Knowing your customer

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Library colleagues know best

It is every library's aim to exceed the expectations of its users by providing great collections and great service. But do we really know what those expectations are, and better still, do we know how our customers perceive our valiant efforts? Are we working from experience and knowledge of behaviours gained over time, and do we have any informed idea of what might lie ahead? Should our provision reflect what's wanted or should we lead and challenge? Or both?

In an effort to answer some of these questions, Manchester University Library designed a strategic market research project that would reach across our customer segments, services and key buildings. In this way we intended to understand synergies, conflicts, perceptions, myths and realities to inform both our day-to-day business and our future development.

Fig. 1 Infographics

A library with such a huge and diverse range of users, buildings and services is open to uneven development or emphasis on particular priorities and areas of work. For an organisation of any size, a well-rounded overview and objective assessment combined with systematic forecasting will build a more relevant and successful offer.

We undertook three projects:

- in-depth study of our student cohorts, tracked year on year;

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- qualitative research with our researchers to understand their work, career progression and research needs;
- in-depth study of the visitors to our visitor attraction, the John Rylands Library.

This article will describe the work we did with students, the action we took and the results.

In 2012 at Manchester we embarked on an ambitious strategic plan with many visionary and innovative ideas to change, re-evaluate and improve our offer. To inform our plan, and to develop a method of tracking our achievements, the strategic market research project was essential.

Asking the questions

Quantitative data

Mindful that an online questionnaire requires respondents to have some connection with the library, the digital questionnaire was balanced with street surveys. These captured the 'disengaged' and self-defined 'non library user'.

The questions, designed in collaboration with external professionals to ensure objectivity, covered current use and perception, future needs, probes on particular services, study behaviours and mobile device behaviour. A representative and demographic sample was taken across discipline, year, level and mode of study.

Qualitative data

The answers from the quantitative survey informed the focus group discussions. In addition, over 100 videos were made of students using the library over 24 hours at three key sites. As they entered the buildings our researchers asked permission to shadow and film them as they carried out their task.

What we found out in 2013

On a scale of 0 to 10 where 0 is not at all likely and 10 is very likely, how likely would you be to recommend the University of Manchester Library to a friend or colleague?
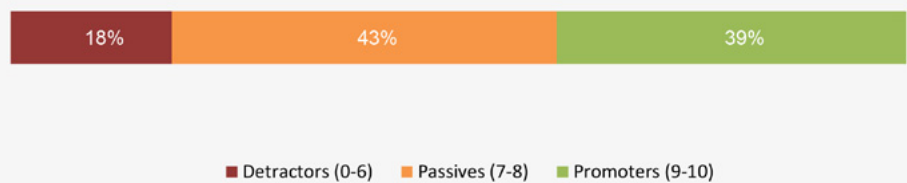Base: 1145

Detractors (0-6)	Passives (7-8)	Promoters (9-10)
18%	43%	39%

Fig. 2 Detractors and promoters

Perception questions probe what the customer feels about the library. People who do not recommend the library, described as detractors, are a highly influential and vocal group. This is one of our most important measures, because they can 'squeeze' the group described as passives, who have no strong feelings one way or the other.

When asked 'What could the library do better?' answers focused, unsurprisingly, on providing more books, more space and more PCs. However, deeper questioning revealed an apparent loss of sight of our 'core' business.

One major cause for concern from the results was the difficulty our students faced when trying to locate material in our two largest sites. Although the layout of a historic building can cause navigational difficulty, the Dewey system and the signage in our locations were also problematic for students. One

video showed an engineering student on his first trip to the library taking thirty minutes to locate a single book. The services of staff were used three times in the search.

Fig. 3 Finding a book!

It wasn't just about finding material. In our flagship Alan Gilbert Learning Commons we were able to measure the perception of the building as busy, and study space hard to find.

Our videos showed that students were unfamiliar with where to look for PCs in our Main Library, and they often gave up and left.

Our newly implemented online Library Search did not fare well in the research, with some students fearing it was broken.

We took action!

The library Leadership Team and library teams quickly addressed the question of the difficulty of finding books and spaces to study. The greatest change was the introduction of a campaign we call 'Exam extra'. Using a mixed model of student ambassadors, our own staff and our security team, we increased the visibility of personal help.

Having colleagues easily identifiable and available for assistance as students entered the building, supporting these staff with rovers for each building, identifying which floors had PC or study space capacity, and communicating this, had a huge impact. Staff gave meeting rooms over to study space and extra furniture was brought in to increase capacity. Revision and wellbeing sessions were well advertised. All the activity was branded as an identifiable and integrated campaign.

Finding stuff

We put over 500 new bay ends on our shelving, and students helped us identify the most baffling complexities of the buildings so we could reposition and install new signage.

A project team already working on our search issues went into overdrive to focus on the issues highlighted in the research.

Our Teaching and Learning team revamped the induction period, which is now

phased over the entire year and is aligned to the student cycle.

Did it work?

In 2014 at the same time of year we repeated the market research. Removing the questions from the online survey relating to strategy and behaviour we tracked performance and perception. Replacing videos with mystery shoppers across three sites, we were able to measure any actual perception of change in service at first hand.
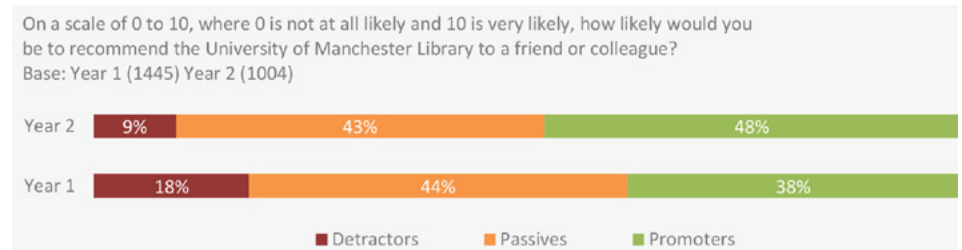
On a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 is not at all likely and 10 is very likely, how likely would you be to recommend the University of Manchester Library to a friend or colleague?
Base: Year 1 (1445) Year 2 (1004)

	Detractors	Passives	Promoters
Year 2	9%	43%	48%
Year 1	18%	44%	38%

Fig. 4 Detractors reduced by half in one year

We were delighted to see that our detractors reduced by half to only 9% and were 'squeezed' by an increase in promoters of 10%. When asked whether the library had got worse, got better or stayed the same, an amazing 32% said it had got better. This is praise indeed by any commercial measure.

We were particularly pleased that all the 'mystery shoppers' found the randomly selected books they were asked to look for in five minutes at our Main Library and had little trouble using our Library Search. Finding electronic journals off campus remains an issue, however.

Our study space still appears to be difficult to locate in the Learning Commons with around fifteen minutes reported as the average time needed to find a place.

Lessons learned over the two market research projects

Visibility
Visibility of staff and their obvious availability to help has been key to changing perception. That moment when you enter a large, complicated and busy building is softened by the sight of someone who could help you, even if you don't need it. The greeter's delicate balance as to whether to make eye contact, smile or speak is a skill, and as the customer hesitates, wondering where to find the floor, the PC or the space they want, their presence is reassuring. Of course staff are at the reception desk and get approached all the time, but even the friendliest team can't take the place of the low-key greeter at a busy time.

Embedding information
Focus groups identified embarrassment about asking for help; the longer the student is at university, the worse it gets. They feel they are supposed to know.

Fig. 5 Different kinds of learning space

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A systemic programme of 'revealing' information at the point of need during the student cycle rather than weighting campaign messages around Welcome or first-year induction has begun to take effect.

Raising standards

Students reported very positively on the improvement of face-to-face help and let it be known that this level of support should be available in evenings and weekends!

Core business

Improving the access to our material and our study spaces has led to a more positive awareness of other services, for example our training offer, My Learning Essentials.

As we approach the major £30 million redevelopment building project of our Main Library, the number of students recommending the library could be expected to decrease, making the need for visible help even more critical. Understanding changes in perception year on year will support our strategy of investment in both time and money.

Fig. 6 Alan Gilbert Learning Commons

Together with the information gained from the other two research projects our plans will integrate and align to support our holistic approach… That's the plan anyway!

Comments from students 2013

' It's quite big so when you walk in you don't know where you are going.'

' I wouldn't ask for help, in case it's something really stupid.'

Quotations from students 2014

' In the library there is always space, but in the Learning Commons it is harder.'

' I've noticed a more supportive atmosphere.'

' It's overall very conducive to private study.'

' I've noticed a more supportive atmosphere.'