Customer service for academic library users on the web

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the nature of customer service in the academic library setting and ways in which its management can be best approached in the electronic environment.

Design/methodology/approach – The study adopts a two-phase methodology. First is a content analysis of the literature on customer service in libraries, focusing on electronic services, to identify main issues and strategies being used to address customer issues. This is followed by a qualitative data-gathering approach to explore user perspectives on the quality of electronic services, focusing on customer service.

Findings – The findings reveal that the concerns of library customers in the web environment are similar to those in the traditional library environment. They are concerned about receiving online help for technical problems and also help to search and use information. Reference services are still highly in demand with an emphasis on the characteristics of the online librarian. Another major need is the ability to give feedback and receive a quick response from the library.

Research limitations/implications – The study is limited to web-based library customer service quality as perceived by postgraduate students at four research universities. Thus, it cannot be generalized to the whole academic library’s clientele views, though it is applicable to electronic library services at other institutions. The subjectivity of the researchers’ interpretations of qualitative data are also acknowledged.

Practical implications – This paper will be helpful to academic libraries in managing the quality of electronic library services by focusing on what the customers require and deem important. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on electronic customer services in academic libraries.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the shortage of studies on the perceived quality of library electronic library services, as is evident in the literature.

Keywords Web-based library services, Customer service management, Academic libraries

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

During the past two decades, academic libraries have been challenged by the impact of the Internet, especially search engines, on users’ preference for seeking information resources. The ubiquitous digital information environment of the Internet has changed library users in terms of their expectations and searching behavior. The users’ expectations have increased as they have become more concerned with the quality of services (Rajesh, 2003; Rosenblatt, 1999). Furthermore, an analysis of students’ searching behavior by Griffiths and Brophy (2005) led them to conclude that:

Students’ use of resources is now very coloured by their experience with search engines, which may in turn lead to expectations that may not be realistic for different types of services.
Thus, search engines like Google have become competitors because they can serve users with information “fast” and “easy” (Detlor and Lewis, 2006). The Amazoogle and Goolezons, as Dempsey (2005) refers to current users, have primarily turned to Google as their first source for information. When Brett (2003) claimed that university libraries “hardly get used” because of the amount of research articles, and other references that one can just download from the Internet, it can be interpreted as a call for library managers to focus on value-added services in the delivery of electronic information services to compete with Internet services and to address the needs of the changing library customers.

LeBoeuf (1988), described two distinct characteristics of library services:

1. Services that facilitate the access and retrieval of information resources.
2. Customer service – helping customers look for what they want in a manner that makes customers feel good about the whole interaction.

As academic libraries advance in developing web sites that become gateways to the electronic information content and electronic services, much of the research is focusing on usability studies of library web sites (Whang and Ring, 2007; King and Jannik, 2005; Benjes and Brown, 2001) to improve access and retrieval, but less on studying customer services.

Customer service entails making every effort to satisfy the customers’ requests (Rajesh, 2003; Ganguly and Gupta, 2008). Customers’ requests come from the recognition of a need for information and is influenced by some degree of expectations from the library’s ability to fulfill this need. Though there has been no evidence that low expectations cause lower uptake of web services, there is clear substantiation that good quality customer service can boost library value.

Hernon and Altman (1998) referred to library users as “customers” and they support the characterization of customer service by Bitner and Hubert (1994), as “meeting the needs and expectations of the customers as defined by the customer”. The challenge is for academic libraries to find out what and how it is “defined by the user”. Managing customer service (as defined by the user), and at the same time setting the library’s mission (defined by the librarian) that supports the users’ expectations, needs and wants is a crucial task. This paper aims to give some perspective on this issue. It addresses the dilemma of how academic librarians can manage customer services on the web within its “constraints” and yet strive to “delight” the customers.

The next section of the paper briefly presents an overview of customer service in academic libraries, followed by how it has evolved in the web environment.

2. E-customer service in academic libraries

This section explores the nature of customer service by examining the defining characteristics in the literature. The evolution in customer service from face-to-face library services to web-mediated services is discussed.

Why the emphasis on customer service? Service is a concept that is fundamental to libraries, and since library users are the focus point of library service, it is important that libraries incorporate high standards of customer service (Hong and Mia, 2007). In 1986, Michael Gorman made a statement about the library:

*The library*: it is also library service from the library user’s point of view. Many of us too often see our library as being a discrete entity. To any library user, the question is not a building, or
a collection, or an administrative structure. It is: Are the materials and services available to me, when I need them.

His views on servicing users’ needs are still applicable in libraries providing web-based services. More recently Dempsey (2009) on his views on mobile communication, has made a rather similar stand on library as a service point:

As a growing proportion of library use is network-based, the library becomes visible and usable through the network services provided. On the network, there are only services. So, the perception of quality of reference or of the value of particular collections, for example, will depend for many people on the quality of the network services, which make them visible, and the extent to which they can be integrated into personal learning environments. Increasingly, this requires us to emphasize the network as an integral design principle in library service development, rather than thinking of it as an add-on.

If we reflect on Gorman’s “available when I need them” and Demsey’s “on the network, there are only services”, it is obvious that customers expectations and needs must be translated into quality services in libraries. Though in the business sector customers mean profit (Hong and Mia, 2007), in libraries, highly satisfied customers mean highly valued library service (Pinder and Melling, 1996).

Another significant point in understanding customer service is user’s point of view (Gorman, 1986); as perceived by the customer (Albrecht, 1988) or defined by the user (Hernon and Whitman, 2001). When academic librarians manage information resources, it for the purpose of “use by customers”. Customers who use the service form an opinion when they interact with the system providing the service. These interactions, are influenced by the delivery systems, and the people who manage these systems. It is good to remember that the academic library’s role for customer service goes beyond helping customers “use” the product or service. The academic library contributes to the research, teaching and learning in the university. It is also an active partner in producing students and researchers who are information literate and lifelong learners. Wang (2008) cautions that an increasing number of loyal library users will bypass the library if the library does not make specific efforts to maintain and enhance their reader relationship.

St Clair (1993, p. 3) adapted a working definition of customer service for information services as: “Good customer relations is a continuing, mutually satisfying contract between the information service organization and the users”. This relationship between service provider and users of service builds on a strong understanding of customer expectations, wants and needs. Grönroos (1994) states that these customer contact experiences primarily determine the quality of the service. Though not all needs and wants may be successfully met, the onus is on the library to manage its services in such a way that both parties mutually benefit. A measure of this success is usually assessed via customer satisfaction surveys that provide library management with insights to how well they are faring with library users. Generally, library user satisfaction surveys report a satisfactory service. Rarely do you get a “extremely satisfactory” or “exceed my expectations” response from the customers. So how best can libraries manage satisfying user and running the library within budget and staff constraints?

The answer to this lies in the following assumption:

It is commonly accepted that quality customer service is based on two requirements, a formal strategy for quality customer service, and a commitment to hiring front-line people selected, trained and supported with customer-service goals in mind.
A formal strategy involves library management’s commitment towards the planning, organizing and documentations of customer service initiatives based on library mission and goals. This is usually an easier task to accomplish as librarians are well trained in documentation, it might come as a job competency to plan, organize, staff and lead the library services deemed pertinent to users. A review of several Customer Charters of academic libraries reveals that the focus is mainly on:

- provision of convenient access to relevant, up-to-date information resources (print and electronic);
- providing assistance and help to look for information;
- have staff that are trained, knowledgeable, courteous, approachable and ready to help;
- give immediate respond to queries;
- facilitate customer feedback; and
- create a welcoming and conducive information environment.

The second requirement, “people with customer-service goals in mind”, may prove a little more challenging to deal with. In information services, the wishes of the customer are so often left behind or ignored simply because the arrogance of the profession, the attitude of those who have the know how and are not willing to give up the “mystique” that goes with knowing something that no one else knows (St Clair, 1993). Librarians generally have the opinion that “we know best” and get caught up with the their role as “information literacy instructors”, i.e. to instruct users on how to locate, access and use information, not “listen and get to know the customer”. Though librarians are said to be one of the professionals who have embraced and mastered information technology most enthusiastically, there is also a great deal in the literature on librarians being obsolete in the digital age. Why? Is it because librarians have not utilized their technological competence in getting to know more about their customers and what they want? The traditional assumption of “when they need it they will come” is no longer applicable.

An integral part of customer service is customer feedback. Customers need to know that their opinions are appreciated and services are managed with their best interest at heart. What can be more frustrating than bad service is not being able to tell the provider that your service is bad! Of course customer feedback does not mean complaints only, it includes suggestions and comments of appreciation as well, which are equally important to library management for future planning. The main issue here is the ability to communicate in an effortless manner that will encourage further use of the library. Such advancements in communication are evident as librarians are becoming more familiar with Wiki software, using photosharing (Flickr), social bookmarking (Delicious), and RSS readers not only for personal use but also to communicate with library users.

3. E-customer service in malaysian academic libraries

In Malaysia there are currently 20 public universities and many more private universities. In 2007, four public universities were given the status of Research University; University of Malaya (UM), National University of Malaysia (UKM), Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and University of Science Malaysia (USM). Several other established private universities are University of Multimedia Malaysia (MMU),
An analysis of the electronic services offered by 12 of these libraries reveal that some initiatives have been taken and services such as online reference, Ask A Librarian, online document delivery, online forms, and online customer feedback facility are available.

Customer service of academic libraries in Malaysia is closely related to the quality management of these libraries. In Malaysia, most academic libraries have followed suit with the parent organization in acquiring the MS ISO 9001:2000 Quality Management System Standards requirements to put in place a management system that is dedicated to addressing the needs or requirements of the customer. In an interview with Chief Librarians of several universities, Kiran (2007) found that the main reason for the certification was to improve the library’s quality image and chief librarians unanimously agreed that the implementation has benefited the library twofold:

1. Establishing policies and quality objectives.
2. A formal mechanism for customer feedback.

This is in line with St Clair’s (1993) believe that the concept of quality management can be utilized to strengthen and enhance the role of the units in the organizations and enhance management practices of information managers as they put themselves in leadership positions within the parent organization. Suzinor (2007), in her dissertation on quality reference service, reports that all eight universities under investigation had either a policy statement or quality objective regarding services, but none had a policy or quality objective specific to web-based or online library services. Though much is being spent on library systems to develop the traditional libraries to hybrid libraries, there is no formal effort towards the management of these electronic services.

Though quality management and quality service are based on standards which are carefully worked out between management and information services staff, the success of customer service relationship depend on “personal standard of excellence” during a service transaction (St Clair, 1993). How does one underline these personal standards and have all customer service personnel be committed to it? It can be done. If libraries begin to employ business rules to library services and adopt the fundamental rules of good salesmanship (sincerely listen to customers), then there is hope.

3.1 What do customers want?
Evaluation of information services quality is based on a desire to provide a “snapshot” of the service to assist in the decision making activities (St Clair, 1993). The feedback captured during the process of gathering user perception of the service quality is a valuable input to understanding what aspects of the service is important to them and what changes will be most beneficial to the customer. Then the library management is responsible to interpret these findings into actions – managing customer service in such a manner that the delivery of service and consumption of service is on a path of continual improvement. This paper reports part of the data collection and findings of a larger research project on library service quality on a whole. The next section presents the methodology used in employed in the first phase of the study, followed by discussion of the findings and finally the conclusions. Some recommendations have been for library practitioners to manage top class customer service.
4. Methodology
The main purpose of this study was to understand the attributes that contribute to library users having a high-quality experience using web-based library services. The study employed a qualitative data collection approach using focus group interviews. Four research universities were selected for this study, namely University of Malaya, National University of Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia and University of Science Malaysia. Invitation to participate, were sent via e-mails of postgraduates obtained from the respective universities. Postgraduates were selected on the basis that they are more matured and will be able to participate more actively in group discussion giving valuably “rich data”. The only criteria imposed, was that they had experience using the library web services. A total of 132 responded to participate of which only 71 finally turned up for the focus group between January and March 2008. The discussions were purely unstructured, except for the initial session on introducing the purpose of the interviews. The insights gained from one group were incorporated into subsequent interviews until saturation was attained and no new information was forthcoming (Greenbaum, 1998). Each focus group lasted about 60-90 minutes and was audio recorded. All responses were separated to individual statements and categorized according to revealing issues. A second phase of categorization further consolidated the issues and allowed for broad categorization and identification of 14 main themes, site design/links; site accessibility; organization of information; personalization; flexibility; content quality; communication; customer relationship; customer support; customer feedback; reliability; self-reliance; functional benefit and emotional benefits. Details of the overall quantitative study are presented in Kiran and Diljit (2008). Among these 14 themes, several themes were related to customer service issues: Communication; Customer relationship; Customer support and Customer Feedback. These themes focused on three main web services, reference service, library instruction and service feedback. This paper discusses in detail the data pertaining to users input on customer service.

5. Discussion of findings
There was no distinct difference in the responses from participants of different universities. Generally it was apparent that the awareness of web-based library services was quiet low. The participants mainly accessed the library web site to log on to online databases for full text articles to complete assignments and other research purposes. Other services used were the digital reference service, FAQs, online customer feedback, alert services, online library tutorials, and access to digitized materials. However, when prompted, it was found that they are indeed concerned about the lack of help in searching for the right information in using the services made available to them on the web.

The initial concern is of course for the design and easy accessibility to the site, including the availability of reliable servers and computer hardware. Participants then expressed the need for better communication and interaction with the librarians in search for reliable, trustworthy and accurate information. This aspect is discussed as “customer service”. From the responses one can summarize that there are three main areas of concern in terms of customer service via the web: online reference; technical help/information skills instructions and customer feedback.
5.1 Online reference

In the traditional mode reference service has been a face-to-face service where customers deal directly with the librarian to ask for assistance. The reference interview helps the librarian understand the query and deliver the appropriate response. What happens in an online environment? Where is the face that is going to help the customer? Virtual reference service is usually designed to help patrons use technology – e-mail, chat, and call-center-based software – real time over computer networks (Tyckoson, 2001). Participants in this study have expressed a need for not only contact, but a relationship with the librarian. Customers need to be made comfortable when asking for help without feeling anxious or cautious. Wan and Diljit (2007) in their investigation of digital reference service in Malaysian university libraries found that the libraries under study provided online reference using e-mail and web forms only. The respondents in the study (postgraduates) reported that the absence of “human element” and “no face-to-face interaction” was a barrier to effective use of digital reference. They also reported that “staff need to be trained” in handling user enquiries. Table I lists some of the statements associated with online reference service recorded during the interviews.

Though these customers may be ardent IRC users, chatting with a librarian does not seem to be a comfortable option with some – they might have the perception that the librarian is unapproachable and unfriendly. When the communication channel is machine-based the chances of not being understood is enhanced and confusion in understanding customer needs and the librarian’s response may cause greater distress to the customer. Lack of confidence in the librarian to be able to help (and not further confuse) resolve the query must be addressed. Librarians must make a conscious effort to gain the trust and confidence of their customers. Rajesh’s (2003) description of trust portrayed by the librarians in a Finnish library (simply by allowing users to bring their bags into the library) had a lasting impression on him by making him feel happy and in high spirits whenever he visited the library. On the web realm, how can librarian convey “trust” in customers? Trust is important for customers to feel comfortable and freely express their needs, knowing that the librarian will take them seriously and respond in an expected manner. Online reference via e-mail, web form or chat are just technologically enabled modes of reference service delivery, what is more important is to convince customers that this service can benefit them and is of value to their

Table I.

Characteristics associated with online reference
information needs. Łukasiewicz (2007) states that students are at a disadvantage because they do not have access to digital librarians for help and in digital libraries, librarians must transform to meet the changing needs of students. This is also the case for hybrid academic libraries. Personal interactions between users and library staff have decreased dramatically with the proliferation of online information and services. Library users are now more likely to interact with the library’s web site and its virtual collections or to fulfill their information needs from non-library sources.

5.2 Technical help/information skills instructions

There are some obvious problems faced by library customers, especially the postgraduates in this case. They seem to need help:

- in accessing the resources; and
- in selecting relevant resources.

Customers are facing problems login in to the system and not knowing usernames and password for remote database access. Some are not even aware that these resources can be accessed outside the campus, while others do not know that vendors may restrict remote access. Where on the web site do customers get this information, or who do they ask? The provision of a web master’s contact alone is not sufficient. The response may take a few hours or days, when the need is actually immediate! A quick look at the web sites of the libraries in this study revealed that indeed none of the libraries provided any immediate contact of person who can help users with technical help. Table II lists some of the statements associated with the need for technical help and information skills instruction recorded during the interviews.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Technical help/ information skills instructions</th>
<th>I suggest the library provide technical help … I would like a tutorial or introduction for all students … yes they can have it online …maybe video or slide show … I get a lot of articles but I don’t know how to choose. Maybe the librarian can help us put together good articles in my field so students go straight to these articles In a DL (digital library) service most users don’t have guidelines or directions where to go to search the DL. Very important to have guidelines and directions to use the DL. Not so much talking with librarian but would like help with technical problems – sometimes server is down, or cannot login. I cannot find who I should call … Must have systematic procedure when we get stuck searching – we know what to do next – contact who, where – who is to help us online? It is good if there is immediate help when we are online – something like a helpdesk hotline number where you can immediately dial the number and get help. For example, ask the password of the database Most of us learn how to use on our own My problem is usually not knowing where to start. My friends tell me databases are very good but I’m not familiar and not used to using … no I never ask help from library … I can only suggest they make it user-friendly Maybe have online tutorial kind of thing. Not everybody is clever at using</th>
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Table II.
Characteristics associated with technical help/information skills instructions
Another major issue is the need for help in searching for the right information and how to efficiently use the web resources. Many library users need help in this area (Li, 2006). Web sites should focus on information seeking activities rather than administrative information about the library (Detlor and Lewis, 2006). Users who are accustomed to searching using search engines may find the advanced searching option of library databases to be more sophisticated. Also researchers (customers) are often looking for specific documents and need to know which databases would best suit their need. Most university libraries offer 40-100 different databases and each database has its own search options and limitations. Tutorials and guidelines seem acceptable to library customers who may want a quick guide on how to search. Since most postgraduate are also working, they may not have the time to attend formal information skills classes at the library. Online information skills instruction is an essential customer service for the library on the web. A study by Janaki and Pauziaah (2007), on the use of databases among postgraduates in University of Malaya, revealed that a majority of the respondent admitted not having the “know how” to access and obtain relevant articles from the online databases. Even Meyyappan et al. (2004) say that current online information services, including digital libraries, expect users to know what they want and formulate queries to represent their information needs, which is often not easy. Current methods of PDF or Microsoft Power Point based instructions are not enough, there is a need for user-centered tutorials for dynamic user needs (Li, 2006). Provision of menus for subject specific search and federated search helps library customers get information with much less effort and time spent. In their discussion on access to digital information in hybrid libraries, McDonald and Kebbell (2004) had suggested the need to re-package information and allow users to personalise their view for a single session or as their permanent default, when accessing digital resources. However, as users in this study expressed their views, it was disconcerting that not many requested for personalized services to better assist them in their specific needs. The users may not know about such services or simply do not have the expectation that libraries too can provide such a sophisticated service.

5.3 Communication/customer feedback

Walters (1994, in Hernon and Altman, 1998) reminds that “every contact a customer makes within the library is an opportunity for the customer to form an opinion . . . when these moments of truth go unmanaged, the quality of service regresses to mediocrity”. Customer opinions need to be known and dealt with in order to retain library value in the eye of the customer. When a customer receives or interacts with a service it is an innate experience, which influences the behavioral intentions. A disappointed customer may decide never to return to the library and cause the library a lost customer. On the other hand if a disappointed customer is allowed to channel his/her frustration to the service provider and be given a reliable and convincible feedback on the situation faced, this customer may retained, or even be made a “delighted” customer because he/she now is made to feel that the library is personally concerned about his/her welfare and the opinion matters. Even if the service is not up to expectations, the experience of the service delivery may be pleasant enough to rouse a feeling of satisfaction. Table III lists some of the statements associated with communication and customer feedback recorded during the interviews.
Expression such as “no action taken” or “they will not do anything” seriously reflects on the lack of library value in the eyes of the customer. How do we retain customers who do not value the service provider? In e-retailing, service recovery is considered an essential component of service quality, mainly focusing on handling complaints from the customers. The same applies to web services in libraries. There is a need for conscious effort to address customer problems and take action in an effective and timely manner. Timely feedback to customer is a very important aspect of customer service. Customers usually want answer there and then, while they are using the service. Students are often in a hurry to complete assignments, while lecturers are busy preparing for teaching and research. Time and speed are imperative factors in the online environment. Customers must receive feedback on time and services must be delivered as promised. FAQs are welcomed by customers, but should be consistently updated to include new situations, especially when a new service is introduced.

6. Conclusion and recommendations
Customers need to be heard and listened to – this is the basics of customer service. Find out what customers want and need; deliver the services to fulfill their needs; and at all times be there while the delivery process is taking place. No matter how self-sufficient a customer thinks he is, there are moments, when anyone might need some help. If at that instant the librarian can be there – the whole service experience can leave a lasting opinion leading to a delighted customer who will return for more and also be a voice for the library. Based on experience, readings and findings of the study, several recommendations have been put forward for academic libraries to manage top class customer services on the web:

(1) *Begin with top management commitment*. Getting every one to shift from “resources” to “customers”, warrants a culture change. The library will need a client oriented management structure to success.

(2) *Train the staff*: train all your staff not only customer service personnel:
   - social skills can be taught so that customers have a positive perception about the library;
- stress management – enable staff to cope with stress so that you maintain a healthy level of work-related stress; and
- build a knowledge base on subject content and technology know-how.

(3) Make known to customers: make customers aware of what is available and what is not. This is to avoid customers having raised expectations, which will lead to dissatisfaction.

(4) Deal with complaints: Be responsive, do not ignore customer complaints or suggestions:
  - take action in a timely manner; and
  - let customers know what action you have taken.

(5) Be reliable: the key to any good relationship is the ability to convey trust and be dependable. Customers who can trust you to serve them the information they need will value the library services and remain loyal to the library.

These are fundamental issues of customer service across any service industry. However, in academic library services, several other pertinent issues arise, as evident from the focus group discussions. Reference service is a customer service and it is also a core library service. Transforming it to providing an e-mail or web-form for the users to write out their query is just not good enough. The reference interview must happen in the online environment. Library customers want a relationship with librarians based on trust and respect so that they will approach the librarian when in need and a knowledgeable librarian can enhance the value of the library by providing excellent service. Make services available to users at the point in their research or learning activity that makes sense (Dempsey, 2003).

Take the extra step – the way forward is paved by Dempsey’s (2009) suggestion: “We can see the impact of mobile communication on services in two ways. First, services may be made mobile-ready, as with special mobile interfaces for library services, alerting services, and so on. Second, mobilization continues the restructuring of services, organizations and attention that networking has brought about”. Suggestions are to personalize services and promote the library “brand”. Open communication channels with the customers and respond with reliable help. Build on customer relationship for these academic library customers are socially visible on the Internet so why not in the virtual library.

Excellent service is most frequently a measure of customer perception of the quality of the service. An academic library serves a community who is need of authentic, current and scholarly information. Thus, the academic library must be valued as an entity, which can help university customers in learning, teaching, research and professional development. Basically, there has to be a difference between mediocre, good and excellent service – the aim is to delight the customer. Thus, in order to maintain quality and to demonstrate worth, arguably, librarians need to embrace positively the challenges of creating and sustaining relationships based on an active partnership with their customers (Broady-Preston et al., 2006). Recognize the importance of delivering excellent customer service so that you can help to build, maintain, and increase your organization’s customer base. High standard of customer service create higher visibility for the information service unit, and it is this enhanced...
visibility that will lead to better positioning within the parent organization (St Clair, 1993). Satisfied customers will also become advocates of the service and indirectly help emphasize the value of the service.

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Further reading


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