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Promoting by Expertise – A Study on Information Search and Usage in Geographical Research as an Instrument for Marketing Librarianship

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1. Abstract

Information seeking and usage in scientific research is an extremely complex process which consists of an enormous variety of methods, tactics and particularly tacit knowledge. The process of information seeking is strongly connected to the process of information usage and finally to the process of producing new scientific knowledge – a process in which a search becomes research.

This paper clings into the geographical research and its’ processes from the information studies point of view. Our paper is partly based on questionnaires which we are planning to arrange in the traditional Geographer’s Symposium in Helsinki late October in 2006. The questionnaire includes questions concerning mostly information sources used in geographical research but also some questions about information seeking tactics and methods used in the process of scientific research.

The role of library in a scientific research process is often quite vague to a researcher and even to the information specialists such as librarians. Libraries’ task is to provide information resources for the users. Researchers use the information resources located in some web service. The libraries and the thousands of hours of work behind the visible resources remain invisible from the researchers’ point of view.

There are two possible goals in our paper. First goal is to make an effort to show how important it is to promote the expertise of information specialists and to represent one example of doing it. If our research gives us a better understanding of scientific researchers needs and usage of information it will surely lead to a path to better and user-friendly information services. The second goal in our research is to reveal the expertise behind all the sophisticated information services used by the scientific research community.

2. Introduction

This paper aims to present the effectiveness of specialized librarians’ competence in scientific information seeking and processing as a promotion of librarianship and library
services as a whole. The growing demand of highly sophisticated information services, the competition in the area and the amending skills of information users has all made it more and more difficult to gain visibility for libraries and their information services. One of the key problems is the fact that users rely more and more to commercial information services such as Google and do not feel any need for traditional information sources provided by information specialists. The future may prove that the now emerging cooperation between Google and libraries is one of the wisest moves in business.

The academic world is especially challenging surrounding to promote librarianship. The men and women of science are used to seeking and processing knowledge in order to produce new scientific information. The main question is – how to make librarianship useful to modern science. The best way to promote ones skills is to be better than the other. The second best way is to be interested in the others work. In a university a librarian can study the information seeking and processing of scientists and simultaneously become a better specialist. A librarian should be able to convince the users that librarianship gives value-added to their work and they can see the role of librarianship in the process of search becoming research.

This paper uses study on the geographical research and its processes in the information studies as an example of promoting librarianship. My paper is partly based on questionnaires which we arranged in the traditional Geographer’s Symposium in the University of Helsinki late October in 2006 held by the Geographical Association of Finland. The questionnaire included questions concerning mostly information sources used in geographical research but also some questions about information seeking tactics and methods used in the process of scientific research.

3. Marketing library services

Marketing non-profit services such as information services of libraries can not be described in the same manner as marketing in traditional economical sense. Non-profit services marketing can be defined as societal marketing as done by Philip Kotler.

“The societal marketing concept holds that the organization's task is to determine the needs, wants, and interests of target markets and to deliver the desired satisfactions more effectively and efficiently than competitors, in a way that preserves or enhances the consumer's and the society's well-being.” (Kotler 1994, 102)

This puts even more weight on identifying the needs of the users, and on providing a service which is at the required level of quality. It also sees the well-being of operation environment as equal and leaves out the profit motive. However, if an organization has profitability as one of its objectives, then that will be an important factor when marketing objectives are being planned. (Webber 2001)

Exchanging relationships is one important factor which often comes up. Exchange, in this context, means transfer of services or ideas in return for something of value. In my
example I gave my time and resources to gather some feedback of Geographers’ Symposium and got a lot of important information in return.

Relationship marketing is also currently much talked about. This focuses on developing a close relationship with your customers, and is particularly important in the information and library sector. With many services you depend on 'repeat business' in order to make your investment in acquiring a new customer worthwhile. Tom Peters (1995, 32) has described it as:

“The relentless pursuit of an almost familial bond between customer and product.”

The main point of all the current definitions is that they cover they whole marketing cycle including defining your mission, and market research, and that they focus on the needs of the target user group or the individual customer. Information specialists and libraries are often providing services rather than products in a physical sense. Marketing experts recognize that marketing a service is more difficult than marketing a physical product. They identify the following as being characteristic of immaterial services (Webber 2001):

- **Intangibility** the service cannot be touched or viewed, so it is difficult for clients to tell in advance what they will be getting;
- **Inseparability of production and consumption** the service is being produced at the same time that the client is receiving it (eg during an online search, or a legal consultation);
- **Perishibility** unused capacity cannot be stored for future use. For example, spare seats on one aeroplane cannot be transferred to the next flight, and query-free times at the reference desk cannot be saved up until there is a busy period.
- **Heterogeneity** (or variability): services involve people, and people are all different. There is a strong possibility that the same enquiry would be answered slightly differently by different people (or even by the same person at different times). It is important to minimise the differences in performance (through training, standard-setting and quality assurance).

It’s not unusual that people try to solve these problems by ensuring that the physical forms of the service (the people running it, the library building, printed search results, web pages etc) indicate the quality of the service. The people running the service are more likely to inspire confidence in the service if they are responsive, reliable, courteous, and competent. If the information centre looks worn out and disorganized, or if the website is a disaster with broken links, then users may assume that the services provided by the centre are messy. (Webber 2001)

Obviously, if a library looking like falling into pieces is providing a consistently good service then its users will become convinced of its quality - but it can take longer to convince them. The problem of perishibility is sometimes overcome by pricing strategies or other incentives to use the service at 'unpopular' times.
4. Case Study: Information seeking and usage in geographical research

At the traditional Geographer’s Symposium in the University of Helsinki late October in 2006 held by the Geographical Association of Finland we made a questionnaire which included eight questions about researchers’ ways of seeking and using information. The questions were about their usage of databases, scientific journals and scientific search engines. There were also some informal questions about their possible difficulties in seeking information. The rest of the questions were meant to gather feedback information about the Geographers’ Symposium which was earlier done by well respected researcher of human geography and other social sciences. So we had to step in quite large boots as librarians and somewhat outsiders in the field although we have a masters’ degree in geography.

Of 250 questionnaires we got 51 back. In other words 20,4% of the target group found themselves the 10 minutes of time to fill in the form. As we can see in figure 1 most of the respondents were students or post-graduate students. Only 8 (15,7%) of the respondents were professors or senior researchers. The total distribution among all participants is not known but traditionally the participants have been mostly students in the symposium. Also two thirds (66,7%) of the participants (figure 2) were under 30 years old. This must please the organizers since scientific symposiums are not always that attractive to the young students.
The lack of time between the Geographers’ Symposium and the deadline of this paper avoided prevented me from making any further analysis of the data. Only a few conclusions can be made one of them being the lack of professors as respondents. The main reason for this is obviously the lack of time which is of great value in a profession of a professor. It’s also true that professors tend to have a long career behind them and the ways of finding and using relevant information has been formed through years and they are used to work in their own certain fashion. Therefore they might have not much interest or time to develop new ways of using library services. An information literature specialist Christine Bruce pointed out that there might also be some professional pride which would not allow them to admit any need of guidance regarding to their own work. After all they are masters in their own field and showing lack of knowledge may lead to loosing face in the scientific community which is probably their worst nightmare.

5. Conclusion

The big question seems to be: how to market immaterial goods such as information? Nowadays the big trend is that all information should be free and available to all. In this framework we should also ask if scientific community is willing to utilize information services – after all they should be the key holders of all relevant information.

First task is to gain visibility to intangible library services. Libraries should be able to make their processes visible and understandable to users and thereby solve the problem of inseparability of product and consumption. For example in this case I should make the geographers aware of the processes which enable them to use electronic services. Too many scientists still think libraries got nothing to do with their access to electronic journals. Libraries should make their users aware of the countless hours of work in order to avoid the black screen in their computer. Visibility comes with marketing and marketing comes with co-operation with user groups. In this case by co-operation.

Second task is to reduce heterogeneity of services by continuous self education and life-long learning. The problem of our users not respecting the profession can not be solved without being always at least one step ahead of them. In the case study the aim was to gain knowledge of the geographers seeking and using information in order to become a value-adding agent in their research.
Third task is to raise the co-operation between libraries and users to a level in which we can actually talk about real co-operation. That means we have to break the service provider – customer – dualism in some level. The ancient wisdom of not being able to beat them and then joining them can work also in library services. In this case if I can convince the geographers’ that the questionnaire and article of mine are valuable to their work and they recognize it’s scientific value they just might be able to see the value of other library services. In Finland the University libraries are totally dependent on the faculties’ financing. So if co-operation gains acceptance it can lead to more resources and consequently even better library services.

Literature:


