

## **“The Consumer Generation and How it is Changing the Library and Information Profession”**

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Within the past few years there have been many changes within the library and information profession mostly around the areas of technological development. However, as well as technological changes there have been changes within the users and those in the Library and Information Profession themselves. These changes, I believe are due to the fact that we are all part of the consumer generation.

The consumer generation is one that the library users and staff are both part of; everybody is a consumer and has had experiences which reflect that, either as part of their work in one of today's many service industries, or as a customer. The 21<sup>st</sup> century has become known for its' high level of consumerism, as well as the disadvantages of this, which we are all well aware of, for New Library and Information Professionals there are benefits that that being part of this consumer generation can bring.

Through my own experiences of working in an academic library I am going to look at the benefits of being part of the consumer generation and explore how this has changed the way we, in the Library and Information Profession, view ourselves as well as the library users.

The idea of a consumer society is not a new one, it can be traced back to the industrial revolution when large scale productivity meant that more and more consumer goods were made available to ordinary people. Today the Oxford English Dictionary definition of a consumer society is one in which “the buying and selling of consumer goods and services is the predominant social and economic activity” (2009).

This is a very apt description of the world that we live in today. In the past two decades or so the idea of a consumer society has become more predominant and everybody who is part of this society has become part of the consumer generation.

Unlike other ‘generations’ such as generation X, Y or the Google Generation, the consumer generation does not have any fixed age range or belong to a particular demographic. This is why it has such a far reaching impact on all areas of society and influences many different professions.

In 2004 the Guardian quoted Tony Blair as saying that “the service will be driven not by the government or by the management but by the user”. This proposition was directed at public service reform but as we will see by the examples given later in some cases the library user is directing the ways in which the library functions.

The consumer generation is one that knows what it wants, how to get it, as well as being aware of the right to have an effective and efficient service delivered to them as quickly as possible. Clarke et al (2007, p.4) puts forward that in “the context of consumer cultures [what they call] the hybrid figure of the citizen-consumer begins to appear and that market based experiences, expectations and practices and relationships enter the public realm”. It is in this respect that the consumer generation is changing the library and information profession, both from the users perspective and our own. Users are, quite

rightly, becoming more vocal about their needs and expectations and although I believe we, as a profession have always been willing to help the users as much as possible, and making the users the top priority this is more and more becoming the primary aim of a library service.

It has been noted that although the library has a customer service department its users are still referred to as such, and not customers. This shows the dichotomy that is in place, not only within my own institution but within the Library and Information Profession as a whole. The term customers comes from the economic society, but the many areas covered by the “library and information” umbrella, are public services, not private businesses and as such do not sit comfortably within the realm of the wider marketplace. Clarke et al (2007, p. 2) explains that “consumers are located in an economic relationships. They are engaged in economic transactions...exchanging money for...goods and services”. This type of transaction is not as direct, or as obvious in public services.

In an academic environment the students pay fees towards their education which includes the use of the library and its resources and the extra services that it provides. However the library is also open to all members of the university who are not paying any form of fees. Neither of these constitute a form of economic exchange, as defined by Clarke, however an exchange of information is happening and it is this that turns the users into customers and consumers.

From the perspective of working in an academic library I have noticed changes happen in relation to everybody now being part of the consumer generation. Many of them have been small, subtle changes, but changes all the same.

When I first began working in the Library and Information Profession the part of the library it was in the area of Lending Services. This title focuses on the primary function of lending library material and its associated tasks such as paying fines and picking up requested books. However it was not suggestive of the other work that went on when staff were not ‘manning’ the issue desk, such as disability services, invoicing those with large fines or working with Distance Learners. Lending services became customer services in 2007 which in itself conjures up images of a variety of duties not solely dedicated to the function of lending stock. As well as being a term that more and more people recognise and know what to expect from it also puts the emphasis on the user rather than the physical content on the library. This in itself is a clear sign of the change that the consumer generation has had. The focus has moved from the stock to the users.

In an academic library many of the users may not have used a library to the extent that they will do during their few years of studying. To have a clear sign that has an easily recognisable function can only be an advantage.

Along with the change of name the library also developed a set of standards and expectations of library staff and users. The benefits of this is that both the library staff and users know what to expect from each other and is the first step to building a relationship between the two groups of people. Having high expectations of any service is part of being in the consumer generation and is one that I believe is now a natural expectation. We, as library and information professionals have high expectations of our users and they of us. These expectations bring benefits such as the aim to deliver the best

possible service to the users and being more proactive and willing to make changes to do so, as well as the users being willing to voice their opinion on matters that are important to them that may have not been recognised as such.

The users also have high expectations, especially today with the plethora of information available on the internet and the ease of studying outside of the library environment. Recently the library at York has provided a new 'comfy' seating area of the ground floor of the library that enables people to eat, drink, and gives space for 'loud' group study. This space also included two vending machines. This benefit to the users came as a response to the national student survey and many individual requests from users that a space be made available for them to use. The benefits to the users have been immediate and very positive, and the library now feels like a more welcoming, busy building. A couple of years ago an idea such as this may have been turned down but due to the volume of requests and the obvious importance that the users placed on having such a space the library responded positively.

This also has been very significant as it is a large visual sign to the users that the library is listening to its users and responding to their needs, both of which are skills that are needed within the library and information profession. And as New Professionals we are entering the profession with a new set of values and ideas that enable what could be seen as controversial ideas to be seen less so and the change easier to make.

It is not only the library itself that the users are happy to voice their opinion over, but other users as well. In the past couple of years there have been two increases in the charges of fines, after several years of no increases at all. This is due to the library users asking for fines for late items to be increased and increased again when the first increase wasn't a deterrent enough - even if this meant that there was the possibility of themselves being charged more, for example it is now £1 per hour for items that are in high demand such as key texts and audio visual material. Not only do the users have high expectations of the library and its staff but of each other as well.

The consumer generation has not only affected the way the users see the Library and Information Profession but it has changed the way we see ourselves. Job advertisements, especially for those advertising vacancies in which staff have direct contact with the users, locate customer service experience as an 'essential factor' as well as having a commitment to user focused, high quality service. Libraries are also described as being customer orientated.

This opens up the job market even more, in what is already a highly competitive environment. Compared to the essential factors linked with customer service it is only desirable that a graduate qualification is required. During the research for this paper I have found out that the university receives over 100 applications for posts within the library. For some of the jobs that I was successful in being appointed to, I believe it was my previous experience in working directly with customers and the wide variety of transferable skills that I had gained in this time that helped me gain an interview, especially since I had little or no experience in a library or information environment at all. This is not to say that New Professionals are a dying breed, clearly we are not. We have to recognise that we constantly need to improve ourselves and be aware that it is not just

other Library and Information Professionals that we are competing against when looking for a job, especially in the current climate.

As mentioned earlier Library and Information Professionals are in the business of exchanging information, passing it from the publishers to the users. Firstly however, the information needs to be bought and this means getting directly involved with the marketplace. This is where the 'library' becomes a customer in its own right. Working as a Serials and E-Resources Assistant for the past few months has given me a different perspective on how an academic library functions and how much monetary value is placed on information. Historically journal prices have increased between 8 - 10 percent, much higher than the rate of inflation and it is journals that have an effect on RAE scores. Authors typically want their research to be published in the most popular and important journals which means that the more importance that it placed on the higher the price will be. As these are seen as essential to the promotion of a University and its' departments the price will be willing paid. Although price increases are very common, even if they are quite large compared to other increases, many publishers are very customer focused and many have library advisory boards which do include library staff.

Many libraries are part of consortia's as we have learnt from being part of the consumer society; it is best to buy in bulk and it can be best to be part of a group that can vocalise it's needs together rather than being a sole voice trying to get attention.

As well as being able to develop and maintain good relationships with their customers, the users, Library and Information Professionals also have to develop and maintain good relationships with the companies that they are customers for. Being able to succinctly voice the opinion of your colleagues or that of the position you are representing as well as concurrently being able to respond to the needs of the users is an important factor in working in the profession. Being part of the consumer generation where it has become natural to seek the best product for the best price and to do this with the necessary information is consequently a benefit for Library and Information Professionals.

Having library and information professionals that are part of the consumer generation that want value for money as well as having standards in place that enable them to make sound financial decisions when it comes to buying information is essential. Such standards include those used for online information such as COUNTER.

COUNTER (2009) states that "Librarians want to understand better how the information they buy from a variety of sources is being used; publishers want to know how the information products they disseminate are being accessed". This need for information on the information itself that has been bought is essential to working out the relative costs of online information and enables stronger decision when the time comes to assess online resources.

Finally, I am going to touch upon marketing. The major part of being within a consumer society is the marketing of ideas and products. The benefit of being part of the consumer generation that responds to marketing is that we all know what we like and don't like and what is or is not appropriate for the profession. Westwood (2009) states that when it comes to marketing it is best to "play to our strengths", rather than try to emulate the competitors. However to do this we need to be aware of our strengths and be able to

market the role of Library and Information Professionals, as well as other library staff, within the all areas of the profession, not just academic libraries, as well as the content and information that we provide. The users, this includes academics, their departments as well as students need to know that we are no longer the gatekeepers of Information but gateways to it. As new professionals we are aware of what we can do and to the extent that we can do it but we need to sell ourselves more so that our users can gain the best from our knowledge and resources. The users themselves are also part of the consumer generation and so being 'marketed' at is a daily occurrence for them, libraries are starting to do so by introducing branded items such as stationary and the almost clichéd cotton bag but that could be just the beginning of what could be a huge change in the way that the Library and Information Profession thinks about itself. It may not be necessary, or even right, for all libraries to suddenly have their own Facebook or have a blog, users need some time away from the library. However, more subtle ideas such as branding online content that the library has bought is one way to acknowledge that the information that the users have found has in fact be procured on their behalf and are using it because they are members of a particular organisation.

In conclusion, being part of the consumer generation is something that both the Library and Information Profession and the users that we serve have in common. By allowing users to become active participants in the service rather than bystanders we can make changes and improvements that are needed and asked for. By marketing ourselves and the roles we play the users have a better understanding of what we provide and how we do so. By becoming more vocal as a profession when buying products we can ensure that the institutions that we work for have the most up to date information at what is hopefully a fair price.

Although , as with any aspect of the consumer society there is always going to be something new to aspire to, a new product that people 'must have' or a service that you have to start because 'everybody else has one'. As Library and Information Professionals we are trained to provide information to our users in the best surroundings possible and as quickly as possible. However, as part of the consumer generation we are also aware that long term commitments are also needed to keep the service running at its best and most efficient and as fashions change it is not always best to run with the crowd.

### References

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