

Marketing Of Library Services To Current And Potential Users: Needs And Implication For Library And Information Professionals

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ABSTRACT

This paper explains the vitality of marketing as a panacea for promoting library services and products to current and potential users. The paper identified the need for marketing library devices to users as well as its implication for Library and Information Professionals (LIP). Today, libraries are facing stiff competition from other information providers using ICT and this is contributing in no small measure in making librarians and libraries less relevant in the mind of the public. Consequently, many now see libraries as one of the underperforming sectors of the Nigerian economy. LIP must therefore be proactive by applying marketing to libraries to brace up in the challenges before her and remain users most preferred choice for information. The paper further concluded that for librarians to stand out, they should acquire necessary skills so that they can outweigh other information providers in information management.

Keywords: Customers, Library and Information Professionals, Library Services, Marketing.

Introduction

Information is power and a major asset to any individual and country that knows how to harness and use it. Information handling before now is thought to be the exclusive domain of librarians. In lieu with this, libraries are charged with the responsibility of accessing and organizing information resource as well as disseminating it to information seekers or users. In furtherance of its role, the library describes such information resources (books and non books), their content, features and purpose for easy identification and retrieval for both current and potential users. Describing the information materials without knowing the users led to the notion that early libraries were "product oriented" base on their demand and supply led concept; an indication that the library services and products were created or designed without concentrating on the users. Today, information handling thought to be the exclusive domain of libraries and librarians is witnessing a radical change following the influence of Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Thus individuals and groups can now access information from the comfort of their rooms without necessarily leaving their location. With this, such users see no need for visiting or using the library. Consequently, professionals from other fields who appear to be proficient in using ICTs are now peeking into the areas of information handling leaving librarians to scramble for survival. The question then is, is librarianship and libraries going in for extinction? How can librarians bring back their users? How can librarians compete favorably with her competitors? These are some of the questions which this paper intends to address.

Marketing of Library and Information Services and Products

In this era of information explosions, library and information professionals have to reconsider their position in information handling so as to remain the users vital hub for information. They therefore have to think outside the box on how to promote library services and products and make users more

aware of their service in a more resounding manner. This can be achieved through marketing of library services to users. Marketing of library services according to Shontz, Parker and Parker (2004) is a purposeful group of activities which fosters constructive and responsive interchange between the providers of library and information services and the actual and potential users. Thus marketing library services is not carried out arbitrarily but with a view of creating a cordial relationship between information providers and users. It is through this cordial relationship that needs and wants are communicated for easy satisfaction. Kumar (2014) opined that marketing of information products and services is a concept of sensitively serving and satisfying the needs of all those who are involved in educating, scholarship, research, development and so on. From the foregoing, marketing of library services is all library activities geared towards bringing users and library products and services together. When library users become aware of library services and products, they will increase patronage of the library and make the library their first point of call for information. Since users are the focal point of libraries and librarians, identifying and satisfying their need is paramount for the sustainability and relevance of the profession.

Needs for Marketing Library Services to Users

Libraries are today facing a radical change following the pervasiveness of ICT in information management. Libraries and library and information professionals are losing their customers to professionals in other field who are peeking into information handling and usurping the opportunities. This therefore is having unprecedented effect on libraries because as a result libraries are now being underused. There is compelling need therefore for librarians to market their products and services for higher patronage. Some of the needs for applying marketing library services include:

- **To compete favorably with other information providers**

In this era of information explosion, Library and Information Professionals cannot afford to stand still and watch their jobs

been taken away by professionals who are not "trained" in information handling. LIPs must constantly be awake to new circumstance, growing needs of users, opportunities and challenges. Marketing library services to users will enable librarians to identify areas of weakness and competitive advantage. Also it will enable librarians to re-orient the users on why they should prefer the library to other information providers since the library resources are more organized, authentic as well as assisting and educating users on how to access information and so on.

- **To improve the image of libraries and LIPs**

In today's world libraries are seen as one of the underperforming sector of the Nigerian economy. Since information can now be accessed by many due to the influx of ICT, such users feel that using the library is a total waste of time and do not see them as a vital part of the engine of growth and development. This according to Mahesh (2002) is because of poor attitude of librarians towards marketing library services and products. Thus users are not fully aware of library products and services and the various sources of information available to them in the library. If library services are marketed, the reputation of the library will be boasted and librarians will always be consulted for information. In addition, it will provide visibility for the LIP as a desirable career choice for younger generation.

- **To keeping pace with users growing need and mode of satisfaction**

Information explosion and knowledge expansion has brought a wide array of information sources some of which are unknown and underutilized by information seekers. With these multiple sources of information, users now have little or no time to search through a whole document or library collection for particular information like before when information sources were few. Libraries and librarians as professionals in information handling have the advantage of enhancing users search through a well organized means such as cataloguing, classification as well as retrieval tools like indexes, abstracts, current awareness services and so on. Robinson (2008) in Estall and Stephens(2011) advocated that libraries with such means should utilize it means maximally and demonstrate what library could offer which the internet could not rather than seeing themselves as mere competitors with other information providers. Marketing library services will thus enable librarians to identify what, how and when users could be satisfied effectively and efficiently.

- **Funding of libraries will improve when library services are marketed.**

Despite the huge importance attached to information, some library management still provide little or no financial support for the acquisition of information resources for libraries. This may not be unconnected with perceived under-valued or underestimated role of the library and its professionals in information provision. This dwindling finance according to Nooshinfard and Ziaei (2011) has consequently led to the inability of many libraries to sustain their services, maintain their role or designs new programmes to meet the needs of users. Similarly where provision are made, intense competition from other departments usually reduce the allocation to libraries and acquisition department in particular. Though

libraries are non-profit making institutions and does not charge fees for her services, Coffman-Stephens (1995) opined that if libraries are adequately meeting the needs of users, the satisfied users may be willing to pay for library services as long as their needs are met effectively and timely. Some users may be willing to pay for services rendered or make voluntary donations for library resources and development. This will be a boast to the meager funds provided for the library.

- **Regular assessment of library product and services**

In most cases, library products and services are scarcely evaluated to ascertain its relevance to users after its creation. This is because many library and information professionals assume that since users are entering the library daily, all library services and products are useful to them. This assumption is no doubt an impediment to the growth of library and information centers. Thus LIP must be proactive rather than being reactive. If librarians engage in marketing of library services, they will be able to identify the needs of users, develop new products and services, repackage old ones and evaluate library activities and programs to meet the growing needs of users.

Customer's loyalty is essential for services oriented organization like libraries and marketing of library services will enable librarians gain confidence and trust of the users. When user's needs are identified and satisfied adequately, such user will to make the library their first point of call for information.

Implication of Marketing Library Services for Library and Information Professionals

The success and failure of every organization largely depends on the caliber of staff at its disposal. This is because the staff manifests the direction of the organization. For library and information professionals to effectively market their products and services, they should strive to:

- **Develop marketing skills and strategies**

In Nigeria and other developing countries, a large number of library schools churn out graduates yearly who often assume that since they are "professionals" any individual or group with information needs will look for them anywhere they are. Because of this they remain in their "closet" waiting for information seekers to come and consult them and in the end loose them to other information providers who are more proactive. This assumption is having a toll effect on the profession because librarians are no longer the sole custodian of information. LIPs need to be more assertive and be able to anticipate users need since many of the users may not be bold enough to come to them for their needs. With marketing skills and strategies, librarians will be able to "capture, regain and sustain" the interest of their users. Many users may not know what the library can offer until librarians reach out to them. LIPs need to present their services as an indispensable part of the organization to users and try to justify their claims as stakeholders in information provision (Veeramani & Vinyagamoorthy, 2010).

- **Acquire Information and Communication Technology (ICT) skills**

The 21st century has/ is witnessing unprecedented change especially in information handling. Today more than ever before information is now being accessed and disseminated irrespective of the location due to the influence of ICT (how libraries in developing countries are applying its use remains a source of concern). It suffices to say that ICT skill appears to be the "cutting edge" other information providers have over librarians. LIPs must therefore brace up in acquiring ICT skills and its newer forms to facilitate information services. The application of ICT to library routines will not only help librarians to satisfy only expressed needs but will also help them to provide and satisfy the latent information needs of users.

- **Acquire and develop customer relations skills**

Library users are the key to the survival of library and information centers and the ultimate judge of all library activities and programmes. Acquiring and developing customer relations skill will enable LIPs to know what will satisfy the users in a way that shapes their attitude positively towards the library. Schneider and Brown (1995) in Spicuzza (n.d.) opined that customer's positive attitude is strongly related to the provider's relational skills as well as the organizations competency in providing the core services to users. When users are treated like they are important (which they are), they will go elsewhere to inform others of their satisfaction. They same way they will inform others of their dissatisfaction. Hence LIPs must take users interest and relationship very seriously.

- **Include marketing as a subject field in the curriculum of library schools**

The absence of marketing as a subject field in the curriculum of some library schools is no doubt an impediment to marketing orientation of library and information professionals. Libraries are no longer about "ownership" but "access". Therefore there is need for LIP to revisit the curriculum of library schools to make it more suitable in other to equip younger librarian with marketing skills and orientation to succeed and remain in the business of providing information to users.

- **Mentoring**

Societal complexities are enormous such that no single individual can possess the skills and knowledge required to address them all. Hence the need for synergy among old and young, experienced and inexperienced, professions and para-professional, highly skilled, moderately skill and lowly skilled librarians in our library and information centers. LIP should as a matter of necessity mentor one another so as to return the profession to her lost glory. It is time to work a team without pride and prejudice to satisfy our esteem user and remain their vital hub of information to them.

- **Users needs assessment**

The needs of library users are ever growing and LIP needs to adjust, package and repackage their services and products to suit their demands at all times. LIP as a matter of fact should not only be interested in the group of people who are

currently making use of the library's resources but also should be interested in the non users as well (Veeramani & Vinaygamoorthy, 2010). For the library to continually satisfy the needs of users, there is need for regular user's needs assessment so as to serve users better. Also, user's needs assessments will enable LIP to identify the areas of attraction, dissatisfaction and interest of the non users and develop appropriate products and services to bring them back. Users need assessment will go a long way in sharpening the perception and attitude of users when thus understand that their needs are taken as a priority.

Conclusion

LIPs are indeed operating in an ever expanding information economy coupled with the growing users needs, stiff competition from other information providers as well as the influx of ICT. There is need therefore for LIPs to grasp marketing concept and apply it as essential weapon to outweigh competitors. This will make LIPs more visible and appreciated in this era of information explosion and knowledge expansion. The users are the consumer of library services and products therefore effort should be made to satisfy them and retain them. Satisfying library users is no longer a choice if LIP must remain in the business of providing information, its either Library and information professionals **SHAPE UP or SHAPE OUT.**

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