Service Quality and the Future of Libraries

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**Abstract**

Library users evaluate the quality of library service on the basis of their experience and their perceptions. Libraries often evaluate the quality of library service on the basis of their statistics. How do we close this gap, and how are perceptions of service quality related to advocacy and the future of libraries? A move towards a user-based evaluation of service quality may result in changes to policies, services and collections. Libraries can use these changes to secure political and financial support, and to move towards their preferred future.

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**Biography**

*Margaret Law is the Director of External Relations at the University of Alberta Libraries (UAL). She has a Doctor of Business Administration, as well as graduate studies in Libraries and Business. In her current role at UAL, she is responsible for the Libraries’ international partnerships, including several in Africa. She is a Past President of the Canadian Library Association, and a frequent speaker on diverse topics including marketing, advocacy, use of intellectual property, and the future of libraries.*

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**Introduction**

The question of library service quality is a recurring one, but it has taken on new importance in a climate of economic stress and increased accountability. The changing technological environment has generated questions about the relevance of libraries, and indeed, of their role in the future. New providers of information and recreational reading continually appear, providing new competition for the traditional strongholds of libraries. In this environment of change, excellent service quality becomes a tool for libraries to use to explain their value in the present, and secure their relevance in the future.

Simply stated, high quality service provides customers with what they want, when they want it, and delivered in the way in which it was expected. Customers want a service that at least meets, if not exceeds, their expectations (Sharabi, 2014). Throughout this paper, for simplicity, I refer to our target audiences as customers, although many libraries use other terminology, including patrons and users.
A high quality service supports the library’s need for accountability, by demonstrating to funders and critics that the library is using resources to provide something that the community not only needs, but wants. No matter the type of library, library staff members are stewards of other people’s money, and a clear demonstration of the benefits achieved through the use of that money supports requests for ongoing funding.

As the relevance of libraries gets questioned, economic realities require libraries to defend their existence and reconsider their role (Garoufallou, Siatri, Zafeiriou & Balampanidou, 2013). New and ubiquitous sources of information and an unclear understanding of the services that libraries can offer often lead people to assume that there is no future for the library. Libraries must combat this attitude by providing service excellence – help that people need, when they need it. Even as we move away from being defined by the things we own – our collections – we must find new definitions in the things we do – service.

The spread of technology, even throughout developing countries, has introduced people to not only new sources of information, but also new platforms for recreational reading, communication with other readers and library users, and new ways of publishing and sharing information. In this environment, libraries face competition for many of the services that they used to provide.

As we talk about the important of service quality, there are three points that we need to keep in mind:

1. In the future libraries will be known for their service, not their collections.
2. Our users define the quality of our service, not us.
3. Our users are always changing; therefore, our service is too.

**In the future, libraries will be known for their service, not their collections.**

Traditionally, libraries were defined by their collections, and were known by what they owned. The value in a particular library was recognized as a result of their acquisitions programs, and their ability to organize material. A good, well organized, collection provided a level of legitimacy that was internal to libraries, driven by librarians. As a result of social, technological and economic shifts, libraries are now moving to a time when they require external legitimacy, demonstrated through attention to the needs and expectations of our customers, and the level of accountability required by funders (Hansson, 2015). Libraries are moving from a general position of being considered to be “good for society in general” to a focus on the needs of specific user groups.

While we will still have collections of various sorts for some time, increasingly our work will be about providing access and connections for people, rather than purchasing and storing. Skills in finding resources and developing methods for finding and using them will become paramount, but these will result in services rather than increasing the amount of things that libraries own.
As a result of technology, people have more access to sources of information than they have ever had in the past. Just as in the print world, these sources vary in quality and authority, but they are increasingly accessible to anyone who has an introductory level of technology, even a cell phone. Much of this information is available at a very low cost, if not free, and the increased competition seems to be keeping the cost of purchasing e-books low. In an electronic world, publishing is no longer local, it has become global. Libraries are no longer the low cost solution to providing information and reading material.

Increasingly, we are surrounded by non-persistent sources of information, including social media and news, and even formerly persistent sources such as manuscripts may be available in several versions at the same time (Hansson, 2015). This has been described as the “fragmentation of knowledge” (Hansson, 2015); a situation which not only changes libraries’ collection habits, but creates new service opportunities. While we may not own these in the same way in which we formerly owned books, users still need assistance to navigate their way through them in order to find, evaluate and use what they need.

What will motivate customers to continue to use libraries in this new, information-dense environment? The library must be able to provide a value-added service that is not available with an electronic download. While some libraries are noting a decline in the number of users, others are becoming busier, so it is a good opportunity to evaluate what it is that libraries provide for their users. Services that are provided include not only the traditional provision of reading material and information resources, although they are in new formats, but a mixture of traditional and new services. Many users are still drawn to the library for programs such as reading programs for children, or speakers on current topics. Students still require assistance with assignments. New services are arising: impact measurement for researchers, open access publishing, and support in navigating the internet. My local public library offers assistance in learning to users to set up their new e-readers after they purchase them. This service is promoted by the electronics store that sells the readers.

As we talk about service, whether it is the continuation of old services or the introduction of new ones, one critical factor needs to be reviewed. How good is the service that we are offering? If libraries are no longer distinguished by their collections, it is essential that they be distinguished by the quality of service that they offer. Research has determined that service quality is one of the most important factors that influence the overall level of satisfaction with the library (Hossain & Ahmed, 2014). User satisfaction is critical to our future as it is linked to two desirable outcomes: the intent to use the library again, and the intent to speak positively about the library.

A shift to excellent service requires a shift from a transactional business model to a relationship business model. In library terms, we have traditionally thought carefully about the transactions that we have with our users, and ensured that we had good procedures for carrying out these transactions in an orderly way. Typical transactions include issuing library cards, circulating books, and answering reference questions.
Processes were designed for consistency and in a ways that they could be followed exactly under all circumstances. Although many libraries have declared that they are now “user-centered” or “user-focused”, this has not been accompanied with a change in behaviour (Odera-Kwach & Ngulube, 2011). A user-focus indicates a shift to a relationship business model – we now need to examine ourselves to see if we have actually made the necessary changes. “The rules for work are changing. We’re being judged by a new yardstick: not just by how smart we are, or by our training and expertise, but also by how well we handle ourselves and each other” (Julien & Tsoni, 2013).

Excellent service requires a shift in organizational culture. All employees must be committed to high quality service and understand their role in providing it. Even those employees who do not interact directly with the users, for example, cataloguers or shelvers, must be aware of their contribution to the overall experience of the library user. In order to engage them in this new culture, everyone must be involved in problem solving, improving existing services, and developing and implementing new ones. For management to simply require high quality service without reviewing the processes used, the tools and resources available, and the level of staff training required, often leads to contrary results (Sharabi, 2014).

In a culture of excellent service, the manager’s role is to support people to do their work better. The manager must seek and remove obstacles that stand in the way of providing the highest level of service. These obstacles may take many forms: outdated policies or procedures, uncomfortable spaces, inappropriate scheduling or other things that we take for granted. At the same time, in his or her interactions with staff member, the manager must continually model excellent communication and interpersonal skills. Staff members who are treated fairly and with dignity will generally treat customers in the same way. The success of service quality strategies is highly dependent on the level of support from management. In a successful service quality environment, employees lead the changes, and get credit for their contribution to improved service.

Part of examining our own approaches to service quality is reviewing how complaints and problems are handled. Many organizations and managers still react to a problem by looking for the person to blame for the poor service. In a high quality service culture, this time is better invested in identifying and correcting the reason for the problem. Often it is caused by a poor process, poor training or poor communication. Likewise, employees who are involved in a problem with a customer can be supported in using the experience as an opportunity to learn more about providing service, resulting in changes.

In times of economic stress and increased accountability, poor service wastes money. If you are not able to provide excellent service to a customer in the first instance, how will you find the time and resources to solve the problem? There are many estimates of the costs of poor service, some as high as 25% of an organization’s budget (Sharabi, 2014). While these are difficult to confirm in a particular library, it does lead to a different perspective on dealing with problems. If a dissatisfied customer leaves and doesn’t return, or talks about the library in a negative way, it is clear to see the negative effect, even if
actual costs can’t be quantified. One of the costs of poor service that is frequently overlooked is the frustration and stress experienced by employees due to frequent complaints. If awareness of this is not incorporated into discussions of service quality, it is likely to result in low morale, leading to further service problems.

Increasingly, impact assessment is being offered as a criterion for measuring the success of libraries (Odera-Kwach & Ngulube, 2011) – it is service, rather than the size of our collections, that will define our impact.

**Our users define service quality, not us.**

One of the first steps towards a climate of excellence in service quality is understanding what it will look like when we achieve it. There are a number of studies of how customers evaluate service quality, and these need to be applied regularly and rigorously to library operations. The findings of these investigations may well be uncomfortable for us, but when interpreted as input into the development or improvement of services, they are invaluable.

There are various ways of evaluating gaps in service quality (Sharabi, 2014). One of the most useful for application to libraries breaks down the service process in order to clearly identify where problems occur. Once the source of the gap is identified, appropriate action can be taken to improve the service. The gaps are described as follows:

- **Expectations gap:** This is the difference between what customers want and what the organization thinks they want. For example, many libraries have made the decision to purchase e-books whenever possible, while certain groups of customers may still prefer print. Many academic library programs are based on the assumptions that all students are striving for the highest grades, when in fact, many may be just struggling to get through their programs.

- **Standards gap:** this is the difference between what the customer wants and what is provided. This may be a result of poor service design or a belief that expectations are unreasonable. For example, customers may want extended hours on weekends when they are able to visit the library, but the library has decided to implement a different schedule.

- **Performance gap:** This is the difference between the service that is designed and what is actually delivered to the customer. It may be a result of insufficient staff, poorly trained staff or poor motivation. For example, if reference service is not timely or accurate, it is often the result of a performance gap.

- **Communications gap:** This is the difference between the commitments and promised made to the customer, often through promotion and advertising, and what is actually delivered. This may be a result of promising too much rather than failing to deliver good service. For example, an academic library that promises that using the library results in improved grades may be promising too much.
What is interesting to note when considering this array of potential gaps in service delivery, is that only one of them, performance gap, is the responsibility of the staff member delivering the service. The others tend to be the responsibility of the library as a whole, and frequently have a basis in management decisions. It is instructive, therefore, to look more widely at problems with service quality.

An additional gap that is an essential part of any service quality discussion may be referred to as a perception gap. This is the difference in the evaluation of service quality between the service provider, in this case the library, and the customer (Julien & Tsoni, 2013). Many of the things that libraries count and rank themselves on are not actually measures of service quality. While we make take pride in the number of databases we subscribe to, or the number of reference questions we answer, neither of these describe the customer experience in using either our databases or our reference desks.

Meeting internally set standards, whether they are set by librarians or libraries, does not imply that the library is performing well in the eyes of the customers (Hossain & Ahmed, 2014). There is a body of research that has demonstrated a gap between service providers’ perception of service quality and customers’ perceptions (Julien & Tsoni, 2013). One explanation for this gap is that when people providing services are asked to evaluate the service quality, they are also indirectly evaluating their own performance. This, then, does not incorporate questions of whether the library is offering the right service to the right people. Customers, on the other hand, do not evaluate their own behaviour when assessing a service transaction. Therefore, they are inclined to attribute all problems to the people or organization providing the service. Again, this supports the notion that an evaluation of problems in service quality needs to look beyond the individual providing the service.

As the library develops a customer-centered mindset, it begins the process of actively seeking out information and feedback from customers and integrating that information into all discussions and decisions within the library. It means shifting from thinking about some of our customers as problems, into understanding that many of them are suffering a gap between their expectations and our service. Understanding this gap and how it is perceived is a step towards a customer-centred service model. It also ensures that when we undertake change to improve services that we are moving in a direction that is valued by our users.

We know in general how customers evaluate service; what is needed now is to apply these general understandings to libraries and library service. We must examine these criteria in terms of our buildings, our collections and all of the other functions that make up a library.

What do our customers value? Is this the same as what our staff value? How does this play out in terms of library service, information literacy instruction, hours. Is it related to our hiring, training and evaluation of staff, what message do our physical facilities send? Note that this is not about money…it is about welcoming behaviour and tidiness, currency of posters, attitudes to staff service. Customers typically evaluate service quality on five
dimensions: reliability, tangibles, responsiveness, assurance and empathy (Lee, 2007). Reliability, the ability to provide the expected service has been identified as the most important criterion in the evaluation of service quality. In order to assess our reliability, it is critical to understand what it is that our customers are expecting of us. Tangibles are one of the ways in which customers evaluate service. Because it is often difficult to evaluate the actual service, such as how good an answer provided at the reference service is, customers use things that they can see as evaluation criteria. A clean and welcoming library will be perceived as providing better service than an untidy one.

One of the areas that libraries must continually assess is our ability to be responsive. To what extent are we willing to help customers and provide prompt service? In many libraries, the number of rules and procedures in place that limit our ability to be flexible with customers limit our ability to be responsive to their needs. In many cases, these rules are legacies of the past, and no longer serve any need. They may also be based on assumptions about the behaviour of our users, in particular, the likelihood that they will engage in inappropriate behaviour if we don’t have rules to prevent it.

One of the dimensions of service quality is assurance, or an evaluation of employees’ knowledge and courtesy and their ability to inspire trust and confidence. This is the dimension that is most closely linked to individual behaviour, and the area that must be tied into human resource practices, including recruitment, training and evaluation of staff members. The final dimension of service quality is empathy, or the degree to which individuals feel that they are treated as individuals. Again, this is an area that will improve with staff training and management (Lee, 2007). Unfortunately, many studies show that users have negative perceptions of library staff, believing that they are passive, incompetent, or overly bureaucratic (Garoufallou et al, 2013). Clearly, as a profession, we have opportunities for improvement.

When we start setting goals for service quality, it is difficult to know how high to aim. If we reassure ourselves that we have few complaints, it is necessary to examine how much impact those few complaints have. How much dissatisfaction is required to start having a negative effect on the library’s reputation. Research suggests that only 5% of dissatisfied customers complain; the good news is that if their problem is resolved, they are likely to become more loyal users than before they complained. Whether or not they complain and give the library the opportunity to resolve the problem, they will typically tell 9 or 10 other people. Satisfied customers, on the other hand, only tell one or two people. (Sharabi, 2014). Already you can begin to measure the impact of a few complaints, as they suggest, but don’t reveal, the existence of many more that you are not aware of.

If your target is 90% accuracy or excellent service, then you are suggesting that you are satisfied with a level of errors that means that out of every 1000 items you circulation, 100 will have some kind of problem. Out of every 100 reference questions you answer, 10 will be or poor quality, either in accuracy or in delivery. However, it is essential to remember that if you are one of the ten people who had a bad experience at the reference desk, if it was your first experience with the library you have experienced a problem
100% of the time. Thus, the library needs to develop a culture of quality, in which the aim is to get it right, first time, every time.

The library customer who has had a bad experience experiences a loss. While library staff are typically proud of the fact they deliver free service, the customer invests in library service in non-monetary ways...time, convenience, transportation and other resources. If he or she doesn’t get what they were expecting from the library, they experience a negative reaction to the library, which they then go and share with their friends. For this reason, libraries must strive to meet the needs of their users.

Customers typically classify service problems on the basis of whether or not they believe that it was controllable by the service provider. For example, while libraries may believe that lack of staff resulting in long line ups may be out of their control, customers typically perceive staffing to be under the control of the library. They are then less tolerant of this kind of service problem. On the other hand, a problem with the online catalogue due to a power outage is understood to be out of the control of the library. In this case, the library’s best strategy is to communicate the problem as quickly as possible. (Sivakumar, Li & Dong, 2014). The library’s efforts at improving quality should focus on those factors that users believe are under their control.

When reviewing your service quality, the most important thing is to recognize that the things that we like to count: size of collection, circulation, collection growth rate, visits, questions answered, preservation standards and so on are not measures of service quality (Odera-Kwach & Ngulube, 2011). We must continually find ways to evaluate those factors which are important to our users: having what they want when they want it, simple and fast processes, and a way for users to provide feedback and receive a reply.

**Our users are always changing; therefore, our services will too.**

The final consideration in develop excellent service is the recognition that our users are constantly changing and so our services must continue to change with them. This means not only developing new processes and services, but abandoning old ones. As the populations of African countries continue to change at an ever more rapid rate, changing expectations will have a growing impact on libraries. Africa is a baby-booming continent with the fastest growing youth population in the world. It has a rapidly expanding middle class, characterized by improved education, more productive urbanization, and increasing consumer demands, which will also affect expectations of library service. (http://trendafrica.co.za/2014/11/23/africas-brand-opportunities-2015/)

Many economists predict that internet usage on mobile phones in Africa will become twenty times more prevalent: double the rate of growth in the rest of the world, and the price of data is steadily decreasing. This digital environment and use of web based technologies and social media will change user expectations. (http://www.howwemadeitinafrica.com/communicating-with-the-one-of-the-worlds-fastest-growing-middle-class/47766/) It brings libraries many benefits: a relatively cost
effective way to reach users, and a flexible and immediate way to provide service. It also brings many challenges, as it requires new service models and new ways of thinking about users.

As a communication tool, it allows us to find out a lot more about our users and what they want; it provides opportunities for immediate feedback, and allows us to promote libraries’ web presence and online services (Garoufallou et al, 2013). It also requires greater attention to how we respond to our users. In a web environment, people expect fast feedback and answers, and will judge the library’s service on how it presents itself on the web.

Studies of university students demonstrate that they are becoming more challenging users as they become more assertive and critical of services (Sharabi, 2014). They are looking for the library to add value to their educational experience, and the service must be compatible with their expectations. A study of students in Bangladesh (a developing country) found that students believed that excellent library service was a right... even those with little experience of library use, and little understanding of what is required to provide the level of service that they expect and demand (Hossain & Ahmed, 2014). As they become increasingly more informed, more connected and feel more empowered, their expectations of service quality continue to rise (Roy, 2013). For libraries to stay relevant, and viable, we must find ways to meet these increased expectations.

Changing expectations include better access to information, more choice, simplified processes and fault-free service. Increased peer-to-peer communication also creates an environment where people depend on their peers for evaluation of service – a bad experience at the library is easily shared widely through Facebook, Twitter or Instagram. Many library processes now appear onerous and bureaucratic to our users. The digital environment has created a more demanding user culture for all library types (Garoufallou et al, 2013)

Moving forward
In the words of the famous Chinese philosopher, Lao-Tzu, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”. A move to a culture of excellent service quality can’t be achieved overnight; however, even small steps can move the library in the right direction.

The library needs to develop a changed attitude to service; to understand that each staff member is responsible for contribution to the overall experience of the customer. Processes and activities need to be critically examined to determine whether they still bring value to the customer, or whether they stand in the way of an excellent customer service experience. Feedback from both customers and staff will contribute to simpler, more effective processes.

As services evolve and develop, workloads need to be monitored, and staff members need training and continuous education, not only in the services but in how to adapt to a
constantly changing environment. Skills such as improved questioning and listening can help staff be more responsive to customer needs (Julien & Tsoni, 2013). Job responsibilities and boundaries may need to be re-defined where they provide barriers to excellent service. New services may require that old processes be abandoned, which can cause a great deal of stress for staff members who are invested in them.

Since few, if any, libraries have sufficient budget to grow their staff, flexibility needs to be built in by freeing staff who are currently doing routine functions. The automation of many library functions, such as circulation, registration for programs, renewals and placing holds, frees staff to provide new programs. Human resource practices such as recruitment and performance management need to directly address issues of customer service.

Staff who work directly with customers need to provide evidence based in put on problems that occur, and propose new ways to respond to them. They also need to be empowered to make decisions that improve customer service. This often leads to improved motivation among staff as they are able to take responsibility for customer satisfaction.

As libraries move forward into a rapidly changing future, we will continue to help our users locate, evaluate and use the information that they need. We may offer different types of information, and it will be located in many new places, but we will still add value to the process by making it easier and faster for our users. As long as we focus on providing this service in a way that meets the needs of our customers, we will continue to be relevant, and our future will be assured. A reliable, pleasant, fast and effective service model, which meets or exceeds customer expectations, will always be of value.

References


