Second Edition

ASSESSING SERVICE QUALITY

Satisfying the Expectations of Library Customers

PETER HERNON + ELLEN ALTMAN

This classic book is brought fully up-to-date as Peter Hernon and Ellen Altman integrate the use of technology into the customer experience. They offer solid, practical ideas for developing a customer service plan that meets the library's customer-focused mission, vision, and goals, and challenge librarians to think about customer service in new ways, including

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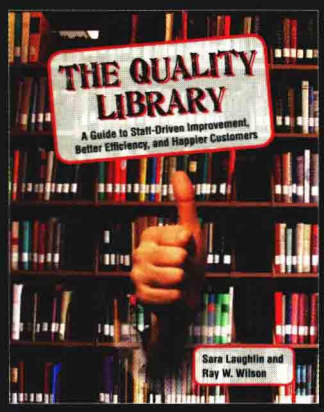

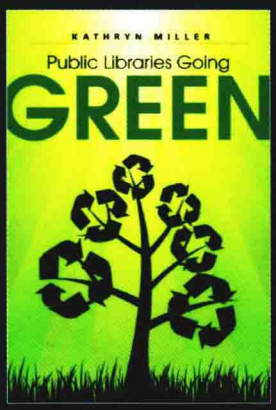

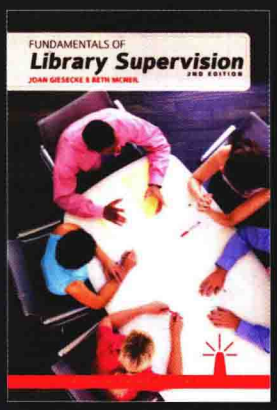

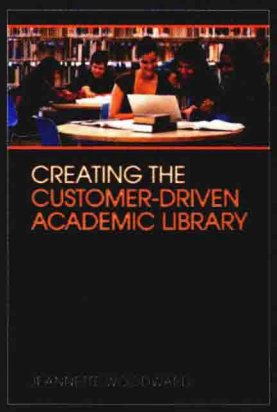

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PETER HERNON + ELLEN ALTM

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Satisfying the Expectations of Library Customers
Second Edition

PETER HERNON + ELLEN ALTMAN

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AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
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Preface

At this time librarians are redefining their roles; seeing an expansion of the knowledge, abilities, skills, and habits of mind required for them to fill those roles; and engaging in profound change within their organizations as they cope with new methods of learning, information-seeking, source preferences, and forms of competition, as well as an ever-changing electronic information environment and changing expectations on the part of those they serve. As Duane E. Webster writes,

> In today's rapidly changing information landscape, libraries face opportunity and challenge. The only constant in this landscape is uncertainty. . . . More than in any preceding era, we know that libraries must change, but we do not know how to make this transition . . . to organizations that can thrive in dramatically different conditions.[1]

Clearly, libraries are now engaged in much more than the preservation and transition of the cultural history and having a nebulous role in meeting the needs of society and the institutions they serve.

In such a time of transition, why should librarians and students in schools of library and information science be interested in yet another book about the evaluation and assessment of library services? Perhaps the better question is, why should they be interested in a revised edition of a 1998 volume? We will address this question by reinforcing our approach. Instead of presenting a cookbook of measures to apply to various services, we identify some touchstones critical to the well-being of libraries: customers, service quality, satisfaction, loyalty, and reputation. The concepts of loyalty and reputation are relatively new in the professional literature. Although a number of librarians dispute the notion that library users are customers, this book endorses the use of that word. Furthermore, we distinguish between satisfaction and service quality; much of the literature confuses or ignores the distinction between the two.

Many in the profession strongly believe that only they, the professionals, have the expertise to assess the quality of library service. Such a belief may have

validity in the abstract, but it fails to acknowledge reality. Every customer evaluates the quality of service received and decides when (and if) she will seek further interactions with the library. Behaviors and attitudes toward the library over time influence both customer perceptions about the library and the views of stakeholders who make decisions affecting the library's funding.

Service quality, as presented here, views the service provided by an organization from the perspective of the customer. It encourages the organization to meet specific customer expectations and to increase the number of customers who are loyal and delighted with the services provided.

The purposes of this book, both first and revised editions, are to

- suggest new ways to think about library services
- explain service quality and further the development of its theoretical base
- clarify the distinction between service quality and customer satisfaction
- identify strategies for developing a customer service plan that meets the library's customer-focused mission, vision, and goals
- identify procedures for measuring service quality and satisfaction
- challenge conventional thinking about the utility of input, output, and performance measures, as well as public library role adoption or service response
- suggest possible customer-related indicators that provide insights useful for library planning and decision making
- encourage libraries to take action—action leading to improved service and accountability

Although the book focuses on academic and public libraries, the basic principles, strategies, and assessment procedures presented apply in other settings.

Traditionally, the amount of resources and productivity counts have been (and still are) used to evaluate the quality of libraries. Performance and output measures were developed as better indicators of service delivery, but they have been more discussed than used, as is confirmed by the small number of public libraries reporting them. Although performance and output measures serve an important purpose, the current cross-disciplinary evaluation literature lacks a standard nomenclature for such terms as performance measures and outputs. Given that different people use the same terms but with widely varying meanings, it is time to replace such terms with new ones, and to explore other ways of evaluating and benchmarking library services. In effect, it is time to develop new ways to look at service. As the book notes, it is also time to move beyond outputs to outcomes and address the perspectives of the stakeholders interested in libraries and their institutional context.

Because technology offers new methods of information delivery, traditional counts of productivity underestimate the actual volume of business performed. New issues, such as those related to distance education, use of library websites, and partnership and consortium arrangements for gaining access to electronic collections, make it clear that volumes of business are deceptive measures—ones becoming more complex to gauge. The library community needs to shift its focus from measures reporting volume of business, such as for circulation, to more meaningful indicators of customer loyalty, expectations, preferences, and satisfaction. The new indicators should report information about present and potential customers, their needs, expectations, and preferences, as well as the problems they encounter and how library staff handles those problems. Such information is useful for promoting customer loyalty, enhancing the service reputation of libraries, and planning and decision making.

Customers are more than a source for data collection; they are the reason for libraries' existence. It is important (if not essential) to listen to, and learn from, customers and to use the insights gained to improve services. A number of libraries have ignored customers because they perceive customers as a captive audience. This book dispels that notion as it enumerates the many competitors poised to challenge the library's perceived monopoly.

As the twenty-first century unfolds, librarians need new ways of thinking and alternatives for applying a customer-centered model of service quality. We regard this work as one in progress, because it provides a base upon which others can build. The approach presented here recognizes that holistic evaluation involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative data, as each type complements the other. The approach presented here is too large and too complex for any library to undertake at one time. Rather, our intention has been to present some new ways to think

about service, along with some methods for evaluating and improving service. Libraries can select, from among the methods discussed, those most appropriate to their particular situation, and implement them at a pace that suits their needs. After all, libraries have become service organizations that function in a competitive environment, and librarians must create and perfect services that better match the information needs, information-seeking behaviors, and expectations of those they intend to serve.

If libraries do not try to be truly service-centered, what are they willing to commit to? What is the source of their service inspiration? What service reputation do they generate? The answers to such questions have a definite impact on the extent to which customers are loyal to the library, and on the number of customers who are delighted or completely satisfied—not merely appeased.

Most people who become librarians do so from a desire to connect people with information—a concept that is the cornerstone of service quality. But, somehow, along the way, the profession has gotten caught up in bean counting: how many of this and how much of that, as though the items counted exist in a universe totally unto themselves. It is our hope that the ideas presented here will encourage librarians to remember the ideals that attracted them to the profession and to abandon such misperceptions as "customers cannot judge quality," "customers do not know what they want," and "professional hegemony will be undermined by kowtowing to customers."

A critical question that many readers will ask is, how does this edition differ from the previous one? We kept the same framework but differentiate between evaluation and assessment, address new developments within and outside the profession, and continue to raise issues. Revisiting the content of the first edition, we find that assessment has assumed a new meaning as discussed in chapter 4. Perhaps *Addressing Service Quality* is now a more appropriate title, but we decided to keep the original title. Since we wrote the first edition, we see that libraries have tended to back away from explicit service promises and that there is still a definite preference for conducting surveys. We encourage librarians to pursue other choices when relevant and to gain a good understanding of the concepts they are addressing. As we continue to remind readers, satisfaction and service quality differ. It is important to focus on the customers of individual libraries and realize that comparisons to other libraries (and use of mostly generic data-collection instruments) assume that customer expectations have little variation.

Note

1. Duane E. Webster, "Foreword," in *Beyond Survival: Managing Academic Libraries in Transition*, by Elizabeth J. Wood, Rush Miller, and Amy Knapp (Westport, CT: Libraries Unlimited, 2007), xvii.

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Chapter One

Understanding Ends and Means

Public library administrators should be concerned about the level of customer service provided by the staff ahead of any other issue.[1]

Historically, the quality of a library has been measured by the size of its collection. The acquisition of the millionth volume was cause for celebration, and press releases flooded local and national news media. The millionth volume or a million-dollar "book" budget gave bragging rights to the library's director. For decades, library directors, upon retirement, wanted to be known for the number of titles added during their tenure.

As collections grew, space became a problem, so library directors pressed for bigger buildings to house the increased number of volumes. Bigger collections meant the need for more staff and furnishings, especially shelving. Several other factors influenced collection building, especially after World War II. The expansion of colleges and universities in response to the GI Bill meant more faculty had to be hired, and they were expected to "publish or perish" to receive tenure. Of course, each author wanted the library to purchase his published works. Several publishing companies were started to translate and reprint works held by major European university libraries that had been damaged during the war.

By the 1970s, many university administrators regarded academic libraries as bottomless pits because of constant entreaties for more money to keep up with the publishing output. In the 1980s and 1990s, the pleas for more money centered on the large annual increases in the prices of scholarly and professional journal subscriptions and the need for electronically delivered resources and their requisite infrastructure.

More recently, libraries have expanded their involvement with consortia and partnerships as they seek more electronic resources while focusing on their customers' information needs and the affordability of those resources. The cost for colleges and universities has increased for nearly everything, including faculty and staff benefits (e.g., health care) and debt services on borrowed money. Issues related to debt services, the size of endowments, and cutbacks on staffing and operating costs became more pronounced during the economic recession of 2008 and 2009. Some estimate that it will take academic institutions at least four years to recover; this is especially true of those institutions that are heavily funded by

tuition dollars and are in the process of major construction projects.

Some critics note the fallacy of equating collection size with quality—not all libraries count items in the same way, while others keep outdated and unwanted books to boost their volume count. Obviously, the sheer number of volumes does not necessarily mean that the library collection matches readers' interests, and many titles go unused—they do not even circulate. In the age of widespread access to digital resources, volume and title counts become less important, unless the institution is threatened by accreditation standards that set expectations for collection size. Academic libraries experience broad and extensive use of digital resources even by the faculty, who now access materials in collections miles away.

SERVICE QUALITY

Because of the previous focus on collection building, library quality has been synonymous with collection size—an assessment of what the library *has*—rather than with what the library *does*. Yet *library* quality and *service* quality are very different measures. A parallel can be drawn with the observations made by Raymond F. Zammuto and others, who studied student services offices in universities: "The idea of service quality as opposed to educational quality has not received much attention in higher education."[2] That situation is changing as most academic institutions now strive to attract and retain students. Service quality has become a topic of considerable interest for many service units on campus.

In the past several decades, as budgets for the purchase of materials have shrunk, the phrase "access not ownership" has become common. The means to achieve that access—interlibrary loan—did not change radically until recently, when the Internet became widely available to educational institutions. The result has been a major shift in resources, attention, and interest from the library "collection" to the Internet. How to use it, which websites are good, and a myriad of associated topics fill the pages of the professional literature and now seem the prime preoccupation of the library community. In all likelihood, access to Internet and associated resources will equal, if not surpass, physical volumes in the collection as the new standard of library quality. Yet such a focus still says nothing about the quality of service provided and received.

For a library, service quality encompasses the interactive relationship between the library and the people whom it is supposed to serve. A library that adheres to all the professionally approved rules and procedures for acquiring, organizing, managing, and preserving material but has no customers cannot claim quality because a major element is missing: satisfying people's needs, requests, and desires for information. Maurice B. Line defined librarianship as "managing information resources for people."[3] How the library sees and interacts with those people—customers—clearly affects the quality and nature of the service rendered. As Françoise Hébert notes, "When library and customer measures of quality are not congruent, the library may be meeting its internal standards of performance but may not be performing well in the eyes of its customers."[4]

PATRONS, USERS, CLIENTS, OR CUSTOMERS?

Organizations refer to the people they serve by many different terms: *clients, patients, students, readers, passengers, visitors, guests*. Such terms make these individuals seem something other than customers. Librarians often prefer the terms *patron* or *user*, perhaps to avoid the implication of an exchange occurring between the library and the people using the service. Yet, both words have rather negative connotations, as Darlene E. Weingand points out:

> The word *patron* is associated with the act of giving support and protection, such as occurred in the Renaissance between royalty and artists. The impression here is one of unequal status, of the powerful protecting the less powerful. This is not the type of relationship that puts libraries on an equal level of partnership with their communities. Further, while *user* accurately describes someone who uses the library, the term is quite unspecific and is widely associated with the drug culture.[5]

Special librarians and subject specialists in university libraries probably come closest to treating their users as clients. In the case of subject specialists, faculty and doctoral students who are repeat users become clients. These librarians know their clientele personally and have insights into their research and related interests. Yet, being a client does not preclude one from being treated like a customer.

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