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Original Research Article

Clients Retention in a Competitive Environment: The Information Professional Perspective

Adeniran Pauline Oghenekaro* and Alabi Stephen Olakunle

Serials Library, Redeemer's University, Ede, Osun State, Nigeria

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The increasing awareness and use of information for different purposes have resulted in the establishment of various information service providers which have the capacity to compete for survival with libraries in providing users with timely, adequate and relevant information in the preferred formats. Information professionals therefore need to respond to such challenges in the quest to enhance the use of their resources and services. This paper therefore looks at the competitive nature of the information environment, identifies the library competitors, rationales for promoting library operations and services, skills acquisition by information professionals as strategies for client retention in libraries. The paper recommends that: libraries should start thinking of plans or modalities to carry out research on customer survey; the need for library managers to be aggressive in soliciting for funds for library support. The paper also recommends the regular organization of training and development programme for skills acquisition by information professionals.

Key words: Library Client, Information Environment, Library competitors, Information Professionals.

INTRODUCTION

In centuries past, libraries were the main sources of information in society. They play a crucial role in all systems in society and from time immemorial; they proved to be partners of change. Today libraries do not represent anymore just some structures for the conservation and utilization of human creation; they are structures of relation to their users, open, and flexible structures.

A series of modifications in the organization of their functions and services come from the fact that they stopped a long time ago being the only important source of information. Thus, they found themselves in the situation of having to deal with the competition generated by the appearance of other organizations specialized in the information transfer. In order to maintain their position in this environment, libraries have to improve permanently the offer of services and products which they provide for their users, to strengthen their role of information provider which they have in society. Library personnel – information professionals need to continue to respond to this challenge in the quest to enhance the use of their resources and services.

Libraries around the world are facing rising costs and dwindling budgets due to technological advances and today's dynamic economic climate (Adekunmisi, 2013, p.1). Marketing concepts are increasingly being introduced within the library

environment to help tackling the challenges facing libraries today. Marketing covers those activities that connect an organization to those parts of its outside world that use, buy, sell or influence the outputs it produces and the benefits and services it offers (Jestin and Parameswari, 2002, p. 1). Kotler in Adekunmisi (2013, p. 1) notes that organizations such as museums, universities, libraries and charities need to market their causes and their products to gain political, social as well as economic support.

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 product and services that meet the identified needs of their clients. Four main factors, namely information explosion, technology revolution, escalating library costs and increasing competition by information providers and web-based commercial service providers are responsible for encouraging the library professionals to develop strategies to enhance their operations and services. Information professionals therefore need to continue to respond to such challenges in the quest to enhance the use of their resources and services.

Statement of the Problem

From time immemorial, libraries have been known to play an important role of information provision in society. With the advent of information communication technology (ICTs), which led to the establishment of other information providers, libraries have ceased to be the only sources of information. The introduction of ICTs brought along its competition in the information environment.

Today, libraries have to compete with a whole lot of competitors such as the internet and website providers, Telecommunication operators, e-journals and e-books providers, online vendors such as Ebscohost, Jstor, Mylibrary, Science direct, Agora, E-granary, special and private information centre, archives and documentation centre, to mention but a few. These libraries competitors are equipped with sophisticated technology, and have adequate funding that enhances their ability to provide much needed information to the information seekers. This trend now makes information users to show little or no interest in visiting libraries for any help. If information seekers' needs are satisfied, they will visit the libraries whenever they have needs. This calls for the response of information professionals. This paper therefore will look at the role of information professionals in client retention in the information competitive environment.

Objectives of the Paper

The following objectives are set for this paper

1. To examine the competitive nature of the information environment
2. To identify libraries competitors
3. To find out the rationale for promoting libraries' operation
4. To identify what skills are required by information professionals for performing their job
5. To ascertain the role of information professionals in clients' retention

The Competitive nature of the Information Environment

Libraries are among the oldest socio-cultural institutions, with an important role in the evolution of human civilization through the functions they perform: custodial, educational, aesthetic and informational (Porumbeanu, n.d, p. 2). Today the libraries do not represent anymore, just some structures for the conservation and utilization of human creation; they are structures of relation to their users, open, flexible structures. A series of modifications in the organization of their functions and services come from the fact that they stopped a long time ago being the only important source of information.

Thus, they found themselves in a situation of having to deal with the competition generated by the appearance of other organizations specialized in the information transfer. In order to maintain their position in this market, libraries had and have to improve permanently the offer of services and products which they provide for their users, to strengthen their role of information provider which they have in society.

Libraries today are having some organizations that are competing with their services and if urgent steps are not taken these organizations may send librarians out of their laudable profession, these organizations include:

- i.) Internet and websites providers
- ii.) Telecommunication (telephone) operators

- iii.) E-journals and e-books providers
- iv.) Online vendors e.g. Ebscohost, Jstor, mylibrary, Science direct, Agora, E-granary etc.
- v.) Special and private information centers
- vi.) Archives and documentation centers

These competitors are equipped with sophisticated technology, current library resources and adequate funding that enhance their ability to provide much needed information to the information seekers; these make information users to develop little or no interest in visiting the library for any help, except during examination period when a large population of readers (students) will visit the library (Yaya et al, 2014, p. 4). The challenges of budget cuts, increased user base, the rapid growth of material, rising costs, networking demands, competition from database vendors, and complexity in information requirements are forcing the professionals to adopt marketing to improve the management of library and information centres (Madhusudhan, 2008, p. 1).

Brook & Tabaei in Bamigbola (2013, p. 2) note that the impact of the Internet poses a big challenge to libraries. For instance Google is competing intensely with a library with its vision of organizing the world information and making it accessible and useful globally (www.google.com.hk/corporate/index.) Haliso & Ogungbemi (2014, p.1) note that the Internet is fast gaining the confidence of scholars and researchers as a veritable source of information. The authors note that the response of academic librarians in Nigeria is to rise above the challenges they face to take advantage of the shortcomings of the Internet and adopt new methods of providing service to their patrons. This is to make sure they remain relevant in their fast changing and competitive environment because the library is no longer the primary information provider. The first place people focus when there is information need now is search engines (OCLC, 2005).

Hughes is quite correct in her assessment that as the number of information service suppliers increase "the role of the library as the primary aggregator and purveyor of content to its community is less and less unique" (Hughes, 2000, p.3). Libraries now have competition. The fact that for-profit information providers could eventually replace academic libraries is not really the issue. The laws of a competitive marketplace dictate that unless your services are relevant and vital, you will be supplanted. However, with the present, limited state of a digital library collection, the danger the competition poses is not to libraries as much as it is for students, professors and the educational mission of colleges and universities.

The libraries competitors marketing strategy is that they provide online research services that complement and support the collection of a traditional library (O'Leary, 2001, p. 14). It is pertinent for the library to go further ahead of Google by taking a step above being a collector and organizer, but focus more on the information users (Mi and Nesta (2006) cited in Bamigbola (2013, p.1). Therefore, if the library is not to lose its role in the society there is a need for libraries and information centres to work out ways of improving on their services in order to retain their users. Librarians are being conscious of promotion strategies and many libraries are fully employing different means of promoting their information services to their users and potential users as well (Kaur and Rani, 2008). In the past years, marketing was familiar and used only by profit making sectors and unfamiliar to not-for-profit organizations or public sectors such as the library (Vasileiou and Rowley, in Bamigbola, 2013, p.1). However, the trend is changing now library is embracing strategies to

promote and sell information products and services (Kaur and Rani, 2008). The library competitive environment calls for the formulation of strategies geared towards customers' satisfaction, thus, it is relevant to the library because the primary philosophy of library and information science is customer-centered. The mission of any library is to satisfy the varied information needs of users, that is, the customers of libraries (Bamigbola, 2013, p. 1). Careful promotion strategy is required for library to survive in this information age.

Kumbar (2004, p. 2) outlined the following steps as reasons why libraries should formulate strategies for promoting their operations and services:

- Competitions for customers - Libraries are no longer the only information provider. The mega-bookstores, online book dealers, information consultants, the Internet service providers, free web access providers and individual customers will not hesitate to market to potential customers or users.
- Libraries need to promote their services in order to remain relevant and stay connected to the communities they serve.
- Information professionals have to market their services and products in order to improve the image of their libraries and themselves. Libraries have to be unique in the kind of access and services they provide. Information professionals need to change the perception of users and others towards them as being information experts.
- Information professionals are and should be regarded as essential and valuable community resources. In essence, there is a need for the information professionals to make people to be aware of the services they provide. They should see themselves as resources people go to for information and should be well prepared and equipped themselves as experts in the field.
- Library users want recognition, attention and appreciation for their individual information needs as customers always have ever-changing needs and wants, and there is a need for information professional to create an environment in libraries that foster customer consciousness and satisfaction among employees.
- Effective promotion of libraries leads to increase of usage, change perception and enhance the reputation of the library.

Role of the Information Professionals in the Digital Age

According to Aina (2014) the ultimate aim of attracting patronage to library and information services is to ensure the relevance of a library in an academic institution. "A library that is not patronized either physically or remotely will lose its relevance" Today's information professionals need to be more proactive in their quest to provide information resources and services to their clients. This will give them an edge over their numerous competitors in the information market. Today's information professionals should therefore take up the following roles.

- Provision of access to electronic and physical materials
- Maintenance of specialized knowledge of digital databases

- Evaluation of electronic materials and acquisition of licenses
- Education of patrons about use of digital library services and generalized digital literacy
- Provision of virtual services to users, often through library websites
- Developing relationships with database managers, electronic publishers, etc.
- Hosting community events
- Partnering with other libraries to increase access to materials
- Handling publishers restriction on e-books and digital materials
- Keeping up to date with the latest development in digital media
- Increasing collaboration with databases and other libraries to maximize information access
- Improve technology access

In meeting the current information needs of users of academic libraries Aina (2014) suggested the need to do away with traditional divisions of libraries. He suggested a more fundamental restructuring such as the Readers Services Department, Technical Services Department, Digital Services Department and Research and Development Department to be put in place. Information Professionals need to equip users with information skills regularly. They (Information Professionals/Librarians) should also ensure the libraries are automated so as to allow the users to access the bibliographic databases and the full texts of the library holdings remotely from any part of the world as long as they have internet facilities.

Nothing can be further from the truth. When organization has competitors like the case of libraries, it can only remain in business (of information provided) only when it is creative and innovative. Therefore, Information Professionals/Librarians need not only to be creative and innovative but also need to be proactive.

Competence, Skills and Attitudes Require by Information Professionals: A Strategy for Clients Retention

When library clients are satisfied with the resources and services provided by a library, they are willing to visit such library again which is the whole essence of this work. Information professionals in the current information age need to possess appropriate ICTs skills, attitude and competencies in order for them to survive in the competitive environment.

Personal competencies represent a set of skills, attitudes and values that enable individuals to work efficiently; be good communicators; focus on continuing learning throughout their careers; demonstrate the value-added nature of their services; and survive in the information age. Professional skills in promoting library services according to Adekunmisi (2013, p. 5) include:

1. Perception of users' needs and ability to obtain feedback from users.
2. Technical knowledge such as ability to use the internet and other electronic resources and databases
3. Knowledge of various marketing strategies for marketing information services

To satisfy users' needs and encourage them to use the library, the information professional must:

1. Have expert knowledge of the content of information resources, including the ability to critically evaluate and filter them
2. Possess specialized subject knowledge appropriate to the business of the library and clients
3. Must develop customer relations –developing a relationship with library users is imperative if libraries are to meet the needs of the current generation of users.
4. Use appropriate information technology to acquire, organize and disseminate information – There is a need for the present day information professionals to develop ICTs skills to be able to efficiently employ ICTs to meet users' needs.
5. Evaluate the outcomes of information use and conduct research related to the solution of information management problems continually to improve information services in response to the changing needs
6. Effective communication skills and the ability to work well with others is required for retaining users.
7. Leadership and management competencies- The information environment is facing radical issues, especially in the area of leadership and management aspects. These aspects must be grounded in a consideration of the information needs and demands of the customers or clients. Quality services are only possible through quality leadership and management practices.

Conclusion

The information environment today is highly competitive. The competition is brought about by the establishment of other information providers which have the capacity to compete with the library. To satisfy clients and encourage them to visit the library again and again, information managers must develop strategies for promoting the resources and services of the library. They must be determined to acquire relevant skills especially, ICTs skills which will enable them to survive in the information and communication technologies (ICTs) age.

Recommendations

1. Libraries should regularly conduct research on customer surveys. This should be done to seek information regarding the library communication, service quality, facilities, research and equipment, as well as service delivery and library staff.
2. There is a need for the library managers to solicit for funds from local and international organizations, schools, agencies; etc for library support. Money realized from such solicitation efforts should be used only for uplifting the library services and development.
3. There is also need for librarians to organize training and development programme regularly for skills acquisition.
4. There is need for library managers to embrace change. They should be willing to accept change rather than stick to the old methods of rendering information services to users.
5. Library managers should develop a feedback mechanism through which users' perception of the library is communicated.

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