Good customer relationships: proving value every day

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Abstract

Objective: The objective of this study has been to improve the quality for the library users as well as the library staff.

Background and questions: The background was the changes in questions in an Academic Library noticed by the library staff and the increase of "nontraditional library questions".

How does this affect the library staff?

Is the staff in need of other skills or competences? Does it affect the customer relationships?

A number of questions were raised e.g. What is good customer services/relationships? How do we make sure that our library has it? Exactly what kind of questions are being asked at the library?

Methods and Results: Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, we have worked very actively with our customer relations/customer services over the last years. The qualitative methods includes Quality Walk, Staff Diary, Critical Friend Evaluation among others. The quantitative method comprised of measuring/pinning down every single question asked at the library between September 2014 and September 2016 and then categorize and evaluate the findings. With this unique collection of data we have been able to improve our services further. From our findings we were able to compile new Documents and Guidelines for the library staff, regarding how we treat and meet our customers - a united and well informed staff contributes to good customer services. From 2014 until today we have seen different effects of our work, one example is that our National Satisfaction index went up to over 90% during this work.

Conclusion and Summary: By raising the question of customer relationships and finding out exactly what kind of questions were being asked, we were able to contribute to increased awareness of the staff, improving the quality both for the library users and the library staff. The library is nothing without its users/customers, hence constantly working with customer relationships and keeping the question alive is crucial for as well customer relations as workplace satisfaction.

1. Introduction

This paper describes a Customer Service project at a middle sized University Library in Sweden. The objective of the project was to improve the quality for the library users as well as the library staff, by addressing both how the customers were being treated as well as collegial and workplace atmosphere. By using both qualitative and quantitative methods the library managed to increase the awareness of the staff as well the customer satisfaction.

2. Background and questions

The background to the project was the changes in library questions noticed by the library staff and the increase of "nontraditional library questions". The following questions were raised:

- What is good customer services/relationships?
- How do we make sure that our library has it?
- Exactly what kind of questions are being asked at the library?
- How does the change in questions affect the library staff?
- Is the staff in need of other skills or competences?

In today's digital world we wanted to take some time and look in another direction. To look closer at the library as space, the personal meeting and the face-to-face contact. What can the staff do that the systems can't? E-mails, chats and digital resources are crucial and necessary, however what happens and might happen in the real personal meeting ought to have other values. We can continue to implement and develop new types of e-resources and technical features, but if there is no one who can help with their use, they are as good as useless. The library needs to offer something else – something more, create other values. Two, in Sweden , very popular terms; "help to self-help" and "an educational approach" are both very important for the student/customer to be able to take responsibility for her or his own learning. But there might be a thin line between those approaches and a feeling of the librarian's reluctance to help. Maybe that first question about printing and copying will help build that trust, which may be necessary for the customer/student to feel secure enough to ask all the other (more difficult) questions? Maybe the University in general has too much confidence in the student's knowledge? They are supposed to know how to work in different computer programs, how to attach files, look for information, find their classes, and how to solve things in their LMS systems. But what if they don't? Who do they ask? Is it the library´s role to answer these questions? May there be a fear of asking because they are expecting the answer that they should know already? For the authors of this paper, it is a matter of building trust and for the library to be that impartial and non-valuing "sounding

board". A place where (almost) all questions are welcome. The customers should always feel that it is worth going to the library.

3. Methods and Results

Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the library has worked actively with customer relations/customer services over the last years. For this project three different qualitative methods were used; Quality Walk, Staff Diary and Critical Friend.

The work with qualitative methods also resulted in the use of quantitative method a bit further into the project, as described a bit below.

Before starting to work practically with the staff, a few inspirational lectures and workshops were being held. The lectures included *Norms & Values in the workplace* and *Equal Rights in Customer Services.*

The workshops were held with all staff discussing *What is Good Customer Service VS Bad Customer Service?* and *Customer Relations and Collegial Attitudes*. To those lectures and workshops other work groups at the University, such as Student Health Care, the IT department, the Janitorial, Student Counselors etc. were also invited – and participated, this because we all meet and deal with the same customers.

With this background, different methods for the staff to work with were being taken into account. When choosing methods, much of the inspiration was taken from the University Library at Malmö University, whom had used those methods at their library. As mentioned earlier, the staff had three methods to choose from: Quality Walk, Staff Diary and Critical friend.

Quality Walk is when one put oneself in the "customers shoes" and tries to put on the users´ glasses instead of your own.

Staff Diary meant that the staff wrote diary notes when working at the information point. Writing down every question, how the problem was solved and other thoughts concerning the customer meeting. The group then met every other week to discuss the outcomes and questions. The group also payed extra attention to the times they gave the answer; *No* or *I'm sorry* and when making *exceptions to our rules*. All to see if the customers had other expectations of us than we could live up to, and if the staff stood behind the rules.

With the method *Critical Friend* the objective was to work in pairs at the information point observing each other in the meeting with the customer and making suggestions for improvement or positive feedback.

After presenting the methods it was decided that the entire library work group (all librarians, library assistants and student workers) should work with the

method Quality Walk. For this method, other parts of the University such as Student Health Care and Student Counselors also wanted to take part, which of course was positive and welcome. By doing this as a group, many interesting discussions were held, which brought different work groups together. The awareness that different work groups at the University share the same customers was of course already there; however, it was useful, good and interesting to share stories.

No one chose the method Critical Friend. One reason for this was time; it was difficult for colleagues to find the time to work together with the person they would prefer to work with. Another reason may have been the feeling of being "evaluated" when meeting customers/helping students. To be able to work well with this method one need to be paired with someone one feels secure and safe with. The feeling is that the workplace has a sense of being a safe and secure environment, but this can still be an obstacle. As project managers we decided to rename the method to *Inspirational Friend*, a more positive sounding word. To increase the feeling of security among the work group further, diplomas were made for each colleague as an incentive to work with this method later.
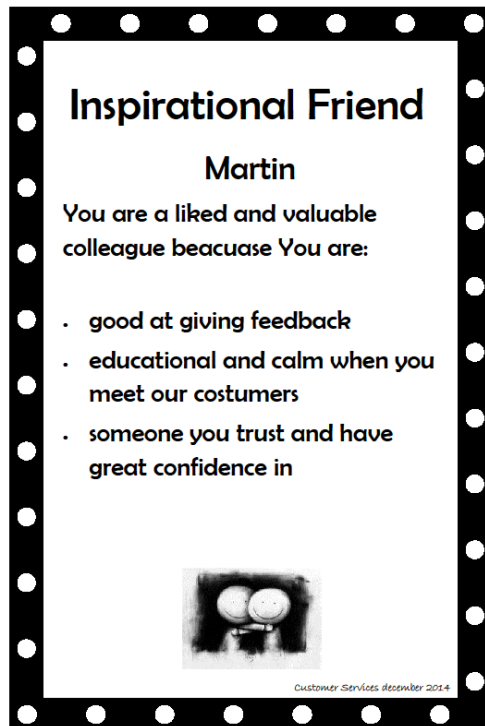

One example of Diploma

The Diary Group met regularly for two months to discuss the results. In those discussions, different categories in questions were rather soon crystallized, something worthwhile to look closer at. Exactly what kind of questions is being asked? How many questions are library related? Is the high amount of "non-library" questions something experienced or de facto true? The quantitative measurements were a spin-off from the work made by the Diary Group. It was decided to pin down every question asked at the information point for a few weeks, which led to a whole semester, which turned in to a year. After measuring for one year a colleague suggested measurements over two years to be able to compare the results.

Hence, the quantitative method comprised of measuring/pinning down every single question asked at the library between September 2014 and September 2016 and then categorize and evaluate the findings. We did this by using:

1 library with 15 librarians and 9 student workers, working at 2 information points in a total of 3 130 work shifts for 106 weeks. We categorized the questions in 10 categories and got a total of 56 411 questions during this time

The result showing all categories:
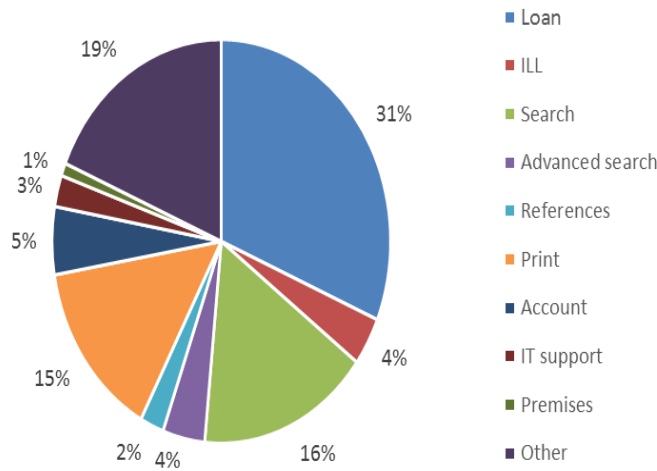
Questions in combined categories. Here we could read that the vast majority of questions asked were in fact library related.
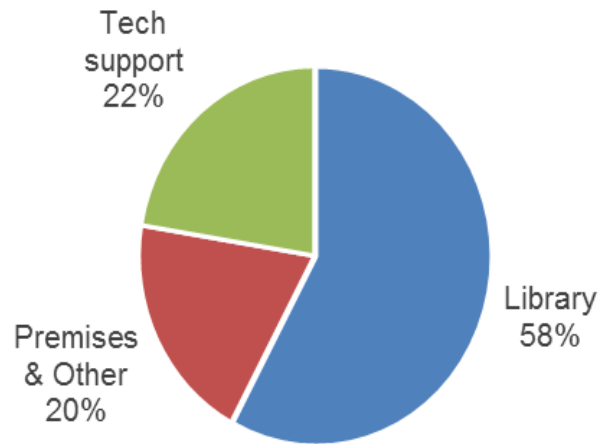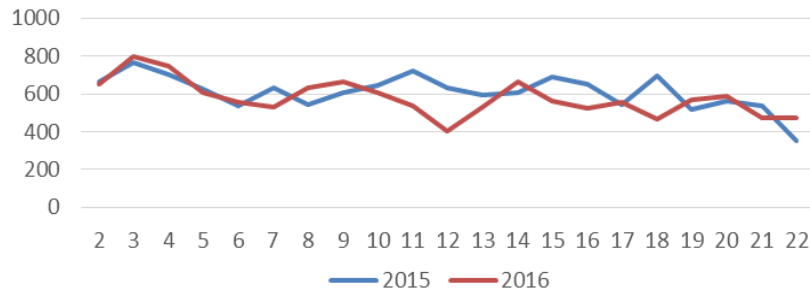
With this amount of data we could also see how the amount of questions changed over the months and semesters and over the week days.
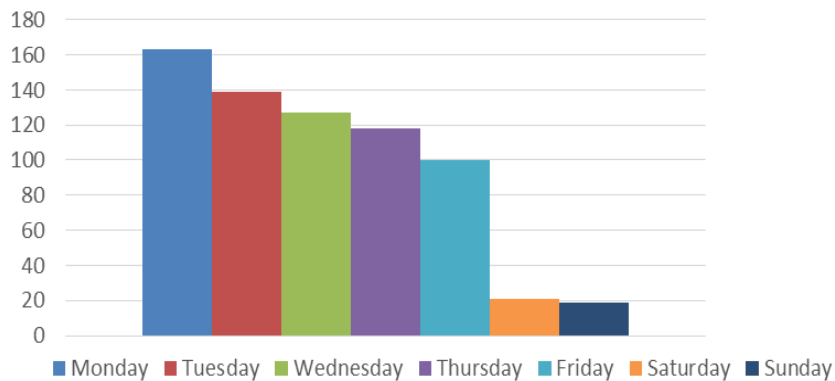
Questions /week fall semester; with an absolute peak in week 36, which is around the start of the semester.
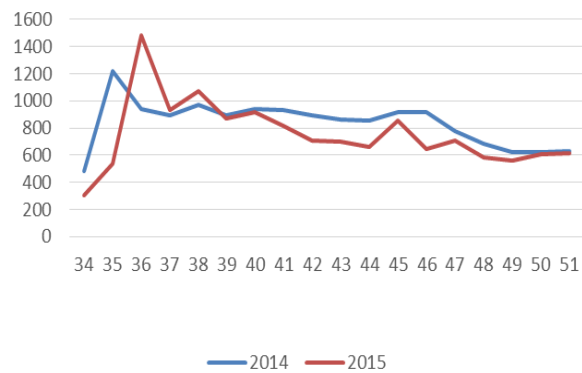
Questions / week spring semester; with peaks around due dates for student essays.

Questions in total/day.; one can clearly see more questions at the beginning of the week.

4.   Summary and Conclusion

With this rather vast collection of data we have been able to improve our services further. From our findings we were able to compile new *Documents and Guidelines* for the library staff, regarding how we treat and meet our customers - a united and well-informed staff contributes to good customer services. As shown above we could also see how the amount of questions changed over the months and semesters and over the week days, which is helpful when planning for staff schedules etc. We do have more library related questions than expected and we now have a solid joint ground to stand on. We have looked closer at the "nontraditional library questions" and planned further educational/training for the staff to develop their skills accordingly.

From 2014 until today we have seen different effects of our work, one example is that our National Satisfaction index went up to over 90% during the most active part of the project.

Looking at those Student surveys made every year we see that the User Satisfaction when it comes to the University Library is high throughout the years;

- 2014 - Student survey 84% NSI
- 2015 - Student survey 93% NSI
- 2016 - Student survey 84% NSI
- 2017 – Student survey 84,2 NSI

Remarkable is the value in 2015, which, as mentioned earlier, was the year we were working most actively in the project.

By raising the question of customer relationships and finding out exactly what kind of questions were being asked, we were able to contribute to increased awareness of the staff, improving the quality both for the library users and the library staff. Customer services is a never ending project and to have the opportunity to work in a project where you were able to reflect both on yourself as well as others was beneficial for both staff and users. The library is nothing without its users/customers, hence constantly working with customer relationships and keeping the question alive is crucial for as well customer relations as workplace satisfaction.

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Some of the results have prior been presented at: **Internet Librarian International** 2015; *Demonstrating value - Good customer relationships: proving value every day.* **Internet Librarian International** 2017; *Demonstrating value - Good customer relationships: proving value every day: the sequel!*