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LIBR 200 Discussion Post - Alignment

Two-Way Communication Leads to Alignment with Users

I think there is a complex relationship between the goals of the library, the wants and

needs of users and both groups' understanding of and reaction to information laws and policies.

Though it may seem hackneyed, I believe the best way to ensure alignment with users is to

utilize both old and new technology to enable communication between the users and the library.

As Rubin (2010) explains in chapter 7, to properly serve its patrons, a library must

understand their wants and needs. Once library users understand that their librarians listen and

react to their needs, they will feel like they are a valuable part of the library and be concerned

with its funding and the effects of laws and policies on their experience of the library. There are

many ways in which the librarian can listen to their users, and I believe it's important to utilize

as many as possible given the breadth of a library's audience. Inviting a broad demographic to

provide feedback on library services in a variety of ways ensures that the entire audience is more

likely to be heard from and also functions as a way to promote the library to the full audience. As

Quinn and Ramasubramanian state in their 2007 article, "Citizen participation is a complex

phenomenon—everyone participates in public life in their own way and at their own comfort

level" (p. 602). The same is true when that participation is specifically for local library

initiatives. Everything from comment cards, to email surveys, to Facebook posts, website contact

forms and comments shared with those at the front desk should be utilized to understand what

patrons need and want from their library—especially when funding deficits require cuts to

library services or when new legislation results in changes to those services. The first step of

aligning with users is to understand what they need and want from their library.

Equally as important as listening to users is sharing information with users. Libraries need to engage in promotional and educational activities that explain their goals and services to users as well as how law and policy changes affect those goals and services. This type of outreach is especially important when, as Rubin (2010) states regarding the commoditization of information, "The more others perceive that information has less to do with libraries and more to do with technology and telecommunications, the less libraries might be perceived as important" (p. 312). Reminding users of libraries' altruistic goals is key in differentiating these institutions from other for-profit information producers and disseminators. "Libraries have a special role and exercise a special interest because they are among the few stakeholders in this group whose motivations are not profit oriented" (Rubin, 2010, p. 311). Libraries need to engage their current and prospective audiences to explain how the libraries are actively protecting users interests in terms of maintaining privacy, providing information free of charge and censorship, enabling easy access to government documents and standing up for users rights to copy information for educational and other non-commercial purposes. Libraries have to actively tout the fact that they are in it for users—not to increase profits for shareholders. This has to be a refreshing reminder for people today. There *are* actually some government institutions left that are relatively apolitical and hold increasing the public good as a paramount purpose. Again, multiple methods must be utilized to share information about library services—social media, press releases and media outreach, announcements on the library website, town hall meetings, etc. When information laws and policies threaten library services or result in changes to library services, librarians must explain to users how these changes will affect them. Very specific examples should be illustrated so that users can identify with a situation that they themselves might experience.

It's not a new or ground-breaking idea, but I do think that two-way communication with users is one of the best means to ensure that libraries are aligned with users and that users know this and experience it in every interaction with the library.

References

Rubin, R. E. (2010). *Foundations of library and information science*. New York, NY: Neal-Schuman.

Quinn, A. C., & Ramasubramanian, L. (2007). Information technologies and civic engagement: Perspectives from librarianship and planning. *Government Information Quarterly 24*, 595–610. doi: 10.1016/j.giq.2006.08.005