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## Focus on the Library Customer: Revelation, Revolution, or Redundancy?

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### ABSTRACT

LIBRARIANS EXPERIENCE SOME UNEASE with marketing's focus on the customer in spite of the centrality of a user focus in defining the profession. By examining different organizational objectives for libraries, the choices librarians make about customer focus and orientation toward marketing become clearer. Ideas from the relatively new field of social marketing reveal the social cause/message heart of some organizational objectives and suggest that adopting a customer orientation toward marketing may not be the best fit for some libraries.

### INTRODUCTION

Poet Linda Pastan (1982) muses: "What we want is never simple" (pp. 98-99). Her statement may best be appreciated in a society where what we want never seems absent. Daily opinion polls, letters to the editor, talk shows, e-mail, and numerous other channels distribute freely what people like, what they think, what they want. Within that context, any additional deliberate emphasis placed on probing the needs, wants, and perceptions people hold can appear to be somewhat absurd. Yet that is exactly what marketing experts invite library and information professionals to do as they emphasize focus on the customer and potential customer (Kotler & Andreasen, 1991).

The invitation falls on conditioned ears. Weingand (1987) states: "The theories of marketing have not been widely embraced by

practitioners in the information professions" (p. 5). Why? Library and information professionals typically act from a substantive value base which includes an underlying belief in a basic human need for information (de la Pena McCook, 1993, p. 1). The enactment of the library's service is built upon not just what customers want at a given moment but what professionals have determined customers need for the long term. Moreover, many library and information professionals have considerable experience with what customers are able to say about what they want (Katz, 1992). Such experience suggests that people frequently do not ask for what they really want (even if one consciously sets aside the issue of what they really need). So the request to librarians to study what customers need, want, and perceive can provoke a vague sense of unease. It seems to place professional judgment and commitment at the periphery rather than at the center of library work. It appears to put more stock than may be warranted in a customer's ability to define what is wanted and needed.

This sense of unease needs our collective attention; it should not be disregarded or attributed to wrongheadedness. Librarians choose the degree to which focus on the customer is implemented in their libraries. For example, being client centered and customer driven is forecast as a core competency for special librarians (Ojala, 1993). The marketing approach, including focus on customers, has been argued in public library literature and after-hours conference gatherings for the past fifteen years. Much of the debate has focused on collection development (Baker, 1993). "Give 'em what they want," argues Rawlinson (1981, p. 2188). Others argue equally strenuously for giving them what they need (Hamilton, 1987). Academic and school librarians, until recently cocooned in the comparative luxury of collections centered on curricula, have demurred. Collection issues, however, are not the only operational area for determining degrees of customer focus. As all libraries consider the implications of decentralized collections and the impacts of new technologies, the process of increased focus on customers comes to include designing technical interfaces, managing on-site and virtual library operations, hiring consultative personnel, and many other aspects of library and community development.

Although consensus regarding the degree to which focus on the customer should be implemented in libraries may not be possible, the topic is still worthy of discussion. Over the next few years, librarians will face significant amounts of social change in the academic, corporate, and civic communities they serve. New opportunities for collaboration will arise. The time is right to attempt to achieve some clarity concerning various foci on customers and why they exist by looking at the organizational objectives libraries

have, the orientations toward marketing librarians seem to hold, and the implications that may flow from an increased focus on customers. Such clarity will enable professionals to consciously choose specific objectives, orientations, and degrees of customer focus in order to increase the effectiveness of libraries and librarians.

### ORGANIZATIONAL OBJECTIVES

The processes of preserving, organizing, and assuring access to information are imbued with the presence of the potential customer. This infusion provides historical definition, but it also plays a critical role in the discussion of the future of libraries. In 1991, the Council of the American Library Association challenged the profession to think about who would be information providers in the twenty-first century and what roles those professionals might play. In her response, de la Pena McCook (1993) writes:

**Holding the user central** to activities and technologies that surround refinements of information storage and retrieval is the single driving motivation that will serve to preserve the professional and ethical orientations rooted in the tenets of librarianship. Understanding the needs of the user for information and activating this understanding characterize the conceptual framework of the library and information profession. (p. 4)

If it is true that what characterizes libraries most deeply is "holding the user central" and that this characterization will preserve the profession into the twenty-first century, it should be a small matter to append that language to generalized library mission statements and get on with the task at hand. Eventually, however, someone will want to know how well libraries are "holding the user central." A measure of effectiveness will be required.

At that point, a variety of definitions of effectiveness will be apparent; intriguing differences in organizational objectives will begin to emerge. This variety may include input-output definitions, total quality management (TQM) benchmarks, entrepreneurial bottom lines, and community alignment with various library "roles," to name a few. Each definition of effectiveness assumes a different process operating with the customer and varying degrees of customer involvement with service design and improvement.

Dervin (1985) asserts that most libraries infer effectiveness by looking at the movement of materials and services. This input-output definition of effectiveness assumes that what is in the system has intrinsic value and is useful to the customer. It matches the customer to the offerings of the system and evaluates based on the number of matches. In contrast, Dervin's design of a sense-making approach centers on the context experienced by the customer. Since the context

is not often experienced in system terms, evaluation is based in customer terms. For example, Dervin's work allows customers to explain that they seek and find levels of emotional support in libraries.

Shaughnessy (1993) proposes a model for total quality management designed around several factors involved in satisfaction with information seeking, including some user-centered factors (such as the objective of the user, the impact of the service, and the ultimate value assigned to the service) and some system-centered factors (such as signage, friendliness of staff, policies, delays, and so on). His emphasis on performance measurement necessarily frames evaluation of both product and process from the vantage point of the customer.

In their discussion of the situation facing traditional academic library administrators serving students from entrepreneurial non-traditional institutions, Garten and Hartwell (1994) emphasize the heightened service expectations of nontraditional students as well as the intricacies of contracting for or bartering services between institutions. The premium placed on discretionary time by adult students and the necessity for costing services exchanged or purchased require an approach to evaluation which allows the customer (end-user or entrepreneurial institution) to justify investment.

Finally, in surveying public library patrons in three metropolitan areas, D'Elia and Rodger (1994) report that most public library visits can be explained, and potential public library priorities confirmed, within the framework of standard public library roles (see McClure et al., 1987), but that significant differences exist between library and patron interpretation of some roles. Their work suggests that those seeking to evaluate library services by building a public understanding of library effectiveness have yet another approach to customer involvement. Childers and Van House (1993) expand the public library role-setting process by offering an effectiveness model using stakeholders to evaluate inputs, outputs, processes, and various aspects of community fit. They thoroughly discuss the concept of library effectiveness and ways to communicate it. They offer a single model but support the idea that library services can be effectively assessed using different models.

These few examples begin to illustrate a variety of ways of defining library effectiveness. They indicate a variety of organizational objectives which hold the user central in different ways. It is apparent that the way in which focus on the customer is implemented in an organization is a matter of choice, a matter of philosophy, policy, and practice. Once the organization's objectives are clear, management and staff adopt an orientation toward marketing which defines what part customers will play in service design and improvement.

## ORIENTATIONS TOWARD MARKETING

The heart of the marketing philosophy is the emphasis on voluntary exchanges of values in support of organizational objectives (Kotler & Andreasen, 1991). Exchanges of value are defined as acts to obtain something that is desired from someone by offering something in return (Kotler & Armstrong, 1989), a relationship of mutual benefit (Weingand, 1987). Parents who wish their children to have the benefits of storytime, give up time and effort driving around looking for a parking place and other perceived costs to achieve that desired benefit. The professor who wishes to establish credibility in a field, gives up time, effort, potential loss of self-esteem, and other perceived costs to learn to use new online resources. Fine (1990) describes four types of social price or payment beyond money that are part of exchange relationships: time, effort, lifestyle (networks of relationships, habits of behavior), and psyche (self-esteem, pride, identity, self-assertion, control, privacy, freedom from fear). Using the marketing approach, librarians analyze, adjust, plan, and assess such perceived costs and benefits in order to construct and manage beneficial exchange relationships with customers, potential customers, and other target audiences.

This process of working to achieve beneficial exchange relationships differs from organization to organization based on differences in organizational objectives. As objectives vary, so do orientations toward marketing in general and toward the customer in particular. If an organization's objective centers on its product, the exchange relationship is basically one where the organization takes the full responsibility of providing something wonderful and the customer chooses the service based on belief in the organization. If an organization's objective centers on efficient production, the organization proves its worthiness as a resource manager and the customer chooses the service over competitors' services based on perceptions of that proof. If an organization's objective centers on sales, the organization creatively and persistently woos the customer and the customer chooses the service based on the persuasiveness of that appeal. In each of these three orientations, ways of constructing beneficial exchange relationships are meant to bring the customer to the service. Each presumes organizational objectives which effectively address customer needs and wants. The work of the marketer begins with certain givens already determined by the organization and the challenge is to work with the customer until those givens are accepted as a viable part of the sought after exchange.

If the organization's objective is centered in customer satisfaction, management and staff adopt a customer or marketing orientation. This orientation differs fundamentally from those discussed earlier.

A customer orientation toward marketing holds that success will come to that organization that best determines the perceptions, needs, and wants of target markets and satisfies them through the design, communication, pricing, and delivery of appropriate and competitively viable offerings. (Kotler, 1991, p. 43)

Librarians who adopt this orientation create their service from the ground up based on the perceptions, needs, and wants of the customer. Because the objective is satisfying the customer, there is no presumption of what would be best. The givens the librarian must work with are givens from the customer's point of view—for example, how much time is it appropriate to give up to get the service, what times of day the service should be available, and so on. The librarian's challenge in the customer-driven orientation is to shape the organization as much as possible to meet the needs and wants of the customer.

These definitions suggest that those organizations choosing a product, production, or sales orientation to marketing can be classified as organization centered rather than customer centered. Kotler and Andreasen (1991) carry this concept forward by suggesting that nonprofit organizations that are focused on themselves rather than their customers will display certain characteristics. They will see their services as inherently desirable, blame customer ignorance or lack of motivation when their services are not used, relegate research about customers to a minor role, tend to define marketing as promotion, and assume that they have no generic competition. With this dichotomy in use, it is easy to see how some libraries could be considered near-sighted and organization centered rather than customer centered.

This is the juncture at which the arguments about marketing intensify, perhaps needlessly. If one sees the choice of orientation toward marketing as closely related to choice of organizational objectives, organization centered orientations begin to make more sense. If librarians choose organizational objectives which hold the user central in more abstract ways—e.g., by anticipating generic needs for local history resources or instructional materials in the sciences—a sales marketing orientation may fit best. A sales orientation does not preclude an important role for research about the customer and customer response to the service. Successful wooing of the customer depends to a great extent on knowledge about what that customer perceives, wants, and needs.

Concepts of social marketing (Kotler & Roberto, 1989; Fine, 1990) may be of use in understanding how and why libraries choose a sales orientation rather than a customer orientation. Beginning in 1971, organizations concerned with causes (health care, environmental concerns, mental health, consumer protection) were identified as

adopting a sales-related orientation to marketing and this was subsequently dubbed social marketing. This approach uses some of the tools associated with marketing to advance social causes and ideas. Certainly, some libraries enter this category. Public library involvement in adult literacy, academic library involvement in information literacy, school library involvement in critical thinking—all are examples of libraries which could be identified as involved in types of social causes. Using a social marketing approach, these libraries interact with customers primarily persuasively. As they serve, they sell. What these libraries represent is not neutral; they are ideas in action. A number of libraries have successfully adapted social marketing techniques to reach target populations (for example, the New Americans Program at Queens Borough Public Library described by Chao, 1993). If libraries are selling as they serve, then they may as well do so efficiently. Whether they are customer-oriented in Kotler's sense, this becomes peripheral to their purpose and certainly cannot adequately describe their effectiveness.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF INCREASED CUSTOMER FOCUS

At this point, it should be clear that the degree of customer focus enacted as part of a library's overall operation is related to several factors and is negotiated as part of the process of choosing organizational objectives and orientations toward marketing. In this writer's opinion, most libraries have an indistinct twin focus. They have a message related to a cause which they would like to see better accepted, and they have services which they would like to see better used. Librarians have difficulty consciously choosing and effectively using levels of customer focus because, to paraphrase Linda Pastan, what they want is not simple. If that is the case, the options are clear. Librarians can preserve the status quo and try to dispel the discomfort of holding multiple positions with multiple definitions of effectiveness. Or librarians can boldly face the complex organizational objectives reflective of their institutions, target populations and communities, and begin to negotiate focus on the customer as it fits within that context. They can admit that what they want is not simple and seek actively to clarify, for themselves and for their communities, what they want. If libraries choose the latter course, the work that marketing has done to define and operationalize customer focus will be invaluable.

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