Put a Ring on It: Engaging Your Users [1]

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Introduction

There are many ways to increase the stream of users coming through the library doors: high-tech equipment, top-notch buildings, airy spaces with lots of natural light, comfortable study spaces, high quality yet easily accessible digital resources, all kinds of useful books, historically valuable materials, widening access policies, long opening hours including weekends, active online presence, numerous helpful and capable staff, interesting programmes, useful training, wonderful events and exhibitions, café(s) serving delicious food and drink, and so on. The list is endless. This sort of high-quality library service provision can definitely increase user satisfaction and numbers; As Mohindra and Kumar point out, "user satisfaction and library service quality are ultimate goals of libraries as service organisations" (2015, 54).

However, in this article my focus is on library users themselves. Rather than looking at what we can provide and do for them, I would like to concentrate on users and how to build relationships with them. The reasons are clear: firstly, winning over our users adds value to our purpose, and secondly, it is simply being practical and realistic. I am in a library where there is a restriction on manpower and financial resources which allows no scope for the types of outstanding customer service provisions listed above. Therefore, focusing on my specific customers and their user experience might be the only doable and achievable option I can possibly have. After all, our value is not just limited to preservation of historical materials but how these materials are utilised by real people. It is vital to let people continuously come

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[1] This article is based on a talk given at the BETH conference 2019, Oxford.

through the library door, whether physically or virtually, as our survival and funding tend to depend on the number of users, the frequency of their visits, and their levels of satisfaction with our service.

I also want to go one step further. I consider library users as active participants who also take part in the library provision, not being mere consumers who submissively receive the provision of our service. I would like to engage with customers, build up relationships with them, then turn them towards the business of the library, enabling them to feel ownership of the library's provision. Is my viewpoint unique? It is not.

Bolton recognised that due to the development of technology "customer preferences and behaviour are evolving rapidly" in the business environment. She pointed out that "organisations must focus on creating customer experiences that build relationships because they face new competitive pressures in a complex and dynamic marketplace".[2]

Libraries can also benefit from this perspective as we too recognise this 'competitive pressure' in the library domain. Nowadays, a user's physical presence is much less prominent in the library building, and in the comfort of their own homes, many rely on free information through Wikipedia or Google. This results in many students lacking confidence when searching the library's digital catalogue. They tend to use Google Scholar primarily and demand access to these materials without checking the library database. Innovations in 21st-century technology have certainly shaped and changed the library users' behaviour and their expectations of the library, for better or for worse. Lucas-Alfieri believed that "academic libraries are at a crossroads" of survival and "a user-centric approach will guide the development and the future mission of our twenty-first century libraries".[3]

To create experiences that build customer relations, I must create new opportunities for the users to be involved in the library service. I am certain that I am not inventing new methods here, but, by simply listing the actions which I have been undertaking in my library, I hope to open a dialogue to discuss and share know-how with fellow experts and professionals.

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[2] R. N. Bolton, *Service Excellence: Creating Customer Experiences that Build Relationships* (New York: Business Expert Press. 2016), 1.
[3] Debra Lucas-Alfieri. *Marketing the 21st Century Library: The Time is Now*. (Amsterdam: Chandos Publishing, 2015), 5.

Building Relationships with Library Users

What are the benefits of having strong relationship with our customers? Axner clarified the reasons to build relationships.[4]

Firstly, "we need relationships in order to win allies to our cause". As the new librarian stepping into my predecessor's shoes, which had been worn for almost twenty years before I joined in 2018, was a huge challenge. The retired librarian had made a wonderful contribution to the development of the library and was deeply loved by the community over many years. Inevitably new blood brings some uncomfortable adjustments. To face less resistance to these changes, I believed then and still do believe now in the importance of making more allies in the library.

Secondly, according to Axner, "our relationships give meaning and richness to our work and to our lives". As a part-time lone worker, ultimately I am short-staffed at all times, and, in reality, I really need a community behind me to support the running of the library. As we are here to provide service to users, reaching out to them enthusiastically, engaging with them, and getting them 'on side' is vital for the success of the library business. I believe in not only opening the library door and resources to users but also inviting them "to share joys and the struggles" of library business and service provision. This will make users active and feel a sense of ownership; hence the library usage rate will increase as well as promotion of orderly behaviour in the library by raising users' collective conduct.[5]

Lastly, "community building occurs one-to-one". Axner saw that some people become involved in an organisation because they believe in the cause but many only need a relationship with another person who is already involved to spark their interest. This argument also coincides with Bolton's view. She viewed that the customer experience journey starts at service offering, as in her 'Customer Experience' diagram shown below.[6] The customer journey flows into customer

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[4] Marya Axner, "Section 7 Building and Sustaining Relationship." Community Tool Box, Accessed May 1, 2023. https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/leadership/leadership-functions/build-sustain-relationships/main
[5] Axner, "Building and Sustaining Relationship"
[6] Axner, "Building and Sustaining Relationship"

satisfaction which is the "customer's purchase and post-consumption response to the service". [7] The next stage is the customer's engagement behaviour (social responses like word-of-mouth interactions) then lastly customer experience. "The customer experience interacts with the organisation's reputation".[8] I believe that the users who are on my side through our own strong relationship will bring other users in and advocate for the library on behalf of the librarian to others.

Now let us move from 'why we form relationships with users' to 'how we actually do it'.

Step 1: Creating connections

The first step in building a relationship is simply getting to know each other. Unless you make yourself known to others, they will not even know that you exist. Just like dating, you have to put yourself forward. If you are in an independent library, you have to market your library to a wider audience through various means. If you work

Figure 1. The Customer Experience by Bolton, R.[9]

in an educational establishment like I do, there are many readily provided by the institution. Students also have an expectation of a library in their educational setting. In my case, the library induction for new students is in their timetable for the freshers' week. This is well organised and advertised by the programme services team and thankfully I just have to turn up to give the talk.
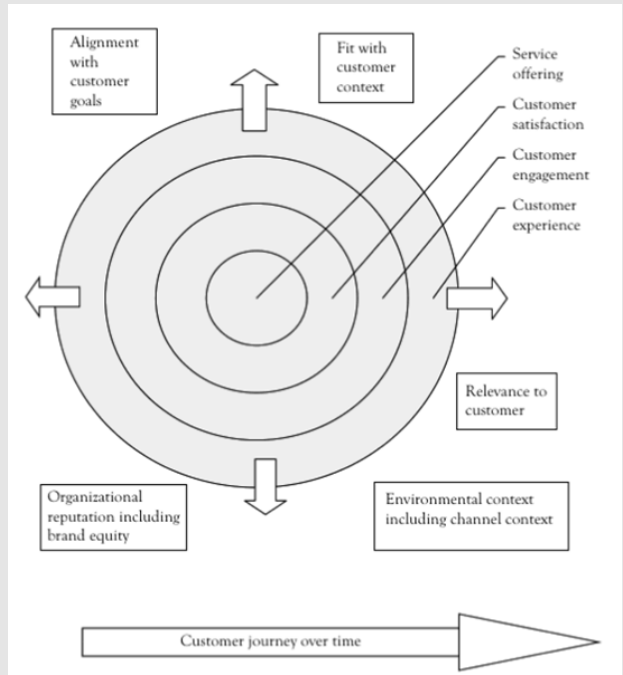
[7]] Ruth Bolton, *Service Excellence: Creating Customer Experiences that Build Relationships* (New York: Business Expert Press, 2016), 6.
[8] Bolton, *Service Excellence*, 6.
[9] Bolton, *Service Excellence*, 5.

However, I think this spoon-fed service is not enough when it comes to creating connections with students. You have to be proactive, to go out there to show yourself. It is important to grab every possible platform where you can present your library. This will require you to talk to various other library colleagues, departments, students, and academics. Networking with other professionals will widen your circle to increase your chances to connect with users.

It is also a good idea to hold and advertise all forms of the library guide so they can learn about the library even before they are at the library, both digitally and in printed handouts. If you are brave enough, having your picture in the guide booklet is one way to make yourself familiar to library users.

Step 2: Igniting the spark
Whichever opportunities you have to stand in front of your potential or new users, it is up to you what sort of impression you give them. For induction talks, well-prepared and rehearsed presentations will give the users a good impression of you and the library service. Refresh the talk and slides regularly, and if possible do not be scared to use new technology to impress the digitally receptive generation. Investigate what is out there and utilise as much as you can. You will be surprised to learn how many new software applications are available for free download or at a small cost. The apps received by our library users with great enthusiasm and excitement, which I have used, are thinglink[10], Prezi[11], and Powtoon.[12] The way I discovered these exciting apps was not via the University training programme or big marketing campaigns, but through a network of other librarians. I was interested in how they practise their services and operations and asked for their opinions and advice. Some were kind enough to give me one-to-one training.

Step 3: Intimacy
The relationship develops and we move to a deeper level with communication.

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[10] For example, we have used this app to create an interactive library floorplan: https://www.thinglink.com/scene/1486723674131136513?buttonSource=viewLimits.
[11] For a group-specific induction, I have used this app to create the following presentation: https://prezi.com/view/UVkRkmXUIHQDf6Gchikr/.
[12] This app helped to create an animated induction video as you can see here: https://www.wycliffe.ox.ac.uk/using-library#collapse3137156

Tell them more of what you do

Via digital: New library webpage[13]

As many students rely heavily on digital devices nowadays, it is a good idea to have an active social presence such as a website, Facebook, and Twitter. I have opted to provide only a library website for now as our digital presence, and it has taken me over a year to get this right. There were many obstacles and complications that I had not foreseen to create the webpages, but I am glad to declare that we now have a proper library tab on our college website, with a wealth of information and links out to much more. I hope that the library not only has a physical place but also a virtual space for the user.

Via Library Newsletter

Regular updates via a newsletter is a classic way to deliver your message and news to the users. Choose a means which is most popular for them to read. One librarian once told me that she sent her newsletters to the student body to circulate, as this was the most appreciated amongst their library users. In my case, we have a college-run weekly newsletter called Update, so I send my notice to the Editor. I also leave print-outs of the newsletter on the library desk as well as displaying it on the notice board to capture more of an audience.

face-to-face

You cannot beat an old-fashioned face-to-face talk. Staff and students meet weekly to share community notices, so I make sure to join this. Whenever there is a need for an announcement from the library, I can slot myself in. On a personal level, I believe one-to-one is the best chance to go deeper into library services and provide background information on its provision. However, be cautious as there is a danger that a personal relationship might be interpreted as a route towards favour, such as waiving of fines and bending rules for the library user. Keep it professional: it is important to know the boundaries and guidelines. Safeguarding training as well as mental health first aid courses are very good to attend if you can.

Listen to their opinion

Clemons et al. pointed out that "how users perceive and value what is available to them is central to effective [library] service design and delivery" and "it [is] more important than ever that libraries develop effective methods of collecting user feedback about library services to help understand and anticipate its users' needs".[14]

[13] Check out the library webpage from https://www.wycliffe.ox.ac.uk/library
[14] Clemons, Nance and Ballinger, "Board in the Library: A Quick and Easy Solution to Gathering Library User Feedback," *Tennessee Libraries* 66, no. 2 (2016) https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/board-library-quick-easy-solution-gathering-user/docview/1874420898/se-2.

There are many ways to collect feedback: conducting a reader web- or paper-based survey; opening official and unofficial community channels; having a focus group; creating a web memo form; networking with other librarians to find out what other library users also say about their libraries in order to learn of new trends, and so on.

One thing I think we should never overlook is the silent multitude. They are the ones who do not vocalise their demands loudly to grab our attention, will behave in an orderly manner and look very confident when using the resources. Therefore, often they are often not on our radar. Their quietness might suggest that all is well in the library but also it might be that they are simply very forgiving and adaptable. Trying to capture this audience is tough. I tend to get them talking

when in more informal social occasions such as community events or at the lunch table. Additionally, I am constantly thinking that I need to become the voice for the voiceless and provide services from their perspective too.

<u>Show interest in what they do and consider acts of service</u>
To show you want to engage your users, you also have to be forthcoming and be creative. I have a few examples that I would like to share with you.

Back in April 2019, looking at the student notice board, I learnt a student-led reading group was regularly meeting to study Feminist theology, and was planning on holding a conference that May. I asked for their book list, acquired the books, and offered to purchase copies at a discount through my book supplier. I displayed new titles before the conference in the foyer. Much to my surprise, this was the most praised and thanked work I had done over that year by either students or academics.

Throwing an event is a winner to earn one's heart. Although our college is named after John Wycliffe, unfortunately, we do not hold any manuscripts of the Wycliffite Bible, the first English translation in the 14th century. When I learnt that some other libraries in Oxford had copies, I organised visits for our community: staff first; two groups of students; and conference participants. This required much more administrative work and hours than I initially anticipated but it was well received with appreciation.
Another easy way to give back is literally, by giving presents. We tend to have more books from donations than we can possibly house so why not give away books to users? I have created a corner in the library for give-away books, many

users come and regularly check for these freebies. I believe that the more they take, the more they feel obliged to do something for the library in return.

Step 4: Commitment: Put a ring on it
It has been a long journey to impress and woo our users with presents and events to win them over. Where are we with them now? I think this is the time to get down on one knee and propose a formal union. There are two obvious ways that the library users can be involved in the library business.

Library committee
When I started in this position, I learnt that there was no library committee so I wanted to set one up straight away. I believe in committees. I do not consider it a limitation to my freedom of library management, restricting my capability as the librarian, but rather believing it creates buy-in–making decisions together after exchanging ideas and collective discussion means people will be more invested in the success of the project.

Furthermore, I knew that in order to bring many new changes and introduce new policies and procedures in the library I had to try my upmost to gather shared thoughts and hear every possible voice for a better solution from the beginning. I wanted to provide an official channel for each representative to express his or her concerns and inconveniences about library issues. To be honest, it is not a comfortable place to be in sometimes. However, in the same way, each Rep has to pay attention to what I have to say in return. This has given me the opportunity to justify my side of the story so it was useful when complaints and difficulties have been brought up formally too.

With time to spend together to discuss improvements to library provision and to work together for better services, I have noticed that although the library representatives are mostly neutral and objective, they also become keen to advocate for the library in some ways. Equipped with background information through meetings they often speak to the students on my behalf and share the library's perspective on the way the library runs and the librarian's perspective in certain situations.

Of course, this is a less direct and time-consuming way to get to your finishing line but in my experience, after good consultation with the committee, new changes

are received with less resistance. This is not only in terms of the library users but also the senior management team. New policies and procedures are usually accepted more readily once they have been informed of the fact that the library committee already approved them. Therefore, in the long run I have actually saved time and effort – and experienced fewer fights.

Library volunteers

In our college, there are two sorts of volunteers. All live-in students have to sign up for a 'college job' (some kind of a chore). Thankfully, I am officially assigned 10 library volunteers each term. Although it has not been plain sailing to manage the student volunteers, I still value their help in the library. As the library was their preferred choice for their 'college job', they tend to love being in the library or dealing with books. Over time, they become concerned and care about the library business from the library perspective. When I am away, I have noticed that they are the ones who voluntarily tidy up the library and leave a warning notice to students about their misconduct. In addition, continual open communication to volunteers can increase student input on new provisions and changes in the library service. They tend to throw more innovative and creative ideas and solutions, which I never thought about, and often share the same frustrations with me about other users' misconduct.

I also recruit unofficial ad hoc volunteers. I mostly ask for proofreading of library guides or publicity materials and feedback on these. Or I might ask for volunteers to test out new forms and changes. My experience is that they become more receptive to the content of whatever piece they have proofread, and end up being more aware of available services in the library.

Conclusion: Continue to Invest in the Relationship for the Future

Unlike in fairy tales, the wedding is not an ending in real life. We must continuously invest in time, resources, and effort to sustain a relationship. It is the same in terms of the library service and provision. We have to stay current and relevant to appeal to our users, using various new ways to communicate and interact. I might have to compromise our accustomed practice and experiment with new devices even if these might not be to my liking. As Bolton says "excellent service creates customer experiences that build relationships".[15]

[15] Bolton, *Service Excellence*, 4.

In the academic year which followed the original presentation of this paper, I introduced online reading lists to the college. We were one of the early adopters of this within the University, and this idea was very well received by our student body at that time and continues to be so.

I am sure that what you have read about today wasn't entirely new to you. However, by discussing the route to reader engagement with you, even if you already know or have been doing what I describe, I hope to open up channels of communication so that you can share your stories with me, so I can learn from your innovative services in return. Fostering good relationships with our users is essential, but so too is developing links with colleagues and learning from each other, which is exactly what BETH allows us to do.

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