Marketing Academic Libraries' Services in the 21st Century: The New Strategy

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Abstract: Significant changes are taking place in the information environment as a result of the impact of changing information and communication technologies in a wireless, mobile and cloudy world. The advancement in technologies has brought a radical change in the world of information which has given rise to the proliferation of information providers such as, Internet and websites providers, telecommunication (telephone) operators, e-journals and e-books providers, online vendors e.g. ebscohost, jstor, myilibrary, special and private information centers, archives and documentation centers to mention but a few. This paper focuses on the marketing of academic libraries services in the 21st century. The paper will describe the concept of marketing and its importance to libraries in the information age. It will discuss issues centered on library customers such as, relevance of customers to libraries, customers' expectations, customers' satisfaction, ideal relationships between customer and staff, service quality and professional competencies. The challenges and benefits of the application of marketing strategies and techniques in academic libraries will be considered in the paper. Conclusion will be drawn and recommendations will be given.

Keywords: Marketing, Academic libraries, Library Services, Marketing Strategy, Customer satisfaction.

Introduction

Academic libraries were the main sources of information in the academic environment and in all systems in society. In fact they were known to play important role in educational institutions as they were solely depended upon for information. This position held by academic libraries for centuries past no longer holds as other organizations more sophisticated and specialized in information transfer have emerged. The advent of information communication technology (ICT) in the information environment has brought dramatic changes in the way information is being handled and managed today. This wing of change engineered by ICT has also changed the information seeking behavior of users making them to place more demands on libraries. To ameliorate the current situation, libraries now adopt series of modifications and flexible structures in their functions and services to meet the information needs of the 21st century information seekers.

With the increase and widespread patronage of the library's competitors in recent years, the traditional functions of the academic library as a physical collection of research material is increasingly being threatened as potential library users become more reliant on the Internet. Chegwe and Anaehobi (2015) mentioned that the information communication technology and the internet have brought several opportunities as well as challenges to how effective library and information services are rendered. The authors lamented that academic libraries now experience less patronage due to the availability of mobile smart phones in the hand of many students.

Now the information professionals have a greater responsibility to communicate the resources and expertise of their libraries and librarians both on campuses and in society. It becomes more critical than ever for them to pro-actively market not only the library's products and services, but also to educate their users regarding the library's unique abilities to provide professional and personalized "value added" information (Alcock, 2011). Adeniran and Alabi (2015) enumerated the factors responsible for encouraging library professionals to develop strategies to enhance their operations and services to include: information explosion, technology revolution, escalating library costs and increasing competition by information providers and web-based commercial service providers. Libraries and information centers have begun to realize that by using marketing principles and techniques, they can better understand their users' needs, justify funding, communicate more effectively with a variety of external audiences and achieve greater efficiency and optimal results in delivering products and services that meet the identified needs of their clients (Adeniran & Alabi, 2015, p.1).

Marketing Concepts in Library Services

Marketing is a term used to describe the communication between a company and the consumer audience that aims to increase the value of the company or its merchandise, or at its simplest, raises

the profile of the company and its products in the public mind (Gordon, 2011). The American Marketing Association (2013) defined marketing as "the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large." Marketing is a strategy employed by organizations and individuals to induce behavioral change in the receptive audience. According to Taylor (2012), marketing in library involves defining a target audience, anticipating their needs, and planning specific strategies that will make them value particular library services so that they will want to 'consume' and support them. Martey (2000) emphasized the importance of marketing in business. The author noted that products and services that are not marketed effectively may not be heavily patronized leading to loss of revenue as the business will face the problems of survival.

The marketing concept is vital to customer-centric organizations because it guides them to prioritize satisfying customer needs and wants. A key premise of the marketing concept lies in the fact that it gives customer-centric organizations benefits over production-centric organizations that fail to take customer preferences into account when developing solutions (businessdictionary.com). By focusing on what customers want, an organization is more likely to deliver a product or service solution with the features that customers desire. Customer satisfaction is one of the primary goals of the marketing concept. The entire goal of marketing concept is to deliver what customers want and in the way they want it. For marketing to be successful, the exchange of goods or services must satisfy both the needs of the individual and the needs of the organization and its stakeholders.

Libraries all over the world are considered as storehouses of knowledge where all forms of reading materials such as books, journals, images, films, manuscripts, audio visual materials produced by great writers are collected and managed. These collections contain information cutting across all fields of human learning providing information for all academic activities as well as for solving problems in society. This mission of libraries has remained the same but the means of accomplishing it is being altered and alternative means are becoming available for people to access information due to innovation, and thus creating some worries whether there will be a need for libraries in the near future.

It becomes imperative for libraries to employ planned marketing strategies and techniques to increase the patronage and utilization of their resources and services. Patil and Pradhan (2013) emphase that to attract more and more users to the library, library staff need to extend promotion and cooperation to users and market their services. The authors maintained that libraries embark on marketing in order to educate their users in how to use the library and its resources and also to update their knowledge by providing information contained in various sources available in the library. The value of information as an intangible asset has become increasingly prominent in recent years, in spite of the challenges involved in the measurement and financial valuation of intangibles. Information is a commodity and information service provided by libraries and information centers is the marketing of that commodity (Ogbomo, 2012). Marketing of products in companies is essential to increase sale and to make profit, but in learning environment like university and other higher institutions of learning, marketing of library and information services is required to create awareness of the library services and what the library can do.

Marketing principles have become an integral part of our daily lives, both personally and professionally over the past several decades. Marketing principles have been effectively applied to different situations including the nonprofit organization hence we now have extensive literature on library marketing (Shontz, Parker, & Parker, 2004, p. 64). Stressing on the need to promote libraries, Van (1986) proposed that marketing should be used as a strategy by libraries to improve awareness of their services amongst academics. According to Van (1986), the main aim of the marketing process is to achieve the aims of the organization.

Library Customers, What is their Relevance?

Who is a library customer or user? Nwalo (2003) defined a library user as anybody who visits the library with the purpose of exploiting its resources to satisfy his information need. Aina (2004) mentioned that the term "user" includes all those who avail themselves of the services offered by a library. Library customers could also be termed as patrons, clients, information users, information seekers, readers, etc. these terms can be used interchangeably, because they all apply to those seeking the services of a library (Anyira, 2011). In an academic library, the main customers or users are the students (undergraduates and postgraduates) and academic staff. There are other categories of customers which include the administrative and university management staff. Staff and students of other educational institutions as well as individuals from the university wider community who use the library also form part of its customers. The external customers in most cases benefit from the library free of charge but are not allowed to borrow or use the library online services remotely without authorization.

Library customers in all ages, internal or external, remain the focal point for the existence of any library. The most important component of an

academic library is the customer. Libraries are established for use and so every effort exerted in their establishment is in vain if there are no users to patronize and utilize their resources. Nwalo (2003) submitted that the library user is undisputedly, the most important person in any library setting. Library customers are crucial because they form the basis for the existence of a library. It is on this background that the mission statement of any library always reflects the determination of the other components of the library to render excellent services to the library customers (Anyira, 2011).

Customers' Expectation and Satisfaction

Customers expect certain things when they walk into a business, and those with the highest level of service will know how to identify those expectations and meet them to the customer's satisfaction. Library and information professionals in the 21st century must strive to gain understanding of who their customers are, 'what their needs are, as well as their information seeking behaviour. Taylor (2013) affirmed that marketing library services involves defining a target audience, anticipating their needs, and planning specific strategies that will make them value particular library services, so that they will want to "consume" and support them. The introduction of information technology in education has changed the way users seek and utilize information. Library customers now place high value on self-reliance, adaptability and survival under difficult conditions and the ability to do things on their own (Basanta & Sanjay, 2008). Libraries must then strive to provide high quality services to satisfy the varied information needs of their customers. Rafael (n.d) mentioned that it is only a customer who regards the services as being of a high quality from his subjective point of view will remain a satisfied library customer in the long run. Tann (1993) advanced the standards for a general assessment of library quality to includes:
- Knowing the customers' needs,
- Faultless delivery of services,
- Good facilities,
- Reliable equipment,
- Efficient administration,
- Efficient back-up service,
- feed-back mechanisms.

Rafael (n.d) observed that user satisfaction depends to a large extent on the ability of the library to integrate user needs into the development of the library, noting that customer retention, like surveys run on a regular basis will help to detect weak points in library performance and give important hints for the optimization of library services.

Ideal Relationship between Customers and Staff

Library customers are crucial to all the activities being performed in a library. This is so because,

libraries are established to serve their user/customers. Customers are key in any business organization. Library customers depend on library professionals to get their information needs satisfied and so, the information professionals must commit themselves to meeting the needs of their customers. A personal relationship between library staff and their customers is important on one hand to enable library professionals identify the needs of users and on the other hand to formulate the best strategies to meet the needs. Green (1876) stressing on the need for a personal relationship with customers emphases that the librarian should give a personal attention to the readers' needs. The author notes that "A hearty reception by a sympathizing friend and the recognition of someone at hand who will listen to inquiries, even though he may consider them unimportant, make it easy for such persons to ask questions and put them at once on home footing" If a relationship exist between the librarians and the library customers, this will create an additional value for the customers and also for the librarians. Sneha (2014) observed that an on-going relationship may offer the customer security, a feeling of control and a sense of trust.

Service Quality and Professional Competence

Academic libraries are established for the provision of relevant information resources and quality services to satisfy the information needs of their clients. Adeniran (2011) observed that meeting the information needs of users requires the provision of the actual information resources and services by libraries and information professionals. In libraries, the concept of service quality represents the difference between user expectations and perceptions of the services performance. Quality in library may be seen by the customers in terms of prompt delivery or lack of error in services (Gulam & Ashok, 2011). The authors argued that quality can also be recognized as relating to the fitness of a service or product to its intended purpose or use, subject to the expectations of the customer or user. This means that quality must conform with customers' requirements and needs. The service quality measurement is essential to know the user expectation and perception on library services.

Libraries are making a huge investment on resources and services to improve efficiency. They place high demand on fundraising in order to yield library service quality and user satisfaction services. Library service quality will help to justify resources and improve services. Apart from provision of relevant information it takes competence on the part of library professionals to render quality services to library users. According to Thanuskodi (n.d) competence is considered more in terms of skill-oriented behavior and observable actions. The Council of Europe (Webber, 1999) defined competency as "the

set of knowledge and skills that enable an employee to orient easily in a working field and to solve problems that are linked with their professional role". Marshall et al. (2003) cited in Okoye (2013) identified two types of competencies for special Librarians. The first are professional competencies which relate to knowledge in the areas of information resources access, technology, management and research and the ability to use these areas of knowledge to provide library and information services. The other according to the author comprises personal competencies which represent a set of skills, attitudes and values "that enable librarians to work effectively, be good communicators, be able to focus on continuing learning throughout their careers, be able to demonstrate the value added nature of their contributions, and survive in the new world of work"

Some basic competencies required of the 21st century information professionals include:

- Ability to use technology and to use it to enhance the overall effectiveness of a library, including web based methods of improving technological access to information.
- Overall knowledge of archiving and filing information as well as maintaining databases and reference information.
- Capable of evaluating resources and finding the best ones for addressing different questions or issues.
- Ability to quickly and professionally search databases, internet resources, and catalogs to find needed information.
- Ability to communicate well with library staff as well as with all patrons and guests
- Deep knowledge of books. Good librarians usually read a variety of genres and types of books so that they can help to advise readers as to good books for their reading level and their interests.
- Ability to promote reading
- Ability to present information clearly and in an interesting manner
- Some public speaking skills may be required as well
- Strong level of customer service skills
- Ability to adapt to new tools, systems, and situations as they arise – library and information technology is constantly evolving and shifting and librarians must be able to evolve along with it
- Team player
- Ability to help overcome issues by focusing on solutions instead of on the problems
- Organizational skills that are enhanced through regular additional efforts
- Must maintain a solid overall understanding of different issues that confront libraries of all sizes

Benefits of Marketing Library Services

Marketing library services has become increasingly important bearing on the rapid growth of information providers and the demands of library customers. If the services of academic libraries are well marketed, they stand to:

- Achieve a high level of customer satisfaction
- Enlighten users on the relevance of the use of library
- Achieve library objectives
- Identify the information needs of users
- Compete favorably with other information providers
- Promote interpersonal relationship between librarians and users
- Attract donors and funding bodies to the library

Challenges of Marketing Library Services

The challenges of marketing library services among others include:

- Lack of effective communication between librarians and users
- Little understanding of the concept of marketing in libraries
- Poor access to information technology
- Librarians not knowing how to market library services
- Inadequate funding
- Lack of training in marketing
- Lack of facilities to market library services
- Lack of marketing policy
- Lack of media access to marketing of academic library services

Conclusion

The library today is being referred to as an information market and the library user is a consumer of information. Information is an essential resource for research and development of any nation. Marketing is a **sine** qua non in making the proper use of the services and products of libraries. The library should give priority to the provision of excellent customer service enhancing its image as information provider in the information era. The library and information services should be user focused in order to satisfy their information needs effectively. Marketing of library and information services includes customer (users) priorities, expectations, satisfaction, responsiveness, relationship, quality of services, professional competencies, etc. The ultimate aim of marketing here is to provide the right information to the right user at the right time.

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