Enhancing maximum utilisation of health information resources in a health sciences library.

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Abstract

In this era of hyper- inflation when health institutions are forced to make budget cuts, the health science library can be an easy and early target unless the librarian had established a strong support base among lecturing staff through marketing library services and resources.

Health science libraries are called upon to demonstrate their value to their parent institutions as they compete with other units for resources. Marketing practices can provide a valuable framework for analysis and action to meet expectations in a rapidly changing environment. This paper is aimed at enabling empowering health science librarians (medical librarians) in an academic institution with knowledge and skills of marketing applied in the commercial world, in order to enhance maximum utilisation of health information resources they have struggled to acquire and processed for use and in the process, justifying their existence in the medical school.

First, the term marketing is defined followed by a discussion on the need for marketing in the health science library. Marketing techniques or approaches that can be used by health libraries to maximise usage of information services and or resources are identified and explained.

Medical staff that knows their librarian and is aware of health information resources in the library, is comfortable accessing them is more likely to use information resources and other services in the library as well as recommending them to students and colleagues. As the library use increases and utilisation of resources gets high, so does the value of the library to the institution and the health information resources to academics and students. Faculty awareness of the full potential of the library services

and resources enriches curricular and research.   Health science libraries should aggressively market health information resources they have secured to their user communities in order to increase support both from within and outside their parent institutions.

Introduction

Rapid innovation, sophisticated marketing, and advances in communication have resulted in an increasing awareness of new options and a greater variety of choices. With many competitors striving to satisfy our wants and whims, traditional choices that we had could be abandoned for new products and services, this based on curiosity, effective marketing, and evidence of a clearly superior option. Choice of new products and services may well be based on familiarity, comfort, trust and satisfaction.

Colleges and universities are by tradition, well regarded non-profit institutions that should not be affected by the evils of market competition. However, reality is that they are no longer protected from the storms of entrepreneurial competition as alternative information providers are threatening to erode the academic library profession's user base. Information costs are causing havoc with the budgets of most university libraries.[1] As Neuhaus[2] noted, competition for funds and the custodianship of information is threatening the role of the library as an essential information provider within academia.

Advances in Information Communication Technology are providing a number of options for information access by the university community. The library may be perceived as one of the many information providers at their disposal despite of its pivotal role in the information provision at the institution. For the health sciences faculty the library is becoming an increasingly unfamiliar location now introducing more complex and complicated information tools while simultaneously reducing traditional formats of information such as the print journal.[3] In the administrator's eye the health science library is another mouth to feed, perhaps to be listed under the IT Unit or it is just a repository for books and a provider of quiet study space whose role as a primary information provider has been superseded by the Internet.[4]

Librarians and information specialists now argue that to ensure a prominent position within the future world of academia, library faculty must market their skills, services and resources.[5] Without effective ongoing marketing, health science libraries may

appear less relevant and less necessary to future generations of health science students, faculty and administrators. As Kotler wrote, "The ability of businesses and organisations to promote their services or to make potential users aware of their products can mean the difference between success and extinction."[6] Libraries are therefore called upon to demonstrate their value in the world of academia by marketing their skills, services and resources. In this way they can consolidate their prominent position as the nerve centre for all health information in the health sciences institution.

In today's economic climate, with costs rising and profits dwindling, it has become especially challenging for many organizations to turn a profit. Competition in the marketplace is increasing the demand for information, while the budgets for information centres are decreasing. The library and information sectors have to escalate their fight for every budget dollar, and some struggle to justify their very existence. Health Libraries have not and are not spared either. They, too are called upon to demonstrate their value to parent institutions as they compete with other organisational units for resources. Marketing practices can provide a valuable framework for analysis and action to meet expectations in this rapidly changing environment. The library is traditionally a non-profit organisation, and only recently did such organisations become aware of the need to market their products and services. Library and information products/services are now being recognised as saleable and there is a constant market for these. The rationale behind this shift-over is due to the fact that librarians are not only facing the challenges of the information explosion, but also the influx of automated systems, rising costs of materials and services, the Internet and online services, demand for better services by users, staff shortage and harsh budget cutbacks compounded by soaring operating costs. As such, they are facing an acute sense of accountability to market and sustain their useful products/services without jeopardising the interest of potential users.

This paper is aimed at empowering health science librarians (medical librarians) in an academic institution with knowledge and skills of marketing applied in the commercial world, in order to enhance maximum utilisation of health information resources they have struggled to acquire and processed for use and in the process, justifying their existence in the medical school.

First, the term marketing is defined followed by a discussion on the need for marketing in the health science library. Marketing techniques or approaches that can be used by health libraries to maximise usage of information services and or resources are identified and explained.

What is marketing?

Health libraries exist in a market place competing with others for limited resources as well as competing in the provision of health information. The marketing concept therefore, cannot be overlooked as it creates strategies for change, growth and responsiveness of the health library in the market place. The concept can be viewed as a philosophy, a management style, an orientation that concentrates on the enquirer rather than the enquiry, is service or customer oriented rather than process or product oriented, looks for effectiveness before efficiency and aims for fitness of purpose rather than quality of product. It is a planned process of identifying, attracting, satisfying and gaining the support of specific user groups in a manner that furthers the goals of the health library and the parent organisation the library serves.[7]

Decisions to select user groups to be served, and the information services or resources to be provided in response to the needs of those groups should be carefully made in order to align the health library services with the priorities of the parent organisation and maximise its contribution to the parent organisation. In this way the library can justify its existence in the organisation and avoid budget cuts, thus ensuring continued funding of the service by the parent organisation.

Marketing, as suggested by the American Marketing Associaton, is "an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders".[8]

Kotler in a work on marketing for non profit organisations defined marketing as, "The analysis, planning, implementation, and control of carefully formulated programmes

designed to bring about voluntary exchanges of values with target markets for the purpose of achieving organisational objectives. It relies heavily on designing the organisation's offering in terms of the target market's needs and desires, and on using effective pricing communication and distribution to inform, motivate and service all markets."[9] The aim here is to develop a customer orientation rather than a product orientation with the key factor being the exchange relationship in which the assumption is that both the library and the user group is offering something of value to each other. The model of the relationship is as shown below
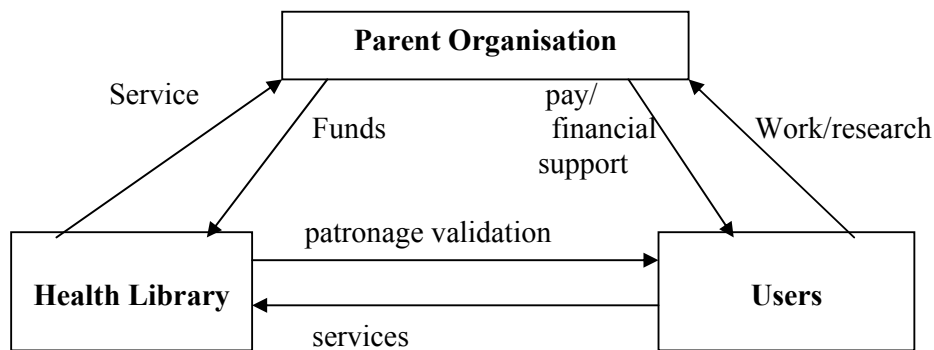

Fig.1. *Exchange relationship*

Adeyoyin[10] in another definition considered marketing as consisting of individual and organizational activities designed to sense and serve the customer's needs and to facilitate and expedite exchanges with a view to achieving the goals of the individual or organization through the satisfaction of the customer's needs.

The need for marketing

Advances in the Information Communication Technology (ICT) have brought about many competitors in the field of information distribution, in particular, the Internet is threatening to take away the health science library users as many of them can use the Internet from the comfort of their homes. Medical doctors, academics and researchers in medicine and health can afford to search for health information from outside the library. This impacts negatively on the budget support for the library for acquisitions of resources as well as improving manpower in the library. Marketing can be used to deliver value of resources and services to the users and manage user or customer relationships in ways that would benefit the health science library, the user groups and

the parent institution of the library. Through marketing the library can justify its existence and continued funding support from parent organisation and the donor community. The costs involved in the generation of information products, and aspects such as resource constraints, shrinking budgets, and electronic information age have also made marketing necessary. Health science libraries must embark on aggressive marketing in order to create and sustain demand for the services and resources they offer to users.

Marketing can help to decide how to create a defensible, sustainable and competitive advantage against competitors. Competition from the Internet, for example, should not take away library users from the library because resources in the library can still be accessed online from homes or information kiosks. It should not be allowed to take away funds from our unit placing it in another unit's vote.

There are arguably many intangible benefits of marketing health information resources that have a larger and more long-term positive impact.

When the administrators understand and value the mission of the health science library, the role of the library will more often appear as a vital element within the plans, goals and objectives of the university, college or school of medicine. When they see that role as an essential one, financial support is more likely.

Curricula and research in the college are enriched if faculty become more aware of the full potential of their library. College faculty who are knowledgeable about library resources and services tend to support library initiatives and encourage their students to make regular use of the library. As students take more advantage of library services and resources, their horizons are broadened and their appreciation of libraries in general is strengthened, thus possibly ensuring long-term support for libraries when these students later assume decision-making roles.[11]

New programmes in the college create new categories of users by, which through market segmentation the library can identify their unique information requirements and information-seeking behaviour and create appropriate services.

While many libraries are marketing their services and resources to the parent organisation, not many are applying formal marketing strategies. As Nkanga[12] observed in an exploratory study of selected information providing institutions in Botswana, many libraries do not take a systematic approach to the process of marketing.

Marketing approach

The systematic marketing approach takes into account the need to determine information needs of the groups of users the health library is serving. As information services in a health library and information centre tend to be customer oriented nowadays, a marketing approach that takes into cognisance the needs of the users is quite proactive and can equally apply or fit into the vision, mission of the health library and the organisation it serves. It guides the library on what to do over the next two years, five years ten years and even what to do tomorrow.

The Kotler-Andreasen-Keiser[13] developed a six step marketing strategy that included an assessment of the marketing environment, the information needs and resources, an analysis of the market opportunity, the development of an operational marketing programme and the evaluation of the marketing strategy process.

The marketing environment consists of the external, the operating and the internal environments. Conditions emanating from the socio-economic and technological advancements and competition are assessed in the external environment for effective decision-making. In the operating environment, the health library aligns its services and information resources with the priorities of the parent organisation to maximise its contribution to the parent organisation. It also ensures that opportunities for market growth are developed to fit in with what the parent organisation wishes to do. In the internal environment, the health library ensures that it remains focused on its objectives while striving to meet the needs of its users.

In the assessment of information needs the health science library identifies the different types of users and prospective users to find out if there are information needs

that are specific to each user group. Where needs are found to be different or are the same but presented in different ways, this would impact on the kind of information to be collected. It will also impact on the services and the products developed from that information, and the way in which they are disseminated to target groups.

Using the strength, weakness, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis technique the health science library evaluates its mission and objectives so that the marketing programme to be developed can adjust to both internal and external realities for success.

Market opportunity analysis will be based on client needs and the capability of the organisation to provide additional products and services. Opportunities are analysed in order to determine areas of the service that should be developed.

The development of an operational marketing programme will involve decision-making on the "controllable variables", (the 4Ps in marketing mix) product, price, place and promotion, which should be consistent with the client behaviour associated with resource or service being marketed. Decisions based on these variables should influence the client towards the desired outcome, in this case the effective use of the information service.

The final step in the marketing process is evaluation, which measures the outcomes of marketing strategies, and provides feedback into the marketing process for future marketing initiatives.[14] Questions whether the marketing programme met its goal, its strengths or weaknesses and above all whether it has resulted in improved library services to the various user groups should be addressed. The health science library is expected to keep abreast of services offered by existing information systems and networks in the market, which might impact on the organisation by providing competition, or creating opportunities for forming strategic alliances.

The process described above provides a framework for the development of a sound marketing strategy using the marketing mix technique to influence users towards increased and effective use of health information resources.

Applying marketing mix

As Kavulya[15] noted, the development of an effective marketing strategy requires the specification of the marketing mix, which incorporates the four "Ps" of marketing: product, price, promotion, and place. The specification according to Lee[16] is the blueprint for the development, implementation and evaluation of specific services and initiatives. McCarthy[17] divided marketing into four general sets of activities. His typology has become so universally recognized that his four activity sets, the Four Ps, have passed into the language.

In the library context product does not refer to a book or books, rather, the various services or information resources offered by the library designed for specific user groups. Examples would include databases, information literacy skills programmes (ILS), and selective dissemination of information (SDI) activities, whose quality depends on their appropriateness or usefulness to the users' information needs**.**

Place is the extent of area to which the health science library services and information resources are made available to the medical students, medical faculty and administrators including channels of availability, coverage, locations, inventory and document delivery systems. Hawcroft[18] suggests that place in the library context is to do with access and therefore should include issues such as providing multiple copies of works, books in high demand or providing Web-based access to distance learners.

Price has been taken to refer not only to monetary cost of services but also to obstacles encountered by the users in accessing the service such as time spend, and unsuitable or user-unfriendly equipment or software.[19] Price would also involve decisions regarding pricing for various library services, which may be done on the basis of inflation and revenue pressure on the one hand and user acceptance criteria on the other.

Promotion includes all the activities undertaken by the health science library to communicate its health information resources and services to the target user groups through advertising, public relations and direct selling. The benefits accruing for the library from these activities include increased library usage, increased value in the

organisation, better awareness of the information services available and a positive perception of the role of the health science library in the college.[20]

Health science libraries can use a variety of methods in promoting health information resources. Posters can be mounted on strategic points in the library while leaflets can be distributed to users as they walk in or during a meeting or demonstration. Demonstrations are arranged differently for members of the academic community of lecturers, students and administrators during a launch of a new product or service or during orientation or information literacy skills sessions for students.

Many libraries produce newsletters that they distribute to users. Acquisition lists by subject can be part of the contents of the newsletters, which are then distributed to departments in print format through internal mail or electronically to every member using the intranet. They can also be put up on the library's home page with links to the institution's home page. In this way, potential users can be attracted to use the library services and resources.

Members of staff of the health science library should hold regular meetings to discuss library marketing and then institute a marketing committee to spear-heard the development of a marketing plan or strategy. The plan should take cognisance of the user needs and the capability of the library to satisfy demand that may arise from implementation of the marketing plan.

Conclusion

The health science library and indeed any other library should be well insulated from tribulations of competitors in the field of information provision. The role of the health science library in the teaching, learning and research activities of the health sciences institution should be recognised. However, it is the responsibility of the library itself to fight for recognition and prominence in the institution. The approach is through marketing of services and resources. Marketing of health information services and resources is necessary as it enables the library to increase awareness and educate the user community about the health information services and resources available for their exploit. The aim of any marketing plan in the library should be to change the

perception of the library from being one of the many information providers to being the only reliable source of relevant health information; from being just another mouth to feed to being a vital unit in the health sciences institute set-up whose role is vital within the plans, goals and objectives of the institute. The curricular and research in the institute are enriched if faculty are aware of the full potential of the health science information services and resources. The health sciences library should follow a systematic marketing approach in order to gain full understanding of its user needs and develop an effective plan to satisfy those needs while creating opportunities for making new products and services available to the users.

Medical staff, students and practitioners that know their librarian and are aware of health information resources in the library, and are comfortable accessing them, are more likely to use the resources and other services in the health science library as well as recommending them to students and colleagues. As the library use increases and utilisation of resources gets high, so does the value of the library to the institution and the health information resources to academics and students. When then the community of users come to depend on the library for its collection and services, they are more likely to support the library when budget cuts are proposed. In these difficult times for health sciences libraries in, particularly developing countries, librarians should aggressively market health information resources they have secured to their user communities and increase support both from within and outside their institutions.

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