

Embracing the student voice

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Whilst developing the Newcastle University Library's first marketing and communications strategy and considering our next accreditation for Customer Service Excellence in 2013, we identified certain deficiencies in the way we collected and used student opinion to inform our service plans and decision making. Neither did we feel we were satisfactorily exploiting the richness of all of the qualitative and quantitative data we were gathering regarding student behaviour.

We were interested in adopting a relationship marketing approach. Over the past decade 'relationship marketing' has come to the fore. Kotler and Fox (Kotler & Fox, 1995) in their six-step developmental model describe marketing as developing from a mechanistic and transactional approach into being an integral part of a service organisation's strategic planning and relationship management. Relationship marketing requires a shift towards including customers in all stages of developing and reviewing services, rather than just telling them about the services that an organisation currently provides. This helps deliver truly customer-focused services and encourages customers to become advocates and support the delivery of key messages in their immediate environments. As Terry Kendrick notes, customer relationship management in a library context is a strategy based on '...sustained and focused use of user information, to attract and keep users through ongoing conversations which build long-lasting, mutually beneficial relationships' (Kendrick, 2006, p. 121).

The task we set ourselves was to plan and evidence customer engagement systematically as part of any significant service development we were considering and / or undertaking. We feel we are starting to achieve this through the multiplicity of approaches we are now regularly using. None of these approaches is unique to us, often being borrowed from other universities' good practice; however, what we think we are doing differently is how we are combining the different approaches in order to increase our reach as well as deepening our level of engagement. Once we have discerned the question(s) we want to ask, we ask them in many different ways and are using many different communication channels in order to make sure we are taking the conversation out to the where the students are. For example we may ask for preferences via a ball poll sited in the library, an online virtual wall, Facebook or Twitter as well as discussing the issues at staff / student committees, with the Newcastle Student Union and through focus groups. Students have commended us for the way we have done this and have cited us as a good example of engagement with them.

Maintaining interest and keeping the conversation going requires effort and creativity. Therefore we have been eager to work in partnership with students not only to build capacity to undertake all this work but also to help keep our communications fresh.

We have used the Newcastle University work experience scheme (Newcastle University Careers, 2014) a number of times in order to recruit students to undertake a variety of benchmarking and market research exercises. Through this scheme the library can pay for students to undertake an agreed programme of work over a fixed number of hours that will offer them opportunities to develop specific employability skills. When we were planning the refurbishment of two study floors for the Robinson Library, we employed two students to undertake customer research, one being a business studies undergraduate and the other being a PhD student with a research interest related to design of museum space. Working together, they created an investigative programme that included observation of current spaces, a quick exit poll, exercises in which students selected pictures of study spaces they preferred and some focus groups. In their allocated 100 hours they achieved what we simply did not have the time to do. Their finding took us by surprise, as we were expecting demand for more social space, but they came back with

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strong arguments for more traditional silent space. As a follow-up to this work, we employed another PhD student, this time from the School of Education, to run a further programme of observation and focus groups to review how the refurbishment was now working for students.

Other work experience placements we have offered have included researching study skills support models used in different universities and seeking academic and student opinion of current provision at Newcastle University. We are currently recruiting to a series of work placements, which will help with benchmarking and seeking opinions about our information literacy and writing development online resources. This is in preparation for a programme of work we hope to undertake during 2016 to create a new portfolio of open educational resources.

Over the past 18 months we have also successfully piloted and established a Student Library Communications Team following a similar model to that which our Careers Service employs. Each academic year we recruit up to twelve students to undertake promotional and customer research related activities. The interview process has proved very interesting as it involves a ten-minute 'audition' to which candidates bring a prepared pitch to persuade new students that use of a library is beneficial. We also ask to them to bring a Tweet to promote the library. Just going through the process of interviewing students for the team provides us with some rather surprising insight into what they and their friends think of us!

The students are employed on casual contracts via the University 'JobsSoc' agency so there is no obligation on either party. We will contact them, usually by email, to ask for members to offer to undertake specific activities / assignments as they arise. To date these have included:

- handing out promotional fliers and postcards on campus
- conducting quick surveys on campus
- participating in focus groups and in some cases letting them recruit and lead on focus groups
- conducting tours for prospective students on open days
- mystery shopping at Newcastle and Northumbria Universities
- providing feedback on publicity.

Some students are more committed than others, but generally we can get sufficient participants to undertake these quick assignments. Library Communication Team hoodies are now a common sight on our campus, with the team members often canvassing opinion or promoting our services on our behalf. The feedback they get is probably more insightful than we would ever be able to achieve, and they are always prepared to discuss the responses they have received, which adds value to the process.

Not only are we creating our own opportunities to work with students as co-creators, we also use schemes and programmes being operated elsewhere in the university. For example since 2013 first-year students have been allocated a student mentor as part of the university's offer. These mentors are expected to meet regularly with a small group of new students to listen to and discuss the issues they are facing as they transition into higher education. We see these student mentors as potentially some of our strongest advocates, and investing in their development is important. We do this in various light-touch ways, including contributing ideas and resources to their training programme and having named library contacts for support if and when needed. It is interesting to note that as the scheme has matured, student mentors are not only using the library as a venue to meet mentees but are also conducting their own informal tours.

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We are analysing the feedback in more detail, whether it be feedback received via a staff / student committee, module evaluation forms, our feedback scheme, a University survey or indeed a casual conversation with a library staff member. Routinely monitoring a range of social media channels has reaped some interesting customer insight.

The collation of this feedback has helped us to

- demonstrate that we are listening to the student voice
- build convincing arguments for further investment
- encourage students to continue to engage with us
- get service enhancements and changes right first time.

Adopting a methodological triangulation approach has also helped us demonstrate the credibility of our findings.

For instance we are currently planning the transformation of a former office building into a fourth library site due to be opened in January 2016. The building was acquired by the university after we had evidenced the need using study space usage statistics and after considering the concerns students were raising with us via social media, staff–student committees, the Student Union’s sabbatical officers and our ‘Tell us what you think’ scheme. Whilst planning this new library we have continued to look for opportunities to get student opinion on its configuration, facilities and services. So far this has ranged from inviting students to test out chair designs to running a very popular, though at times controversial, communications campaign to canvass for ideas for the library’s new name. Of course we also arranged for the Education Sabbatical Officer to have an early tour of the building, which he subsequently tweeted and talked about. This has not only helped with our planning, but has also allayed some students’ concerns about library space issues.

Integrating student engagement into our strategic and operational service planning is not always easy and can require considerable time and effort. However, the rewards from investing in an ongoing and open two-way dialogue with students are far reaching.

References

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