

Deployment of Soft Skills for Effective Customer Service in the 21st Century Library

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Abstract

The advent of information communication technology in the information environment has brought dramatic changes in the way information is being handled and managed today. This wind of change engineered by ICT has also changed the information seeking behavior of users making them to place more demands on libraries. There is a need for libraries to strive to be effective in their services to customers in order to remain relevant in the information age. The paper considered the deployment of soft skills expressed in terms of staff appearance, approachability, effective communication, positive attitude, ability to cope in difficult situation, and so on, for more effective customer services in the 21st century library. The paper concluded that, effective customer service in libraries is imperative in the 21st century library as it will make library users feel important, improves learning, increases patronage, and promotes library and university image. The outcome of this paper will help the management of libraries irrespective of the type to be more effective in the services they render to their clients. This will ultimately increase patronage and clients retention.

Keywords

Modern Library, Customer Service, Soft Skills, Effective Library Services, User Satisfaction

1. Introduction

In the information era, technology has taken over virtually everything, with the library environment being the most affected. The introduction of ICT in the information arena now puts libraries in strict competition with several competitors while some are more sophisticated than libraries. The academic library collection of information resources meant for teaching, learning and research is al-

most losing its relevance due to the widespread dependence on the Internet by potential library users. The proliferation of digital information available over the Internet, intranets and extranets is resulting into libraries and information centers losing their former place as the focus of the information environment in many organizations [1]. Libraries are becoming one of the many information systems available to information end-users. ICT also survives and makes true the rules of Library Science—“Every reader his/her books/information,” “Save the time of the readers,” and “Library is a growing organism” [2]. The author stressed that ICT with its tremendous information sources, rapid transmission speed and easy access ensures the satisfaction of the user with complex demand has broken down the distance barrier and shortened the time required and ensured the right information to the right reader at the right time. It also increases and solves the libraries demand of collection development.

The introduction of information communication technology in the learning environment has brought so much changes in the manner in which information is being managed and disseminated today. The change ushered in by ICT has also affected the way users seek and use information which now makes them to place more demands on libraries. Some library users are adopting electronic habits, making increasing use of the new ICT including computers, the Internet, the Web, Intranet, Extranet and other technologies to access latest information, updated information resources and access to ICT facilities that they could use in their work [3]. To ameliorate the current situation, there is a need for libraries to adopt series of modifications and flexibility in their functions and services to meet the information needs of the 21st century information seekers. [4] observe that the introduction of various information technology trends has led to reorganization, change in work patterns, and demand for new skills, job retraining and reclassification positions since the 21st century library emphasizes access rather than ownership. There is need for library workers apart from equipping themselves with ICT skills, to think of how best they can serve the library customers because a customer who perceives the services of a library to be of high quality will be willing to come again.

2. Who Is a Library Customer/User?

[5] saw the term customer in a library context as “only a tactical renaming of professional values”. He went on to state that the trend was based on “the notion that the library has a product that is... readily definable... and that “customers” know what they want and what the library has to offer. [6] defined a library user as anybody who visits the library with the purpose of exploiting its resources to satisfy his information needs. Similarly, [7] submitted that the term “user” includes all those who avail themselves of the services offered by a library. In an academic library, the main customers or users are the students (undergraduates and postgraduates) and academic staff. Other categories of customers include the administrative and university management staff. Staff and students of other

educational institutions as well as individuals from the university wider community who use the library also form part of its customers.

To any business organization, customers are very important. No business exists without the customers. Libraries are business oriented organizations and thrive on their customers. Library customers in all ages, internal or external, remain the focal point for the existence of any library. The most important component of an academic library is the customer. Libraries are established for use and so every effort exerted in their establishment is in vain if there are no customers/users to patronize and utilize their resources. This is the reason why the mission statement of any library always reflects the determination of the other components of the library to render excellent services to library users. As such, a library is said to be productive when the library users are satisfied [8]. Library customers are crucial because they form the basis for the existence of a library. There is need to value library customers and recognize that they have a choice as to whether or not to use library services

3. The Need for Effective Customer Service in the 21st Century Library

Customer service is the act of taking care of the customer's needs by providing and delivering professional, helpful, high quality service and assistance before, during, and after the customer's requirements are met. Customer service is a long-standing tradition in libraries. However, a more effective customer service is expected of the 21st century library. Effective customer service is important now as library users keep changing their expectations and raising the bar of what they want out of a 21st century library. In the past decade, academic library services have transformed dramatically. Wireless services, e-books, mobile access, and chat reference are now all part of the basic academic library service agenda. Academic libraries are now, more than ever, a place to make community connections. The demographic makeup of library communities has become more diverse. Information has moved from a resource to a commodity [9]. The author emphasized that how the people who come to the library are served/treated needs to be responsive and reflective of community needs. Effective customer service in this age of information would amount to improving customer satisfaction, increase usage and retention, ensure reliability and consistency, ensure provision of correct information to customers and more importantly, achieve customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction could be achieved by:

- Going above and beyond what is normal to exceed customers/patrons' expectations
- Being empathetic, caring, and attentive
- Providing high quality service in a timely manner
- Performing all duties in a courteous manner
- Having extensive knowledge of ALL library services
- Anticipating what customers need before the need is stated

- Acknowledging all problems and complaints, and attempt to resolve them immediately
- Outwardly displaying a positive and helpful attitude no matter how demanding or inconvenient the requests might appear

It should be noted that, quality service leads to long lasting positive impression and poor service leads to long lasting negative impression. If library customers feel satisfied with library products and services, they will visit again.

4. Soft Skills for Effective Customer Service

The proper and polite way expected of the 21st century library workers when delivering customer service can be expressed in the following as shown in the diagram below.

Appearance

The success of a business is to a great extent dependent on the impression people have of that business and its workers. It is important to have a good image which speaks a lot about a business's values, achievements and work ethic. Approximately 55 percent of first impressions are based on overall appearance, and people often decide whether or not they like you, and will do business with you, within 10 seconds of a first encounter [10]. Irrespective of the type, every business can project a professional image and turn a first impression into increased profits and growth. Libraries as service oriented institutions cannot afford to shy away from the need to harness the power of good appearance at the workplace to satisfy the 21st century information seekers. The appearance of today's library workers should be such that would attracts customers to patronize and use its resources. The following points reflect on the impact of appearance in libraries:

- Appearance deals with every aspect of how an individual is perceived
- It reflects upon the basic character and work ethics of an individual
- How library workers appear is very important because in an instance, opinions can be formed about a person based on his/her appearance, character, speech, and mannerism
- First impressions play a major role when relating with library customers (see **Figure 1**)

5. Approachability

To have a successful library transaction, patrons must be able to identify that a librarian/information professional is available to provide assistance and also must feel comfortable in going to that person for help [11]. In remote environments, this also means placing contact information for chat, email, telephone, and other services in prominent locations, to make them obvious and welcoming to patrons. Approachability behaviors, such as the initial verbal and non-verbal responses of the librarian, will set the tone for the entire communication process, and will influence the depth and level of interaction between the staff

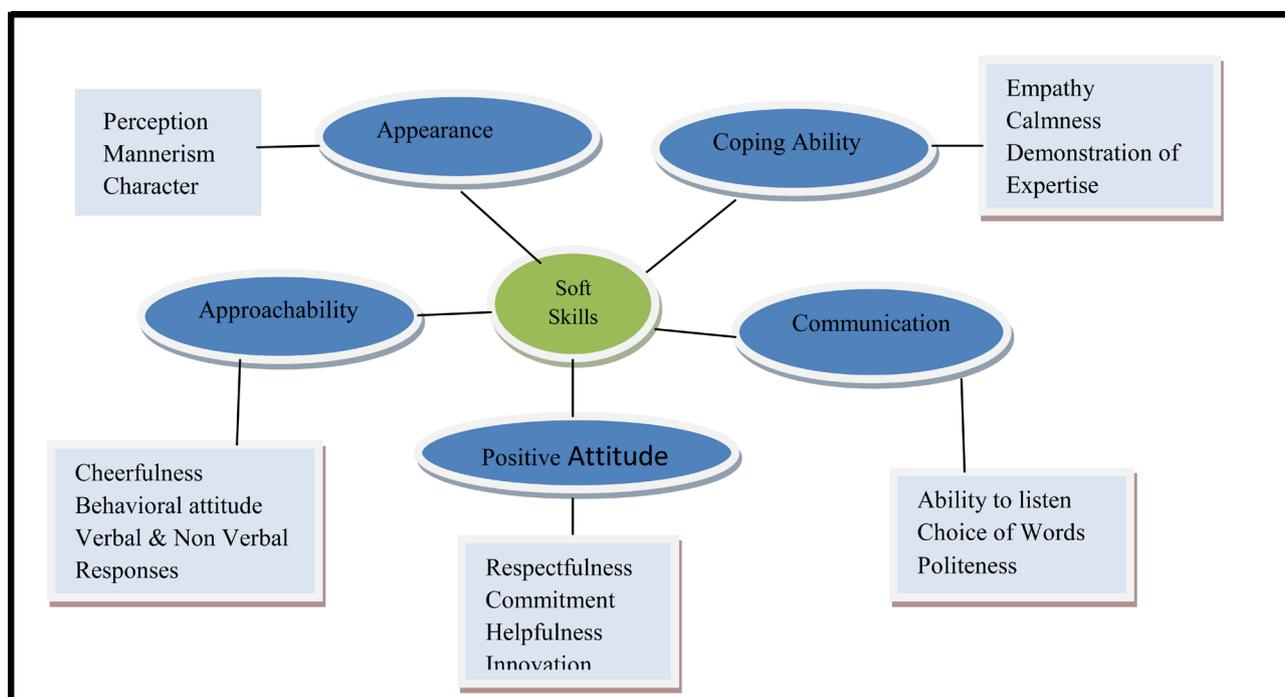


Figure 1. Soft skills for effective customer service in libraries.

and the patrons [12]. At this stage in the process, the behaviors exhibited by the staff member should serve to welcome the patrons and to place them at ease. The librarian's role in the communications process is to make the patrons feel comfortable in a situation that may be perceived as intimidating, risky, confusing, and overwhelming (see **Figure 1**).

According to the American Library Association's (ALA) guidelines for the behavioral performance of reference and information service providers, an important component of a successful reference interaction is that a librarian be approachable. There is need to employ techniques of smiling, making eye contact, open posture, patient, understanding and so on. Darren and associate conducted an image-rating study to assess how visibly salient, cue-based characteristics of hypothetical librarians can influence patrons' perceptions of librarian approachability [13]. The study emphasized factors that librarians can readily change on a day-to-day or even moment-to-moment basis. Using a subset of previously rated images, they carefully balanced demographic characteristics (*i.e.*, gender, age, and racial/ethnic affiliation) in order to test a diverse sample of hypothetical librarians. Results of this study expand the extant research on behaviors that librarians can modify to enhance their approachability.

6. Positive Attitude

Apart from the skills and experience of library workers, attitude plays a key role in the relationship between them and the library customers. Positive attitude can be expressed in:

- Respectfulness—have a respectful attitude when interacting with library cus-

tomers

- Commitment—being committed to the goal of satisfying users' needs
- Innovation—being willing to try something new or finding a different way to meet customer's needs
- Helpfulness—willingness to assist customers with their needs (see **Figure 1**)

7. Communication

According to [14], communication is a transfer of information from a source to a receiver. Communication is crucial to all phases of management by every individual within the system and is particularly important in directing and leading any system [15]. Library workers interact with library customers and interview them to articulate their needs clearly. There is need for library professionals to possess conversational skills which is the ability to talk to all types of people to find out their information need. The ability to communicate effectively on an interpersonal level will go a long way in ensuring that they meet the demands of the clientele and also gain their confidence. Effective communication is an important component of customer service for the 21st century library. Communication for effective customer service in libraries would take the following forms:

- Ability to listen carefully
- Ability to see all questions as relevant
- Smile & eye contact
- Tone of voice—not speaking loudly
- Choice of words
- Speak clearly and politely
- Do not respond sarcastically/make jest of patron
- Thank patrons for their questions and feedback
- Explain library policies and procedures if need be
- Instead of saying “I don't know”, refer patron to someone who has the information
- Do not use library jargon
- Ask if you can help with anything else
- Respond to their “thank you” with—You are welcome, it is my pleasure, that is why we are here, anytime (see **Figure 1**)

8. Positive Attitude in Difficult Situations

The ability to transform or change a tough situation into something better in the workplace cannot be overemphasized. Positive attitude will help individuals take difficult situations and find ways to empower themselves to turn negative thinking into positive thinking. The nature of the library requires its workers, beyond skills, experience and training, to demonstrate enthusiasm or positive attitude irrespective of challenging situation in order to fulfill the purpose of its existence. A positive attitude in the library professions can also impact the actual job performance. From dealing with stressors of the job, to crafting creative solu-

tions to problems, to managing your interpersonal relationships with the library customers, having a positive demeanor is advantageous on many ways [16]. More productive is achieved and people incline to do their best when they demonstrate positive attitude towards desirable and undesirable assignments. Employees who are viewed as enthusiastic are known to provide good customer service, resolve interpersonal conflict effectively, and work productively with others [17]. There are many ways in which library workers can demonstrate enthusiasm in the workplace. Some of the ways include:

- Willingness to listen carefully
- Empathize with the patron
- Maintain calmness
- Explain why there is a problem and how it is going to fix it
- Learn from your challenging experiences
- Willingness to ask for help from colleagues (see **Figure 1**)

9. Conclusion

The importance of effective customer service in academic libraries cannot be overemphasized. The success and achievement of the goals and objectives of libraries are anchored on their ability to render effective services to their customers. If library customers are satisfied with library services, they will find it very easy to come to the library anytime they have information needs either for personal or academic purpose. The paper emphasized the deployment of soft skills in terms of staff appearance, approachability, effective communication, positive attitude, ability to cope in difficult situation, etc., for more effective customer services in the 21st century library. Applying these skills will result to making their patrons feel important, increases patrons' learning, increases patronage, and promotes the image of library and university to mention but few. The paper will help management of university libraries to strive to do their best to see that their clients get the best service from the library. This will lead to increased patronage and client retention.

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