
Customer involvement with services in public libraries

Customer
involvement with
services

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Because of increased economic prosperity, public libraries in Taiwan with well-established library systems have flourished during the past four decades. There are currently 439 public libraries in Taiwan[1] classified into three levels, namely, provincial/municipal, county/city, and town/village, as well as those owned by the private sector. The four provincial/municipal libraries have relatively large collections, and facilities and large numbers of staff. The 21 county/city libraries are located in cultural centres which provide reading services and also sponsor informational and recreational activities, such as exhibitions, lectures, and performances. In order to enrich the cultural life of the general public, each of Taiwan's 309 towns and villages has established a library. Although sizes and services differ to a certain degree according to the level of classification, the goals of all public libraries are similar, namely, the promotion of our national culture, the propagation of civil education, the dissemination of information and the promotion of leisure activities[2].

The importance of public libraries is fully appreciated by the government and laws and regulations and policies have been drawn up to promote library services actively. The efforts made by the government in this regard are remarkable when considered from the standpoint of legislation, national planning, and financial support. However, the sad fact is that the public libraries may be so widespread that their value as a learning resource centre may all too easily be overlooked by many of the customers. Although the extent to which public libraries are used varies with the individual community concerned, in general less than one-tenth of the population in the Community served have registered as library users, and library visits per capita average only 1.25, according to a survey conducted by the National Central Library[3].

The relatively low level of use by residents in the community may be due to a lack of awareness of the services that the public library has to offer. Alternatively, it may reflect a personal dissatisfaction with the kind or the quality of service initially received from the library. An extensive questionnaire survey conducted by the Taiwan Provincial Taichung Library reported that, among 4,907 customers surveyed from 293 public libraries, the main purpose for visiting public libraries was to borrow books, and 30 percent of the

customers surveyed did not know that public libraries provided a variety of services other than circulating books. Over half of the customers surveyed were students in terms of occupational groups. This phenomenon may reflect the misconception that public libraries exist mainly for students who are preparing for examinations or writing term papers, rather than serving the informational needs of the general public. Besides, about half of the customers surveyed recognized that public libraries could not solve the questions they raised, and were not very satisfied with service quality in terms of staff attitudes, the collection, and the library's physical surroundings[4]. These results reveal that the services and functions of public libraries in Taiwan are not fully understood by the general public, and, more important, that the quality of services provided by public libraries does not meet customers' requirements. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to propose an effective approach to facilitating the promotion of the use of library services in Taiwan's public libraries, advertising library literacy for the general public, and ensuring that the service quality delivered meets customers' requirements.

Involvement segmentation

The first task in service marketing is to identify the main categories of customers and their characteristics, that is, market segmentation. Conventionally, the user groups of public libraries have been identified according to their demographic characteristics such as age, occupation, and educational background. Since public libraries have traditionally viewed themselves as support institutions that supply materials and services to the community in order to support the community's educational, informational, cultural, and recreational needs[5], different customers will have different needs when visiting public libraries. Therefore, marketing libraries' services according to demographic segmentation might result in considerable heterogeneity within each seemingly homogeneous demographic group. In the adult groups, for example, an adult requesting information related to job needs will regard the speed of document delivery and the currency of databases a priority requirement. However, an adult visiting a public library to plan a summer vacation is more concerned about the quality and availability of the collection and the librarian's help with finding sources of information. Another adult who is preparing for a civil examination may expect the public library to provide sufficient desks and a pleasant atmosphere for reading. The customers' needs may thus be quite different, and their attitudes quite diverse, and so the library will need to adopt different approaches to promote and sell their services effectively.

The essence of service marketing is service. It is worth noting that consumer marketers have proposed product involvement as an effective alternative in which the market is segmented according to the levels of personal relevance and/or importance perceived by the customers[6]. Similarly, customers of public libraries may be segmented according to their service involvement. Good has proposed an operational definition of service involvement as "the amount of

participation perceived by the customer to be required to engage in a particular activity or service"[7]. All services provided by public libraries involve different kinds of interaction between libraries and their customers, and evoke varying degrees of involvement.

There is a residency requirement related to customer participation when library services are delivered, and, as a result, a special relationship exists between customers and services. Since the provision of library services is facilitated by three key resources, namely facilities, collections, and librarians, customer involvement with public library services may be categorized accordingly into three segments based on the resources supported. Low-involvement customers may be defined as those whose use of the services mainly depends on the facilities available and who usually serve themselves. These low-involvement services may include the use of facilities for personal study, news browsing, and attendance at activities. Medium-involvement customers are those who use the collections intensively, who may be helped by the facilities and who may interact with librarians passively, availing themselves of services such as borrowing books, consulting reference collections and photocopying. As to high-involvement customers, these are identified as those who use services which require that they actively participate in the service process, interacting to a high degree with the librarians, the collections, and the facilities. These high-involvement services provided by public libraries may include interlibrary loans, reference consulting, and database searching. One way to conceptualize the level of customer involvement in library services is to locate these services on a continuum between the extremes of high and low involvement, as illustrated in Figure 1.

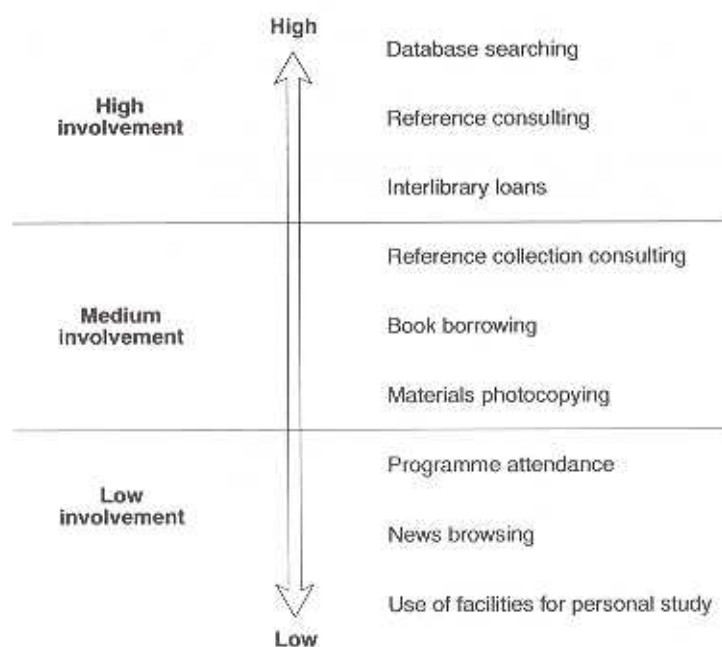


Figure 1.
Continuum of user
involvement with public
library services

The level of involvement has an influence on the decision process and the formation of attitudes towards service use. Krugman has suggested that the decision process differs in high- and low-involvement cases[8]. Under higher levels of involvement, customers will tend to give more careful consideration to information that is relevant to the particular decision and will engage in a more extended decision process. As the involvement level decreases, customers will tend to engage in more routine types of decisions. In such routine decision making one finds less in terms of a search for information than in extended decision making.

While the decision process differs between high- and low-involvement, the ways in which attitudes regarding service are formed may also be diverse. The occurrence of attitude formation may be best described by means of a hierarchy of effects as illustrated in Figure 2[9]. In the high-involvement hierarchy, prior to making use of the library's services, the customer has become aware of the existence of the benefits promised through promotional efforts, advertising, and through the influence of friends. This decision-making process involves an extensive internal and external search process, the outcome of which is the formation of attitudes regarding the services under consideration before a decision to use them is made. Database searching is an example of a high-involvement service. In such a situation, the customer usually has existing attitudes about manual or printed search tools, and the related research is likely to be of importance to customers. However, in the case of a low-involvement hierarchy, the behaviour occurs before strong attitudes have developed. After the customer experiences the service through direct use, it is likely that certain attitudes will be developed. An example of a low-involvement service could be programmes provided by public libraries, such as exhibitions and lectures. Typical customers are not aware of such services prior to walking into the library, and, therefore, there is no pre-existing attitude. Once, however, the customer is aware of the service, and is satisfied as a result, then repeat behaviour will occur, and positive attitudes will be formed.

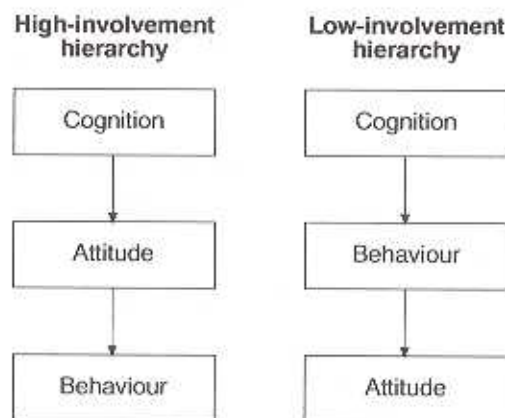


Figure 2.
The hierarchy of effects

An exploratory study has been conducted by Chang and Hsieh[10] in which they surveyed the customers of 24 county/city libraries in Taiwan in order to explore the effect of customer involvement on service quality when evaluating public libraries. A total of 661 customers were surveyed, and the subjects included people of all types of occupations, educational backgrounds, and age groups. The results indicate that 77 per cent of the customers were regarded as low-involvement, 20 per cent as medium-involvement, and only 3 per cent as high-involvement. In Chang and Hsieh's work, 44 indicators related to service quality were identified, based on a literature review and the opinions of public service librarians interviewed. These were then factored into four dimensions, namely availability, access, empathy and tangibles. Significant differences were found to exist among the four dimension of service quality with respect to the three segments of customers. High-involvement customers underscored empathy as the foremost criterion when evaluating a public library's services; medium-involvement customers considered access to be the most important; and tangibles was paramount to low-involvement customers.

The results of the empirical study mentioned above show that different customers will have different levels of service involvement, and customers with different levels of involvement will emphasize different dimensions of service quality. Therefore, the services of public libraries may be marketed better by designing strategies which take into account the level of involvement.

Marketing implications

The level of the customers' service involvement has a bearing on their evaluation of the service quality. However, the degree of customer satisfaction with respect to the quality of services offered by the public library is gauged through their willingness to patronize or continue to patronize the public library. Hence, public libraries should provide the service quality demanded by customers from various involvement levels, and then design appropriate marketing strategies to target the demands of these various customer levels. This is in order to elicit potential customers who will avail themselves of and repeatedly use library services, as well as develop customers with low levels of involvement into those with higher levels of involvement.

The decision process and the stage of attitude formation vary according to the different levels of involvement. Therefore, the choice of marketing channel to incorporate the messages to be communicated and the dimensions of service quality is critical when designing marketing strategies for each level of involvement. These relationships are summarized in Table I.

There is a firm conviction concerning the potential customer that those not currently using low-involvement services will only respond if the library's message – a description of its resources and services – reaches them. Therefore, "awareness" should be the focal point in the marketing of low-involvement services to potential customers. Marketing communication efforts should focus on increasing awareness of, and familiarity with, the resources and services that the public library offers. Familiarity promotes use behaviour. Thus, from being

Table I.
The relationships
between levels of
involvement and
marketing strategies

		Low-involvement customer	Medium-involvement customer	High-involvement customer
Decision process		Simple	Complex	Complex
Hierarchy of effect	(1)	Cognition	Cognition	Cognition
	(2)	Attitude	Behaviour	Behaviour
	(3)	Behaviour	Attitude	Attitude
Marketing strategies				
Channel		Press release	Library publications	Personal letters
Message		Low-information content	High-information content	High-information content
Service quality		Tangibles	Access	Empathy

initially trial users of the library, these customers may later become frequent users.

The most appropriate marketing channel in low-involvement conditions is the broadcast media. Information disseminated by means of bulletin boards, newspapers, and radio and TV stations is best of all able to foster service awareness. Furthermore, displaying attractive posters in well-frequented areas outside the library can encourage impulse trials, thereby encouraging people to make use of the library. In a low-involvement situation, customers are likely to use very simple rules to make their decisions, and will engage in little active search for information. Therefore, the message communicated should be kept simple with relatively low-information content, should appeal to one's emotions, and should be effortlessly absorbed and processed. Moreover, since the most important quality dimension perceived by low-involvement customers is that of "tangibles", the marketing promotion should lay emphasis on the suitability of the library facilities, the cleanliness and comfort of the environment and the availability of resources.

According to the hierarchy of effects paradigm, in low-involvement situations, the behaviour appears to occur after a limited amount of cognition is formed, and attitudes are formed only after the customer has used the services. Therefore, the marketing thrust with respect to low-involvement customers should consist of attracting them to try using library services. It is only when they are satisfied with the services they have availed themselves of that they will become frequent and loyal customers. In that respect, the public library should creatively design the sign system that is used to direct new library users, in order to make it more convenient for first-time users. This will greatly help customers develop a positive attitude.

By contrast, high-involvement customers expend greater efforts and initiative in gathering service-related information and make their decisions based on more complex rules. In addition, according to the hierarchy of effects, high-involvement customers will avail themselves of the services only after cognition is formed and attitudes are created. Thus, the marketing thrust in the

case of high-involvement customers calls for marketing communications with relatively high-information content and an appeal to reason rather than to emotions. This will help customers develop a positive attitude before they use the services. The most effective kind of marketing medium consists of direct mail in the form of personal letters. As "empathy" is the most significant quality criterion considered by high-involvement customers, marketing promotion should concentrate on personalized services, such as individualized attention shown by the librarians, initiative on the part of the librarians in providing information to customers, and the librarians' ability to reply to customer inquiries accurately, etc. Moreover, as the high-involvement customers usually interact intensively with the librarians, the selling skills demonstrated by the librarians (such as professional knowledge and communication skills) can be the best reinforcer that can precipitate repeated use of high-involvement services.

Medium-involvement customers have similar information facilitation and attitude development processes to those of high-involvement customers. Furthermore, the design of the marketing strategies is the same for both levels. The only difference is the marketing channel, as library newsletters or similar publications that come out regularly are used at this level to increase communication exposure. In addition, medium-involvement customers regard "access" as the most critical quality criterion when evaluating library services. Hence, marketing promotion should focus on customer-oriented service encounters, such as information regarding new arrivals as well as bibliographic instruction programmes conducted by the library. These can help the customer understand better the resources and services of the library and reinforce customers' motivation or willingness to use or to continue to use the library's resources.

The marketing promotion conducted by the public library should concentrate not only on attracting non-users, but also on changing the use patterns of current customers, such as turning low-involvement customers into higher-involvement customers. Based on the hierarchy-of-effects perspective, high-involvement customers should be able to establish an attitude towards the services offered before they actually avail themselves of the services. Therefore, the public library may launch some special programme or gimmick to induce situational involvement with higher levels of services, and then establish a positive attitude through high quality service in order to maintain the higher level of involvement. To give an illustration, the customers of the Taipei Municipal Library are mostly college students, and the type of services they most frequently avail themselves of are borrowing books, and using reading facilities. Generally speaking, the customer behaviour in this library is largely low- or medium-involvement. However, through the provision of overseas studies counselling services, the library has successfully turned low- or medium-involvement customers into high-involvement customers.

Communication by word-of-mouth is the most effective means of fostering attitudes. Public libraries could therefore focus on the needs of current high-

involvement customers in order to improve current services by adding values which might increase customer satisfaction. Such satisfaction results in more satisfied existing customers, and may later be passed around by word-of-mouth to lower-involvement customers. Eventually, the lower-involvement customers would then become high-involvement customers.

Conclusion

Customers visit public libraries for a variety of purposes. For this reason, in this study the customers of public libraries are segmented into three groups based on their service involvement. The empirical results show that the level of the customer's service involvement has a bearing on his or her evaluation of the library's service quality. The public library can thus tailor quality benefits to meet the actual needs of the target market. With carefully planned marketing strategies, public libraries can attract potential customers and encourage them to try and also continue to use the library's services, as well as change the use patterns of current customers.

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