TITLE: **Comparing the effectiveness of alternative investigation methods for library environmental evaluation**

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AIM

New technologies, open access, electronic journals, electronic books… what is the future for academic libraries? The Life Sciences Library at the University of Liege, in Belgium, has asked this question, as many of you certainly have also done.
In Liège, several libraries have had to merge. For the Life Sciences Library, this happened last year. The library is now far away from most of its users. This may not be so important because there are many documents available in electronic version. But don't these users miss the documentation that exists only in paper version? What are their expectations, their needs? How can we communicate with them? How can we stay close to our users and let them know that we are there? Unfortunately, I don't have all the answers to these questions but we are working on this.

We decided to apply marketing principles to this issue. We had the opportunity to make a presentation on this subject two years ago at the 11th EAHIL Conference, in Finland. Since then, we have continued our work, our reflection on the subject.

The first step of a marketing plan is to analyse our customers, our services and our environment. Following this, it's important to write a strategic plan and to implement what has been decided.
I'm going to talk about environmental scanning. This first step is important in applying a marketing approach. But how to make that first step?

METHODS

Four methods of environmental scanning were considered:
- The LibQUAL+ survey. This service is offered by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL)[1];
- A toolkit for academic and research libraries, created by the American Library Association (ALA) and by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)[2];
- Consulting focus groups;
- Conducting semi-structured interviews.

RESULTS

LiQUAL+

The libraries director at the University of Liège launched the LibQUAL+ online survey last year[3].

The standardized questionnaire contained:

- 22 questions about 3 topics: user perception of service quality, access to information and the "library as place";
- 5 additional questions could be customized: we questioned our users regarding their satisfaction about the opening hours, our inter library loan system, our user training activities, the online public access catalogue and our openness to their suggestions and their new needs.

For each of the 27 main items, users had to indicate three levels of satisfaction: minimum, desired and perceived service performance. And this was on a scale ranging from 1 to 9.
A comment box was available for users who wished to add something.

The survey was anonymous, but it allowed us to characterize the respondents in terms of sex, age, status, department, information literacy, library use, and general satisfaction.

The questionnaire remained online for one month.

To comment generally on the strengths and weaknesses of the method used, we can say:
- It's an easy way to begin environmental scanning and to collect a large amount of data about all categories of users;
- The survey is conducted by others;
- It's a standard tool allowing comparison between institutions around the world.

The disadvantages are:
- In the French version, several questions are ambiguous. Users and librarians could have different interpretations of their content and meaning;
- The analysis takes time;
- Since this is only a satisfaction survey revealing the major trends of the users' opinion, a risk exists that those analysing the data might draw misleading conclusions.

In order to go further in our environmental scanning, we decided to involve the staff in examining the LibQUAL+ data. Before discussing the LibQUAL+ conclusions, our colleagues worked in small groups on the LibQUAL+ questionnaire in order to give their own perception regarding the level of user satisfaction. Their opinions were pooled and compared. We observed that the staff had a rather accurate opinion of the level of user satisfaction, but we also observed that they were much more critical of themselves than the users were. When different opinions were expressed, the topic was debated between groups. This additional step was also time consuming, but it was a great opportunity to discuss the results with the staff and to involve them in our marketing project.

ACRL method

As already said, the LibQUAL+ survey does not provide objective information about concrete user needs. So, we decided to evaluate the usefulness of a toolkit created by the ALA and ACRL. On the Marketing @ your library website, manuals, grids, slides and examples of how to conduct a marketing project can be found. Several working options are proposed: the project can be led by a single librarian, by a small leadership team or by the whole staff. We chose the third option, and of course we adapted it to a European way of thinking and to our own context.

Several activities must be conducted in a specific order:

1. Providing the participants with a minimal knowledge of marketing and assessing where we are in the marketing process;
2. Carrying out library user research;
3. Adjusting the library strategic plan;
4. Promoting the library.

So far, we have undertaken the first two activities.
We will focus on the second one here.

Carrying out library user research aims to answer the following questions:
- Who are our customers?
- Who has an influence on the future of our library?
- What do our customers want and need?

ACRL worksheets were used to focus the discussion and to make sure that every issue was taken into consideration.

ACRL guidelines give a list of ways to learn about our customers.
Going through that list, we realized that we already used many of the cited methods.
When necessary, we organize formal meetings and less formal discussions, or we circulate questionnaires and surveys.
Above all, we evaluate regularly the effectiveness of our teaching by different methods, including structured interviews.
Our everyday work in the library, as well as observation, is also a great source of information.

There are other methods suggested by ACRL that we did not use:
- National surveys
- Yearly surveys of each customer group
- Focus groups
- Observation of interactions within the library
- Chat room discussions
- Suggestion drop boxes or display walls

The ACRL approach enabled us to do several things:
- To ask good questions in a structured way;
- To list the different categories of users;
- To identify current needs (satisfied or not satisfied);
- To consider future needs;
- To stimulate staff involvement and motivation.

As always, the approach has its limitations:
- Working with the whole staff takes a lot of time.
- When considering user needs, it is not always easy to say how far they have been met or remain unmet, how far the users are satisfied or not satisfied.

It is important to be aware that both the LibQUAL+ and ACRL approach only provide assumptions about user needs. Thus, it is essential to validate these results by comparing our own perceptions within the library about user needs with the users' own opinions.
Validation is also necessary because part of the data were collected before the merging of our different library entities.
How should we carry out this validation? We considered two approaches for this: firstly, using focus groups and secondly, using semi-structured interviews.

Focus groups

First of all we considered focus group interviews.

What's a focus group?
According to Krueger (1994)[4], it's "a carefully planned discussion designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment".
A focus group is also "a special type of group in terms of purpose, size, composition, and procedures".
Three phases are necessary: planning the study, conducting the interviews, analysing and reporting.

Using focus groups presents several advantages[4,5,6]:
- Focus groups provide more data, and faster than individual semi-structured interviews;
- A wide range of topics can be addressed;
- Direct interactions between participants and researcher are allowed;
- Non-verbal responses can be observed;
- Synergistic interactions between group members can create new representations;
- An agreement can be reached.

Using focus groups also has several disadvantages:
- It can be difficult to gather people together and to create an environment convenient to the conversation;
- Controlling the group is difficult and bias is possible if there is a leader in the group;
- The moderator can introduce bias if he/she influences the discussion according to his/her expectations;
- Groups vary considerably and have their own characteristics, so it can be difficult to draw general conclusions from sample data collected in a particular context.

Experts in using focus groups offer some tips to ward off problems. For example, for the generalization of the results, it's important to conduct several focus groups until no more new information appears. This means that several focus groups must be conducted for only one customer category.

Semi-structured interviews

Having considered the focus group approach, we then considered semi-structured interviews. Having already used this approach before, we can say that the structure of an interview is a safeguard that prevents some disadvantages of the focus group approach. The discussion follows a detailed guide that it is designed to ensure that all issues are considered and that the discussion does not stray from the theme. The answers are also easier to compare than those gained through the use of focus groups.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, we used two different methods for preliminary environmental scanning.
- LibQUAL+, which is a satisfaction survey revealing the major trends of the users' opinion;

- The ALA and ACRL toolkit, which allowed us to gain insight into staff perceptions of the users and their needs.

We then considered whether the technique of using focus groups or semi structured interviews was the most appropriate for validating data obtained at that step.

Even though focus groups seem to be common in libraries, the procedure is rarely detailed, so we don't have references to rely on.

Moreover, for us, the use of focus groups does not seem appropriate to our goal and our deadlines.

- We do not need to reach agreement between participants;
- This approach takes time both in the preparation but also in the collection and analysis of data;
- In order to use this approach, we would need to be specially trained or seek the collaboration of an expert.

So, instead of focus groups, we decided to use semi-structured interviews conducted either face to face or in groups. The main reason was that we have already used this approach: we are aware of the strategies involved and of the biases to avoid.

We are eagerly awaiting this meeting between us and our users.

The next step will involve writing a strategic plan and launching a promotion campaign for our targeted audience and topics.

We hope that we will have the opportunity to talk about what happens next in our project at a forthcoming conference.

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