

Erika L. Gavillet

# The “just do it” approach to customer service development

## A case study

**W**ith financial constraints curtailing the opportunity to grow our collections and buildings, and the ever increasing demand to improve the student experience, academic librarians are turning more towards quality in customer service in order to develop and enhance services.

The word *customer* in customer services is one that causes a shudder in some more traditional members of the library profession. As Reg Carr so succinctly put it in his paper on academic “hybrid” library perspectives, “even now there are still a few library staff ... who prefer, mistakenly, to think that their libraries exist primarily to provide them with employment, rather than first and foremost to serve their users”.<sup>1</sup> The fact that libraries shy away from referring to their users as *customers* is an indication of the difficulty with which libraries have adapted to the new consumer approach to higher education.

At Newcastle University Library, the Customer Services Group was keen to target improvements to services that are important to the users of the library, rather than projects that library staff felt were important to the users. The literature increasingly reports that the best method of developing high quality, relevant and useful services is to involve our users throughout the lifecycle. Nambisan’s work validates this premise, with his tripartite vision of the user/customer as a resource for the initial ideas and drivers, as a co-creator as we consult them during the development of a service, and finally as the consumer of the service at the end point.<sup>2</sup>

However, as the age of value for money and evaluation rolls on, students are ever increasingly required to fill in surveys and evaluation reports, leading to “survey fatigue.” This makes the collection of opinion and ideas from our users an increasingly time consuming issue as we seek unusual methods in order to wring feedback from our users.

Mindful of this questionnaire ennui, the Customer Services Group tasked themselves with devising a method of surveying, which was both painless to the users and gathered essential information for service innovation ideas.

### Literature review

There is an increasing amount of literature on the student experience and relevance of the academic library in the first quarter of the 21st century. Jean Sykes wisely points out that in order to make our services relevant we need to really understand our users, putting aside our own 20th-century experiences of both society and libraries.<sup>3</sup>

Most research into service innovation and customer input has been heavily theory-based and borrowed from management concepts, such as Blume’s five factors influencing the value customers place on service and performance, and developed by work around marketing and customer-focused culture in

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libraries.<sup>4,5,6,7</sup> However, a new less theory based, more “light-touch” approach has been espoused recently with research, such as John Christensen’s Fish philosophy<sup>8,9</sup> and, that “libraries really ought to use ... techniques to reach students ... with messages that speak to them in their own language. Libraries should also consider making concessions to students’ lifestyles.” This is counter-intuitive to the traditional approach to innovation in academic libraries, where project groups and mass consultation tend to take place prior to any service development.

An OMC Group white paper in 2004, states that “in volatile times like now, where it is almost impossible to predict the future value of a new idea (particularly one that is technologically driven), it is better to “just do it.”<sup>10</sup> So, is it a method that can be usefully used in the academic library of today?

### Case study

The Customer Services Group at Newcastle University Library wanted to develop services that would have the maximum positive impact on the users of the library. However, library staff are well aware of the difficulty in extracting opinion and responses from students, especially in this age of survey ennui.<sup>11</sup> The group decided to adopt a “quick and dirty” survey approach. We asked just three questions:

- What five activities do you do most in the library? (with a list of services with tick boxes)
- What else do you use in the library? (with a list of services with tick boxes)
- If money were no object, what single change would improve your library experience the most?

It was also decided to pursue the responses quite aggressively—library staff approached students sat at study places or in the café when they approached the enquiry desks. Mindful of gathering data from those who were not in the library, staff also stopped students at a variety of locations on campus. As the survey took only two minutes

to complete, about 1,000 responses were gathered in the survey period. This included responses from staff, postgraduates, undergraduates, and NHS external members of the university library.

The results were not unexpected. Students wanted more textbooks, more PCs, more study spaces, longer opening hours. More interesting was a desire for less noise and distractions when they were studying, including groups talking, using mobile phones, and using Facebook on PCs when others were trying to work.

At a meeting of the Customer Services Group in April 2010, the possibility of a low-cost, highly visible, and positive impact campaign was discussed and decided upon. Every member of library staff, regardless of section, job responsibility, or grade would be involved in a campaign to keep the library as quiet and pleasant as possible during the enormously busy examination period in May.

It was decided that regular sweeps would be made of each floor in the library during every day in May. Staff would check for noise, trailing wires from laptops, litter and unattended belongings. Each sweep would be noted on survey sheets at information desks on each floor. Guidance leaflets would be created for staff to use when speaking to users, and posters would be placed all over the library.

The campaign would be promoted as a partnership with the university library working with students to keep the library as quiet as possible to support revision, and as tidy as possible to provide a quiet and clean study environment. Promotional material would state what library staff would do; sweep four times daily to check noise levels and to ensure there were no safety hazards; ensure bins were emptied regularly; check for unattended belongings. It also stated what was expected from users: keeping noise levels to a minimum; keeping an eye on their belongings; keeping gangways and doors free from trip hazards; and using the bins or recycling units.

Given that there was a scant two weeks before the start of May, the proposal was tak-

en to the Service Managers' group to ensure buy-in from all section heads. Each section was responsible for a number of days during the month, and how they staffed these was up to them. There was an overall approval, and the campaign started with bright posters and leaflets on May 1, 2010.

Over the next month, a total of 558 sweeps were made by library staff from all sections of the library. Each sweep took an average of 5 to 10 minutes. Staff were highly visible, wearing name badges and leaving "calling cards" on unattended belongings to warn users about the dangers of leaving laptops, iPods, and wallets visible at unattended study spaces. Users who were asked to be quieter or to remove trailing laptop wires were given leaflets about the campaign and asked to take part. Students responded to the staff presence by following the guidelines and over time less intervention was required.

Within a week of the campaign going live, it had appeared as a campaign of four other university library Web sites, some with identical wording to the Newcastle Library text.

At the close of the campaign, library staff were surveyed, asking "How was it for you?" Forty-four staff responded. All said that it had been worthwhile and positive and that users had been cooperative and appreciative. The only negative aspect was the amount of litter generated by the users, and this led to requests for more recycling bins and the possibility of emptying bins more frequently. It was also noted that users responded unfavourably to the calling cards on their unattended belongings, as they assumed that no one would steal anything while they were away from their desks.

There were a number of further suggestions around providing plug extensions for loan, and more publicity for the campaign. All agreed it should be repeated each year. A number replied that they did not usually work with users or go onto the library floors. While they had been uncomfortable enough with the idea that they patrolled in pairs, they found it a welcome introduction to the library users and how they used the facilities.

Student feedback was also sought immediately after the campaign, with staff asking users a number of short questions when they came to the Enquiry desks for any reason. Of the 420 responses elicited, all but two felt it had made a positive difference to the Library environment during the exam period and that it should be repeated next year. The only suggestions made for future campaigns were to increase the number of patrols and that there had been too much litter in the library during the period. All but five respondents said they used the library to study during the examination period because it held less distractions than studying at home. The majority of free text comments reflected appreciation for the efforts of the staff, and that it had been a welcome enhancement of services.

## Conclusion

This campaign highlighted many possibilities for the development of customer service developments. The speed of putting the service together, just two weeks, and the fact that it included all library staff proved that it is possible to move projects along quickly. It was relatively low cost. By spreading the sweeps between all sections of the library, no one department bore the burden of timetabling for a whole month, and it gave a clear message to all members of library staff that our primary *raison d'être* is our users, whatever their exact job role might be. It also showed that services can be seasonal—the library is able to roll out different services at different times according to user need. We have always done this for induction and information skills teaching, but we need to be aware of the flow of the academic year and what that means for our users, and respond accordingly.

The Customer Services Group is now considering other seasonal activities to see where we can pool the whole library staff resource to good effect in the future. Most importantly, it was well received and appreciated by the users. It showed the library as responsive, sensitive to their needs and determined to

*(continues on page 236)*

*divs/acrl/about/membership/duesfaqs/FAQ\_Proposed\_Bylaws\_.pdf.*

**Approved the suggested revisions to the** special instructions for appointments for the Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship Committee, Excellence in Academic Libraries (Nominations) Committee, Marketing Academic and Research Libraries Committee, Membership Recruitment Committee, Membership Retention Committee, Membership Promotion Committee, and (Dr. E. J.) Josey Spectrum Scholars Committees to align them with ACRL's policies.

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*("Setting up a library iPad program" continued from page 216)*

8. Wolfram Alpha Mobile, [m.wolframalpha.com/](http://m.wolframalpha.com/) and WorldCat Mobile Beta, [www.worldcatmobile.org/](http://www.worldcatmobile.org/).

9. "iOS 4.2 Software Update," [www.apple.com/ipad/software-update/](http://www.apple.com/ipad/software-update/) (accessed March 9, 2011).

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*("The 'just do it'..." cont. from page 231)*

provide the service they require when they require them.

## Notes

1. Reg Carr, "What users want: An academic 'hybrid' library perspective," *Ariandne* 46 (2006).

2. Satish Nambisan, S. "Designing virtual customer environments for new product development: towards a theory," *The Academy of Management Review* 27 (33, 2002): 392–413.

3. Jean Skyes, "Improving the student experience—How can the library help?" *New Review of Information Networking* 13 (1, 2007).

4. Eric R. Blume, "Customer service: giving companies the competitive edge," *Training Development Journal* 42 (9, 1988): 24–27.

5. Judith Broady-Preston and Joanna Felice, "Customer relationships and libraries: University of Malta, A case study," *Aslib Proceedings* 58 (6, 2006): 525–36.

**Based on the effectiveness and success** of the ACRL Leadership and Recruitment and Nominations Committee (LRNC), moved it from pilot status to permanent committee status.

**Approved changing the name of the** Women's Studies Section to the Women & Gender Studies Section, effective January 9, 2011.

**Approved the Annual Conference 2010** Board meeting minutes. ¶

10. The Unofficial Apple Weblog—App Reviews, [www.tuaw.com/hub/app-reviews](http://www.tuaw.com/hub/app-reviews).

11. MacWorld App Guide, [www.macworld.com/appguide/index.html](http://www.macworld.com/appguide/index.html).

12. AppShopper, [itunes.apple.com/us/app/appshopper/id387037496?mt=8](http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/appshopper/id387037496?mt=8).

13. iTunes RSS Generator, [itunes.apple.com/rss/generator/](http://itunes.apple.com/rss/generator/). ¶

6. Judith Broady-Preston, Joanna Felice, and Susan Marshall, "Building better customer relationships: Case studies from Malta and the UK," *Library Management* 27 (6/7, 2006): 430–45.

7. Barbara Sen, "Market orientation: A concept for health libraries," *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 23 (1, 2006): 23–31.

8. John Christiansen, "The Official Home of the Fish! Philosophy," [www.charthouse.com/productdetail.aspx?nodeid=11037](http://www.charthouse.com/productdetail.aspx?nodeid=11037) (June 18, 2010).

9. Elisa F. Topper, "Fish or pickle? Customer services in libraries," *New Library World* 110 (1/2, 2009): 92–94.

10. Chris Lawer, Are you becoming customer-centric? OMC Consulting Ltd. (2004).

11. Chenicheri Sid Nair, Phillip Adams, and Patrice Mertova, "Student engagement: The key to improving survey response rates," *Quality in Higher Education* 14 (3, 2008): 225–32. ¶