

Efficient Customer Service: The Proactive, Responsive and Relevant 21st Century Librarian

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Abstract:

Purpose: This study aims to sensitize librarians on the contemporary realities based on the importance of imbibing the principles of efficient customer service in dealing with library customers as a strategic tool in ensuring that librarians remain proactive, responsive and relevant in the ever changing information landscape.

Design/Methodology/Approach: The study adopted the systematic review design to select and analyze relevant literatures in order to ascertain the fundamental issues and trends that are challenging the conventional roles of librarians in the 21st century. Analytical approach was used in articulating the possible way forward and in exploring the concepts of proactiveness, responsiveness and relevance as the standard for measuring efficiency of customer services.

Findings: The study revealed that changes in technology has radically transformed the information landscape, dwindling budget has adversely affected the library's capacity, and the dynamic change in the information seeking behavior of our users has redefined the concept of library service provision.

Implication: Suggested solutions to challenges confronting librarians in the 21st century includes imbibing the principles of efficient customer service to proactively advance teaching, learning and research; responsively embrace digital technology in services delivery and ensuring that librarians remain relevant by creating and seizing opportunities to build public understanding and support for the library.

Originality/Value: It was remarked that by cultivating and displaying the outlined skills of efficient customer services, the library will increase its visibility, appreciation and relevance and the role of librarians in the digital age indispensable.

Keywords: Customer Services; Efficient Customer Services; Proactive Librarian; Responsive Librarian; Relevant Librarian.

Introduction

The 21st century is undoubtedly acclaimed the technological age. With new technological developments and innovations cutting across academic, social and economic spheres, come new challenges and new expectations. There is no gain saying; new opportunities and challenges are confronting libraries in today's rapidly changing information landscape. Adigun, et al (2013) pointed out that empirical studies conducted by various authors showed that libraries are struggling to keep their place as the major source of inquiry in the face of emerging digital technology. Young people appear to share a voracious appetite for new technologies, new access methods, and new ways to get and use information. Adults are in no way immune to this trend. Digital technology has indeed immensely revolutionized the information landscape. As observed by Dakshinamurti and Satpathy (2009) the role of a librarian in the 21st

century has changed considerably in keeping with the changes brought in by technological applications that are now fully entrenched in libraries, particularly in academic institutions all over the world. Similarly, Duane E. Webster (cited in Hernon and Altman, 2010) argued that the only constant in the information landscape is uncertainty. Now more than in any preceding era, libraries must change, but just how to make this transition is fundamentally the issue. At the heart of the necessity for change is the libraries most prized asset – library customers.

Library customers are more than a source for data collection; they are the reason for the libraries' existence. Business Case Studies LLP (2016) argued that customers are crucial to the success of any business since they represent its fundamental source of revenue. Customer satisfaction is at the heart of the selling process. The relationship between the customer and the organization is, therefore, an important one.

Going by this assertion, the library can never place too much emphasis on its customers. The customer is the foundation of the library's success. According to the American Library Association (2013) an explicit function of the library is to organize, preserve, and make knowledge accessible. To achieve this, it is imperative to identify and meet the needs of the consumer. It becomes very essential to listen to, and learn from, library customers and to use the insights gained to improve library services.

Unfortunately, a number of librarians and libraries have ignored customers because they perceive customers as a captive audience (Hernon, Altman and Dugan, 2015). In general, the library became an organization that served all customers not only with similar tools but in similar ways. The era when academic libraries enjoyed monopoly and custody of knowledge; incontestable administrative support and when librarians held sway the information landscape are long gone. It is important to understand societal trends and changes in information landscape. Libraries are predominantly a service-oriented organization and good customer service is the key to the library's image, growth and stability. Hernon, Altman and Dugan (2015) argued the because there are many competitors poised to challenge the library's perceived monopoly on information and knowledge provision, librarians need new ways of thinking and alternatives for applying a customer-centered approach to service quality and customer satisfaction.

Statement of the problem

The paper sensitized librarians on the importance of imbibing the principles of efficient customer service in dealing with library customers as a strategic tool in ensuring that librarians remain proactive, responsive and relevant in the ever changing information landscape. To that end, the paper strives to help librarians understand, based on contemporary realities, the current answer to the question, "How should librarians advance the course of librarianship in the 21st century?"

Literature Review

What is customer service?

Customer service is about serving people. It is the genuine, compassionate, personalized, and or, simply put, human approach to meeting the needs of customers. It is the tactical approach

used to win customers' loyalty. According to Salesforce.com (2016) customer service is the support you offer your customers both before and after they buy your product - that helps them have an easy and enjoyable experience with you. It's more than just providing answers; it's an important part of the promise your brand makes to its customers. And it's a critical to the success of your business. Similarly, Study.com (2016) defined customer service as the act of taking care of the customer's needs by providing and delivering professional, helpful, high quality service and assistance before, during, and after the customer's requirements are met. There is no doubt that customer service is an extremely significant part of maintaining ongoing customer relationships.

- **Characteristics of Good Customer Service in the Library**

Some characteristics of good customer service include:

✚ **Promptness:** the quality or habit of arriving or being on time. As members of a professional society, librarians are charged with a weighty responsibility. IFLA (2011) posits that the core mission of library and information professionals is to facilitate access to information for all for personal development, education, cultural enrichment, economic activity and informed participation in and enhancement of democracy. In recognition of this fact, when attending to library customers, promptness should be the watch word. Unnecessary delays should be avoided.

✚ **Politeness:** is the practical application of good manners or etiquette. Politeness is almost a lost art. Saying a warm greeting, addressing customers respectfully (sir/madam), 'how may we/I be of service', and 'thank you very much' are a part of good customer service. For any business, using good manners is appropriate whether the customer makes a purchase or not (Salesforce.com, 2016). Librarians are expected to show the highest level of politeness to all library costumers through appropriate courteous responses.

✚ **Professionalism:** All customers should be treated professionally, which means the use of competent hands and appropriate technology where applicable. Professionalism shows the customer they're

cared for. Librarians protect each library customer's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired or transmitted.

✚ **Personalization:** is a tailored means of meeting the customer's needs more effectively and efficiently, making interactions faster and easier and, consequently, increasing customer satisfaction and the likelihood of repeat visits. Using the customer's name is very effective in producing loyalty. Customers like the idea that whom they do business with knows them on a personal level (Salesforce.com, 2016).

Why is Customer Service important?

Nowhere is change more evident than in the librarian profession. On the one hand, underfunding of the library has grossly undermined the capacity of the library; while on the other hand, the library is experiencing stiff competition for information access and information service delivery arising from new technology. The dynamic change in the information seeking behavior of younger demographic library customers, being inundated with technology beyond our capacity to keep paces and making ineffective attempts to serve members of our constituent is the worry.

Most successful businesses recognize the important of providing outstanding customer service. A courteous and empathetic interaction with a trained customer service representative can mean the difference between losing and retaining a customer. When problems arise, customers should receive timely attention to the issue. Prompt attention to emails and phone calls is critical to maintaining good relations. Requiring customers to stand in long lines or sit on hold can sour an interaction before it begins (Business Case Studies LLP, 2016).

Skills of Efficient Customer Services

1. **Patience:** this is the capacity to accept or tolerate setbacks, problems, or pressures from customers without becoming annoyed or anxious. When the need arises! If you deal with customers on a daily basis, be sure to stay patient when they come to you confused and frustrated. Take the time to truly figure out what they want. It pays the customer and the library in the long run when competent service is provided

patiently than when customers are hurriedly rushed out the door!

2. **Attentiveness:** the ability to *really* listen (being alert, observant and attentive) to customers. It means assiduously attending to the comfort or wishes of library customers in a very polite or courteous atmosphere. This is fundamental in providing great service. Why the need arises! Being attentive to customers is the best barometer to gauge quality of service. It is very important to be mindful and attentive to the feedback that you receive.
3. **Good Communication Skills:** this implies being able to convey information to customers clearly and simply, in a way that it is easily understood. Librarians distinguish between personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow personal beliefs to interfere with the provision of access to information resources. When to take note! There is need to be cautious of how some personal communication habits translate to customers. When it comes to important message that needs to be relayed to customers, it must be conveyed clearly; keep it simple and leave nothing to doubt.
4. **Knowledge of the Library Services:** this is essential in matching the right service with customer's need. Why the need arises! With proper knowledge of the various library divisions/extensions and their services, suitable services can be recommended highlighting their features and benefits thus saving customers' time and reducing the chances of information anxiety and frustration. Adequate knowledge of library services is key to overcoming objections; boosting confidence, enthusiasm and persuasion.
5. **Ability to Use "Positive Language":** being positive is one of the most important customer service skills. Language is a very important part of persuasion. Why the need arises! Customers create perceptions about you and your library based on the language that you use. It is therefore imperative that helping a customer should start from a sincere and positive position. In that position, the customer is "the king", "always right". Using positive phrases enhances customer engagement.
6. **Ability to "Read" Customers:** the ability to "read" customers is a valuable skill in business. This is an important part of the

personalization process as well, because it takes knowing your customers to create a personal experience for them. What to take note of! Look and listen for subtle clues about their current mood, patience level, personality, etc., and you'll go far in keeping your customer interactions positive.

7. **Ability to Work under Pressure:** the ability to stay calm and even influence others when things get a little hectic is critical for effective service delivery. What to take note of! It is unacceptable for a librarian to allow a heated, rude or unruly customer, force them to lose their cool; in fact it is their duty to take charge of the situation and pacify the customer.
8. **Tenacity:** a great work ethic and a willingness to do what needs to be done is a key skill when providing the kind of service that people talk about. To most customers, what is considered memorable services created by a single employee who goes beyond the “status quo” when it comes to helping them out. What to take note of! Bearing in mind that putting in that “extra effort “is priceless in value should be the driving motivation to never "cheat" your customers with lazy service.
9. **Willingness to Learn:** seek feedback from customers and colleagues about how to improve your customer services skills. Why the need arises! To succeed in the librarian profession, there is a need to be learning constantly because of the rapidly changing nature of the information seeking behavior conditioned by advances in digital technologies. Learn from successful colleagues. Seek mentorship.

THE PROACTIVE LIBRARIAN

According to Dictionary.com (2016) proactive can be defined as creating or controlling a situation rather than just responding to it after it has happened. In the light of the significant changes occurring in the librarian profession, Dakshinamurti and Satpathy (2009) asserts that, the very fact that technology allows the users to have direct access to the products of information has paradoxically made it all the more necessary for the librarian to reach out to the users in a proactive manner. Below are some practical areas librarians can demonstrate proactiveness in the discharge of their duties?

- **Punctuality to work.** The official resumption time prescribed by the Federal

Civil Service Commission is 8:00am. Punctuality is the most obvious form of proactiveness you can display to your organization. It is a clear indication of preparedness for service provision.

- **Empathetic to library customers.** According to Dictionary.com (2016) empathetic is the psychological identification with the feelings, thoughts, or attitudes of others. It is the ability to understand someone else's feelings, emotions and experiences. As librarians you demonstrate empathy when you are able to put yourself in the situation of the library customer. It will lead to greater success personally and professionally. Here is a paraphrase of 5 vital steps as put forward by Mind Tools Ltd (2016).
 - Pay attention, physically and mentally, to what's happening. Put aside your viewpoint, and try to see things from the other person's point of view. When you do this, you'll realize that library customers most likely aren't being inconsiderate, stubborn, rude or unreasonable – they're probably just reacting to the situation with the knowledge they have or experiencing a mood swing.
 - Listen carefully, and note the key words and phrases that the customer uses. Once you understand the customer's perspective, acknowledge it. Remember: acknowledgement does not always equal agreement. You can accept that people have different opinions from your own, and that they may have good reason to hold those opinions.
 - Respond encouragingly to library customer enquiries. To be effective, you need to discern the customer's viewpoint. Some questions are like icebergs. The most substantial part lies hidden beneath the surface. Even when the inquirer is eager for the answer, before you respond, consider why the question was asked, whether you should give a direct answer or direct the user to a reference material or give a referral. Express yourself kindly and respectfully.
 - Take initiative in developing active partnerships with library customers. This requires communicating in the users' language, understanding their concerns

and being part of their team (Brophy, 2007).

- **Provide library signage to facilitate access to information.**

It is important to have an attractive and effective sign system that is consistent throughout all public areas of the library. Great signage communicates your competence, understanding, and care for the people using your library (Santy, 2012).

Types of signs

- Directional signs guide people to areas or services within the building. These signs use arrows pointing to specific locations.
- Identify access difficulty areas, offers possible solutions before they are requested using identification signs to facilitate access to resources, specific areas or functions within the library.
- Use Information/Instruction signs which are explanatory in nature to briefly explain library functions or instruct patrons on how to use certain resources. Examples: OPAC, Wi-Fi etc.
- Use Current Awareness signs posted in high traffic areas to draw attention to very important information, information resources and services. Examples: changes in library hours, new arrivals, library rules/requirement, announcements of library workshops/seminars.
- **The Library Ambassador.** Generally speaking, an ambassador is a respected official acting in a representative capacity on behalf of his nation or organization. The role of an ambassador is to reflect the official position of the sovereign body that gave him authority. Library ambassadors represent the library as professional, knowledgeable and courteous advocates for our services, spaces and resources. Ambassadors provide active support to facilitate research and information literacy. They provide comprehensive reference and instruction; provide feedback about Library services; and create, participate in, and reflect on existing and new Library programs and services.
- Get to know faculty personally and actively engage with faculty and students in assigned departments or institutes in order to develop strong working relationships.

- Take initiative to identify, meet, and facilitate ongoing communication about faculty and students information needs and service expectations.
- Acquaint users with the Ahmadu Bello University Institutional Repository interface, subscribed database and seek opportunities for collaboration in areas of collections development (e.g. creating digital collections; contributing to institutional repository).
- Knowledgeable expert on the library's division and services they provide as well as open sources of information. Guide users on open source download and upload.

The Responsive Librarian

Customer responsiveness is the ability to deliver customer requirements in a timely and satisfactory manner. Customer responsiveness is used to measure the capacity of a business to recognize and respond to changing customer needs. According to Godsell et al (2006) knowledge of and engagement with customers are the only sustainable competitive advantages an organization can have. A responsive librarian uses technology to learn more about customer needs to deliver the highest standards of customer service. Being responsive is critical for successful customer development.

- **Embrace Digital technology**

Ability to keep up with new ideas in technology and librarianship is critical to our responsiveness as librarians. Librarians need to do so much online these days, way beyond basic catalog and database searching. Librarians have to be able to use search engines and use them well. They need to be able to find quality open source resources. They need to help patrons set up e-mail and teach basic Internet skills. They need to be able to troubleshoot problems users are having accessing online library resources, at least to the extent where they can figure out if the problem is on the library's side or the user's side (Farkas, 2006).

Keeping up with new technology is often not an explicitly listed part of one's basic weekly job duties, but its importance cannot be overstated. Five years ago, few people were talking about blogs and IM in libraries, but now so many libraries are using these tools to provide services to patrons. We need to be able to keep up with what's new in technology and what libraries are

(or could be) doing with it. Reference librarians are now providing reference services online via e-mail, synchronous chatblogs and IM (Farkas, 2006).

When customer responsiveness is a priority, opportunities to serve library customers will increase, while problems and service issues will decrease.

Areas librarians can demonstrate responsiveness:

- Use technology, including library website, email, phone calls, Short Message Service (SMS), social media platforms, etc to help ensure customers get the information they need quickly and/or address their concerns promptly. This is critical because, failing to meet deadlines or ignoring customer inquiries can increase client dissatisfaction with your services.
- Use Current Awareness Services. The purpose of a (CAS) is to inform library users generally about new acquisitions and developments. Most libraries use notice boards and designated shelves to draw attention to recent additions, while some libraries produce complete or selective lists for circulation to patrons.
- Use Selective Dissemination of Information. Sometimes referred to as (SDI) is a form of CAS, whereby librarians conduct regular searches of databases to find references to new articles or other materials that fit a particular customer's interest profile and forward the results of these searches to the customer. It is important to create and maintain library customers profile and information resources consulted or requested.
- Monitor usage statistics. Compile statistics of information resources consulted and align your acquisition policy accordingly. This means that the research focus of lecturers, departments, and courses offered are adequately taken into consideration.
- Use library orientation and workshops effectively. Identify potential topics for workshops or events that can be used to promote library services and collections. Work with Kashim Ibrahim Library & Dean and Heads of Department to plan and organize library orientation and workshops.
- Use Opening and closing hours effectively. Responsiveness often comes down to adjusting your schedule to peak times. Keep track of when you receive the most

patronage. Example, before and during examination. Adjust your opening and closing time accordingly so as to demonstrate your level of responsiveness to your library users.

The Relevant Librarian

“What is the role of librarians in the digital age?” “Why should libraries spend money for books and journals when everything is online?” “Why do we need a well equipped faculty/departmental library when students can do their assignments and research on the Internet or at the comfort of their home?”

It is an undeniable fact that technology has greatly revolutionized the way information is accessed. Library advocacy have a critical role to play in answering these questions. Library advocacy is the activity that librarians engage in which aims at garnering public support and influencing decision makers in their institutions. On the job or off, librarians have countless opportunities to build both public understanding and support for the library, its information resources, services and personnel. However, for library advocacy to be effective; identify a need, set a goal, come up with a plan of action, get stakeholders involved and ensure proper coordination.

Practical suggestion for planning a library advocacy (these are excerpts from “I Love Libraries” an initiative of the American Library Association, 2015).

 **Set Goals:** Determine what you want to accomplish. Does your library require a bigger space, more information resources (books, computers and accessories etc)? Once you've identified your goals, you're ready to organize. Bear in mind, library advocacy should be tied to the libraries overall goals and ongoing public awareness program. Identify critical tasks. Important areas include: Developing a budget, recruiting volunteers, coordinating of activities with the Dean, Head of Department, University Librarian and the state chapter of Nigerian Library Association and fundraising.

 **Plan a Library Event:** Any event during the year is an opportunity to showcase your library. Create an event or promotion that will get friends of the library, administrators or alumni involved. You can host the event at the library or immediate department/faculty hall or any strategic campus venue and invite the media to attend. Develop a communication plan.

Critical elements include: Defining the key message and targeting key audiences.

Make and Distribute Handouts:

Important information about the library, its services, and needs can be distributed in writing for people to read later or pass on to others. If you have desktop publishing skills, or know someone who does, work to build written materials that can be passed along to others. These can include the library's hours and services, a wish list of things the library needs, information about upcoming events, or any other pertinent library information.

 **Involve the Press:** Are you good at public speaking? Call your local radio talk show or TV news. Speak publicly about the specific value of your library. Write an op-ed piece for your local paper, or ask students/faculty to write editorials for the campus paper. Write a one page newsletter or library bulletin.

Conclusion

The case made above of the need for librarians to imbibe the principles of efficient customer service reiterate that when librarians take a proactive role in advancing teaching, learning and research; are responsive in embracing digital technology in services delivery and are prepared to seize opportunities to build both public understanding and support for the library, they will increase their visibility and appreciation, an appreciation that can translate into goodwill and tangible benefits. Regardless of changes in technology which has radically transformed the information landscape, dwindling budget which has adversely affected the library's capacity, and the dynamic change in the information seeking behavior of our users which has redefined the concept of service provision, by cultivating and displaying the outlined skills for efficient customer service, library remains relevant and the role of librarians in the digital age indispensable.

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