An overview on virtual reference service as an application of information technology development

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ABSTRACT: Library service is a busy, service oriented activity, with a deeply rooted emphasis reflected in the professional literature, on practical and technical matters. The purpose being pursued in library service is the provision of access to books, journals, and other informative materials. The paper focuses on Virtual library which uses technology and innovation to meet customer demand, to improve customer delivery, as well as the search and retrieval technology available on electronic networks. Library and Information Centres need website to offer Virtual Library Services. At the same time, many libraries have found that they can achieve their goal better by means of using marketing principles and techniques; in addition, they can have more successful communication with their users and understanding of their needs. The paper gives an overview of the advantages of virtual reference services and methodology of marketing of library services and products.

1. INTRODUCTION

Virtual reference service is defined as the provision of real-time personal assistance to patrons via web-based interactive software, information products and services in a multiplicity of formats have made libraries and information centres more competitive and alert.

- Provide answers to the questions via e-mail.
- Provide library home pages with links to valuable information with notes on what has to be used in the library and what can be used at home.
- Provide built-in questions to the user of a digital index. At the end of the search ask if the search has been a success or if the user needs help.
- Provide one-to-one reference service online as one has in the past over the telephone.
- And update telephone service so it is more than answering a few ready-reference queries.

These services keep reference librarians several steps ahead of user needs.

2. VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICES

Virtual libraries may be made up of a number of components, including; the Internet and Intranets; integrated access
to information; digitisation of materials; access to electronic publication; electronic document delivery; resource sharing; cooperative developments; and end-user services. These elements then may be considered the basic building blocks of the virtual library, although the nature and extent of the application of each component will depend upon the circumstances and needs of the library and/or organisation to which the virtual library is attached. Fig 1 represents one of the basic models of the Virtual library.

**Fig 1: VIRTUAL LIBRARY COMPONENTS**
2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Rowley (2001) calls marketing, the management process which identifies, anticipates, and supplies customer requirements efficiently and profitably. According to Kotler (2001) “marketing is the art of helping your customer become better off”. This modern concept emphasizes that marketing is customer-oriented. One hundred years ago at the 1896 ALA Conference, Lutie Stearns spoke about advertising the library and the library materials. In the earlier period, advertising was addressed to promote the optimum use of library materials. For advertising, several methods were employed such as display, notification, brochure, audio visual materials etc. The following are the factors that necessitate the marketing of information products and service:

- Every institution wishes to achieve high levels of customer satisfaction
- They want to enhance the perceived value of their services
- They want to ensure the survival of their respective institutions

Tony Leisner, an expert in Service Marketing, who did substantial work on library marketing advocated that increased customer satisfaction will result in increased willingness to use and pay for the services offered. Marketing of Library and Information products is different from the consumer products. In an electronic era information products are not in the form of printed books and the information is not limited to one document, we need different mechanism to the marketing of information products and services. Information professions need to perform the following methods to market their products and services:

- Awareness building
- Branding
- Outreach

3. INTERNET AND INTRANETS

Internet and Intranets are useful to enhance the collaboration and communication with library users of outside the organization. Both can allow the libraries to get the right information to the right person at the right time. They can also improve the existing services or the provision of new services. Internet and Intranets may be considered important because they allow libraries to provide valuable assistance in an increasingly online world, as well as meeting client service expectations.

3.1 INTEGRATED ACCESS TO INFORMATION

Integrated access to information is significant because it provides users with a single starting point for internal and external searching. It falls into two areas: enhancements to OPACs, and the use of a single workstation to access multiple electronic resources.

3.2 MATERIALS DIGITISATION

Digitization of hard-copy materials has two major applications in virtual libraries. It can be used to create a body of electronic full-text material for client use. It is also valuable in allowing “special” collections, such as manuscripts, maps, photographs,
or historically significant of rare materials to be made available to the clients.

3.3 ELECTRONIC PUBLICATIONS

Electronic publications allow greater flexibility of access to materials, which is critical in the virtual library environment. They can allow remote access, and access at any time and also allow multiple users, and can permit linking between one part of publication and another or between different publications.

3.4 ELECTRONIC DOCUMENT DELIVERY

The importance of electronic document delivery is that it can be used to maintain adequate and rapid access to resources. Electronic document delivery should take less time than the traditional hard-copy delivery to satisfy the library clients.

3.5 RESOURCE SHARING

Library users generally want to be able to access information, regardless of location and source, and resource sharing satisfies their needs. The importance of resource sharing in virtual libraries is several-fold. Consortia approaches allow participants to share costs, while maintaining access to resources.

3.6 COOPERATIVE DEVELOPMENTS

Cooperative development is becoming important through sheer necessity. It is undeniable that digital resources are expensive, and there are usually no new budget allocations for libraries to purchase or develop electronic resources. To take advantage of what the digital environment has to offer, libraries therefore need to expand cooperation.

3.8 END-USER SERVICES

End-user services in the virtual library environment covers three main elements:

End-user access to online tools and electronic full-text, end-user search training, and the facility for direct user requesting of materials. Libraries are tending to offer end-user access to materials because, in the electronic era, users have the expectation of access to materials, in full-text, and on their desktop.

4. ADVANTAGES OF VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICES

The boon to users of Virtual reference involves

1. The convenience and timeliness of information services
2. To expedite the systematic development of: the means to collect, store, and organize information and knowledge in the digital form
3. To promote the economical and efficient delivery of information to all sectors
4. To strengthen communication and collaboration between and among the researcher and education communities
5. To take an international leadership role in the generation and dissemination of knowledge
5. METHODOLOGY OF MARKETING OF LIBRARY SERVICES AND PRODUCTS

Marketing aims to identify the client base, and to determine and fill its needs and demands by designing and delivering appropriate products and services. The main focus of the concept is the client, and the goal is client satisfaction. The challenges of budget cuts, increased user base, the rapid growth of material, rising costs, networking demands, competition by database vendors, and complexity in formation requirements are forcing the professionals to adopt marketing to improve the management of library and information centres.

5.1 AWARENESS BUILDING

- Create an information Centre Web site – highlighting services responsive to user requirements
- Place articles / announcements about the Centre in library or institution newsletters or on strategic pages of the institution or library intranet
- Network with thought leaders, influential persons in other departments; engage them to spread the word about the library and information services
- Broadcast email messages to targeted groups when we find relevant information about their projects, competitors, products, etc.

5.2 BRANDING

- Design brochures and the web portal or digital information network / intranet highlighting Information Centre services with the Information Centre logo and address
- Order Seals or stamps with the Information Centre logo and address to affix to communications from the Information Centre. Establish the library and information brand
- Distribute paper or laminated bookmarks with the logo and address of the Information Centre

5.3 OUTREACH

- Proactively send articles, press releases, announcements of books, etc. Based on the profile and the knowledge of users’ areas of interest
- Set up new product / service trials for specific user groups
- Send invitation to the new users
- Schedule orientation sessions for new users
- Hold an Open House in the Information Centre

6. It gives the lifelong opportunity to learn
6. CONCLUSION

Virtual reference service at the state wide level is much more successful, and recent statistics show that the virtual reference is growing steadily. Traditionally, librarians have provided information and reference services on their terms and expected users to abide by those terms. But now the library professionals have understood the needs of their users as related to acquiring knowledge and using information. The users are experiencing immediate information access and delivery through the Internet and expect the same quick results from the libraries. The impact of technology on reference services not only satisfy the user needs but also strengthen the communication between the librarians and the clients.

References: