

Investigating library usage in the 21st century: A qualitative approach

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Abstract

This paper deals with library marketing in a public library setting in France. Although a large number of studies have been published in library sciences with respect to library usage and library services satisfaction, many marketing issues still remain unanswered. In an age of digitalization and large-scale computer ownership, libraries are faced with a double challenge of attracting and keeping its users while reinventing its missions. An exploratory study was conducted in two public libraries in France where 60 individuals have been observed. Confronting the results of these observations with library staff, we identified specific issues from merchandising and store design which we offer as future research avenues.

Key words: Library marketing, library usage, unobtrusive observation

Introduction and Objectives

This paper addresses the issue of user behaviour in a library setting, with a focus on the French public libraries. Libraries are part of the cultural infrastructure of a nation and their usage is accounted for as cultural participation. Public libraries have been described by Margaret Hodge, Minister for Culture of the United Kingdom in 2010 as “a democratic entitlement for every individual, for every community and for the whole nation” (Department for Culture, Media and Sport, 2010, p.2).

The major technological changes which we have witnessed in the past twenty years have had a profound impact on the role of libraries as well as on the interaction between librarians and users. Catalogues have been digitalized, research for documents and references are made through internet, computers are made available in libraries for public use, books start to be digitalized, etc. As a consequence, library usage has undergone a serious decline in most industrialized countries. Nevertheless, going to a library remains a very important cultural activity: the 2008 national survey in France on cultural practices indicates that 28% of respondents (aged 15 and over) have gone at least once (compared to 30% in 1997). Not surprisingly, the age groups 15-19 and 20-24 are the most active, with 51% and 47% respectively (Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication, 2012).

These figures reveal a number of trends when considered over the long term: a) there has been a steady increase in library usage from 1973 to 1997, mainly due to the sharp increase in usage for the 15-18 year age group. After this peak in 1997, library usage drops; b) whereas registrations decrease, there are indications that library usage has increased over the past years. In other words, people go to the library for reasons other than taking out documents; c) cities with less than 50 000 inhabitants have a significantly higher registration figure compared to the national average, confirming their crucial role in citizens' lives (Donnat, 2009, p. 170-178).

It is in this mutating context that library managers have used marketing concepts as a way to find new opportunities of growth and/or ways of building loyalty among their users (Muet & Salaün, 2001; Jacques, 2005; Parker, Kaufman-Scarborough & Parker, 2007). Libraries now serve different purposes: in addition to books, there is also audio and audiovisual material that is referenced; users can also enjoy conferences, public readings, exhibits, children's activities or, in some cases, have a snack and a coffee. Libraries in Finland and the Scandinavian countries are particularly creative in this respect, as discussed in Ratzek (2011). More recent services include assistance with government-related procedures.

The objectives of this paper are firstly, to give a general overview of previous research in the area of library usage and secondly, to present results of an unobtrusive observation of library usage. These results confronted with library managers' opinions will reveal new opportunities for research and managerial implications.

Literature Review

While only a handful of studies have been identified in the marketing literature, much has been published in terms of research on users in both public and university libraries in the field of library sciences (see e.g. Koontz, Gupta, & Webber, 2006; Jose & Bhat, 2007), in addition to the numerous public policy documents available on the web. Our literature review is organized in two major sections: the first section presents results of usage and attitudes of library patrons, while the second section focuses on the various methodologies used. Although the focus of this paper is on public libraries, we have also considered studies conducted in academic libraries. We would like to emphasize that this literature review is far from exhaustive, due to the large number of documents available and the limited space.

Usage and Attitudes

Most libraries, both public and academic, regularly perform surveys to identify the frequency of patronage as well as the nature of the library's usage. As indicated in the introduction, going to a library is a very common activity in most industrialized countries, performed by approximately one citizen in four during the course of a year. The purpose of going to a library, though, is not always directly related to reading or lending a book. In her observation of users, Ranjard (2009, p.47) distinguished five motivations: occupying a specific space (for reading or for studying); finding references; finding answers; discover a topic; validate a fact or a figure. Kyrillidou (2002) reflects on the value of a library in a digital age, where "technological innovations are making possible the decoupling of information content from

the container” (p.43). Libraries must now demonstrate the value they provide to their users. But she also adds that libraries constitute a social institution, in part through the network they have developed and which also adds value.

The large-scale survey conducted in France and reported by Maresca (2007, p.165) goes further than describing the usages by performing a principal component analysis on perceptions of the library (in this case, public libraries). Three users segments were identified, using two orthogonal dimensions, i.e. attractiveness and social utility. Not surprisingly, the first segment made up of heavy users perceives the library as both attractive and useful. On the other hand, light users or former users believe that the library is not attractive because of its austerity and lack of renewal. Another segment, made up of non users, sees no use for library services.

Users’ satisfaction is also a major concern for libraries. At the initiative of researchers and librarians at the Texas A&M University, the well-known SERVQUAL scale developed by Parasuraman, Zeithaml & Berry (1988) has been adapted to libraries under the name of LibQUAL+. Although still strongly identified with Texas A & M University, the project is now self-sufficient and a service of the Association of Research Libraries. Its website at www.libqual.org lists the annual results of the surveys, 2012 being the latest. The 2012 report mentions that close to 1 500 surveys have been performed in more than 20 countries, in as many different languages (LibQUAL+, 2012). It is used as a tool to improve library services and thus perceived quality, but at the same time libraries have investigated determinants of loyalty, in addition to satisfaction (Martensen & Gronholdt, 2003). The researchers were able to indicate that satisfaction strongly depends on the collections and electronic resources, while loyalty seems to be more dependent on the human skills of librarians. There is thus a difference between a **material** and an **emotional** satisfaction.

Methodologies used

The vast majority of studies in a library setting use a typical quantitative approach: developing a questionnaire – or using an existing one – administering it to a large, representative sample of library users (or non users) and analysing the ensuing results with quantitative methods.

In addition to his large-scale survey of over 5 000 French individuals, Maresca (2007) also conducted 50 individual face-to-face interviews with current and past library users. The results of these interviews were used to illustrate some of the observed behaviours in the survey.

Focus groups have also been used with users, in this case in an academic library, with the objective of understanding some of the weak points of the institution based on the LibQUAL+ results (Ho & Crowley, 2003). The same methodology has been used to understand satisfaction with the web page of a library (Crowley et al., 2002) or e-reader usage (Aaltonen et al., 2011).

Observations in library settings have been performed by Ranjard (2009): uneasy with some of the (exclusively) quantitative results, she decided to resort to unobtrusive observations in various public libraries. Observations coupled with in-depth interviews have allowed her to uncover motivations and barriers to use of library services.

As mentioned at the outset, many facets of consumer behaviour have been investigated in a library setting, nevertheless, what researchers in library sciences have not (yet) tackled is the issue of **how library patrons use the space available**, whether specific patterns exist in terms of paths, walking, stopping, etc.; whether the nature of the displays have an impact on attention, interest or readership. In short, we ask ourselves questions dealing very closely to store design and visual merchandising.

Method

Although both quantitative and qualitative methods have been used in the past, they all rely on self-declaration of usage. Also, casual observation of people's movements in a library has revealed the appropriateness of designing a non obtrusive observation methodology.

The objective of observation is to monitor behavioural and non-behavioural activities and conditions, such as spatial analysis, nonverbal analysis, record analysis, etc. (see e.g. Cooper & Schindler, 2001, p. 371). One of its main advantages is to collect original data at the time they occur, thereby eliminating the risk that individuals forget tasks they engaged in or the environment they were submitted to when they performed the activity.

The purpose of the observation was to follow individuals around the library and identify the path they followed and the types of activities they engaged in during their visit. Two public libraries were selected for observation: the main city library in Lyon, Bibliothèque municipale de la Part-Dieu and the neighbourhood library in Saint-Etienne, Bibliothèque municipale La Tarentaise. An observation grid was elaborated which contained the various locations of the library, such as entrance hall, return desk, reference desk, computers, etc. A total of 18 locations were considered. The observation has been performed in four different places in the Lyon library, i.e. the main entrance hall and three reading rooms. Ten individuals were observed in each of these locations, for a total of 40 individuals in Lyon. In the Saint-Etienne library only the main entrance area has been observed, but 20 people were observed, yielding a grand total of 60 individuals.

Findings

Observing the incoming flow

The access to the Lyon Part-Dieu library takes place through automatic glass doors followed by an electronic gate. People then enter a large open space where various desks are located: information, subscription, loan, return, as well as access to two reading rooms on the ground floor, a café, an exhibition area, stairs going up and finally, stairs going down to the youth section.

Observation took place on a Saturday afternoon in June. This is typically the period when many high school students come and prepare for their final exams at the library. Ten people coming in the building were observed with respect to the first place they were going to. Seven individuals moved directly to one of the reading rooms, either on the main floor, on the upper floors or in the basement. Three other people went to the return desk.

Saturday afternoons is also typically a time to bring children to the library. Most children observed that afternoon were accompanied by their dads. Mothers tend to come with their children on Wednesdays or with older children (pre-teens).

The observation of the incoming flow at the Tarentaize library of Saint-Etienne was performed on a Wednesday afternoon in June. The size and the layout of this library is completely different, as it mainly consists of one large area accessible through glass doors and an electronic gate. Separate rooms are located on the outskirts of the main area, one such room devoted to children and another to periodicals. The information desk – which serves as a reference desk – is located in the middle of the general area. The upper level of the library contains the offices of the staff as well as an exhibition area. It is accessible by stairs and given the cathedral ceiling of the building, it is entirely visible from the ground floor.

Of the twenty people that were observed, eight began their visit by returning books at the counter, located right at the entrance of the library, even before the electronic gate. **Four individuals went to the “return of the day” shelf, located on the right hand side after entering the library.** Three went immediately to the shelves located in the main area, three more to the periodicals room and the last person went to the computer.

When looking at who browses in the various departments, one clearly sees **that women are in the novels/literature section, while younger individuals tend to browse the DVD section.**

Observing in the reading rooms (Lyon)

As indicated above, observations were also taken in three reading rooms at the Lyon Part-Dieu library. These rooms are clearly separated from the common areas (entrance hall, stairs and landing) with doors and provide a quiet environment for reading or studying.

The first room in which 10 individuals were observed is the Arts and Leisure room. It is over 500 m² large, contains books and magazines concerning all disciplines of the arts (visual arts, photography, architecture, theatre), travel, sports as well as an interesting collection of motion pictures and TV programmes in DVD format. Just like the books, the DVDs are presented in alphabetical order of the movie director. The room also has a number of work stations, mainly tables along the window looking outwards. In the centre of the room, there are televisions to view the DVDs, computer stations and a number of comfortable seats. Finally, a round table located at the entrance of the room exhibits a display of either newly acquired documents or a thematic display, in line with a major cultural event in Lyon, for instance.

In this room, seven people immediately went to the shelves, three of them to the travel guide books. One lady took a book on Vietnam and started reading it, at first rather lightly, but then

quite thoroughly and fully concentrated. Next to her, stood a man, in his thirties, trying to decide which book on New York is most useful. Another user entered, went straight to the magazine shelf, picked up the magazine he wanted, went to one of the comfortable chairs and started reading it. One person entered and stopped at the display at the entrance, **before going to the DVD section**. Finally, one person entered and went straight to a work table.

Behaviour at the DVD section is quite interesting. It is one department where the tacit mutual understanding between users no longer seems to hold true. Rather than respecting each other's space, including the more or less obvious interest for a document, the DVD section is one where individual – or individualistic – behaviours are at play. For instance, if one looks at what is happening in front of letter “S” (for Spielberg?), it is almost as frantic as in front of a 50%-off sale in a department store. Some seem to be looking for the movie everyone talked about when it was released 6 months ago and they are not willing to share their precious space with others. “After all, nobody is standing in front of letter “G”, why don't they go and look there?”, they seem to be saying.

The second room where 10 people were observed is located on the second level of the library and contains documents on social sciences and humanities, law, education and professional orientation. It is approximately 600 m² a large chunk of it being taken by work tables, suitable for four people. Still, there are many books on the shelves as well as magazines. The paths taken by users in this room are more varied than in the first one. Three people went straight to one of the work tables, settled and started working. Two people looked at the display of new acquisitions; after that, one of them went to the shelf to find a book, while the other one went to one of the work tables. Two other people entering went to the magazine shelves, before going to one of the tables to work. One person came in and went to the computer before going to look for the reference in one of the shelves. The last person went to the reference desk at the entrance to ask for information and then went to the look for the book on the shelf.

Finally, the third room where observations were taken is the languages and literature room. It is also 600 m² large, contains fiction from French authors, foreign authors translated into French as well as foreign literature in its original language. In addition, there is a section devoted to language learning and dictionaries. The room is located on the ground level of the building and at its entrance is a large display of both new acquisitions and the librarians' selection, each identified with the name of the librarian and one handwritten sentence of comment. This is also a room where comfortable seats and couches have been installed. Many readers are actually sitting and reading their book, either because they don't have a reader's card and cannot take the book out or because they enjoy the setting of the library.

Again, here paths are relatively diverse: two people browsed **the novelty section**, before going into the shelves; two people went directly to the shelves; two people went to a table to work; one person went to the computer to find a reference; one person went to the reference desk and then to the shelves; one person went to the reference desk before going to the computer to find a reference; one person went and sat down on one of the couches.

Discussion

The results of these observations have been submitted to and discussed with library staff. On a general level, their comments referred to the methodology used, which they found both innovative and useful. Because the method used was more systematic, librarians felt comforted in some of the decisions they made. For instance, the “return of the day” shelf – which nearly every library keeps – plays a very important role in selecting a document. According to François Marin, head of the Tarentaise library in Saint-Etienne, the documents on this shelf seem to enjoy an added value from library users. They consider these documents as a type of personal recommendation and also a guarantee of their quality. In a sense, if other people have read these books (or seen these movies), it is a recommendation in itself. Another big advantage of these shelves is the small number of items compared to the documents in the shelves. It is therefore easier to browse through them, it takes less time and it is less intimidating. Finally, the Dewey classification used in the shelves becomes irrelevant on these shelves, as the number of documents is generally too small for it to make a difference.

The display with novelties or specially arranged documents is an attraction to library users. Individuals are generally attracted by new items.

Librarians also reacted to how people browse through the shelves. Some of them indicated having experimented with where to place certain books on these shelves and they were surprised to see the effect it had on readership. Indeed, books placed at eye level were more generally looked at and taken out, while books on the bottom shelves were rarely considered.

While the Dewey classification for books is usually well understood by users, it is less so with DVDs which – as mentioned above – are classified according to the name of the movie director. As Poissenot (2009) indicates, users choose a DVD based on the genre of the movie, eventually its title, but only very rarely according to the name of its director.

Recommendations and Further Research

A this stage of our exploratory study, we can state a number of conclusions. We should firstly note that **merchandising of the location should be a key element in how we think about library marketing in terms of users’ expectations**. The mere fact, for instance that books placed at eye level or that the “novelty” and “return of the day” shelves are more attractive to users, should constitute a strong signal with respect to current usage procedures.

Indeed, in addition to the introduction of digital technologies in libraries, there are still many other innovative techniques which could be implemented in order to attract and seduce visitors who are less and less loyal. Given the instantaneity and ease of use of digital tools, it is important to encourage users to make the effort and return to the book as an object. Similarly to bookstores, libraries should rethink the lay-out and the presentation of their documents as well as consider the library user as a consumer. The consumer must be seduced and should be given a pleasant experience bordering on a sensorial one. This is where a number of recommendations can be given.

Firstly, libraries should become a **living space, appropriate for recreational activities and most importantly, where there is a friendly atmosphere. Books should be at the heart of the collection, but complementary to a more global system, which is both aesthetic and functional.** The fact that some libraries, such as Part-Dieu or La Tarentaise have already implemented a café and an exhibition space give strong support to this idea.

In this respect, **opening up spaces and improving readability of the documents exposed** is an important aspect. One should indeed take a step away from the purely utilitarian view of the traditional library to allow readers (re)discover the pleasure of reading books.

Responding to the specific needs of some groups of users, thinking along those lines can lead to creating spaces where patrons can stroll and linger at their leisure. Another idea is to organize little areas where documents are presented according to the target audience or specific markets.

With this in mind, more thought must be given to how documents, and books in particular, should be **presented on the shelves**, indeed taking cues from the retail sector. To catch people's attention and pique their curiosity, books should actually be presented within easy reach, similar to concept stores, which includes **sophisticated and attractive display furniture**. Also, as much as possible, the cover page should be facing the customer.

Secondly, libraries can also devote attention to the **architectural aspects of their space**, rethinking shapes and colours. Walls, floors, landings, and stairs can and should indeed become markers for the evolution of the visitor in the library building. Taking into consideration how people move around the various displays and using these itineraries in designing specific shapes and colours can add life to a place usually considered to be monotonous.

While some libraries (e.g. the ones in which we made the observations) have already taken steps in this direction, with more attention devoted to design and installing comfortable chairs and couches, very few actually take a **comprehensive experiential vision of their spaces** into consideration. A large number of constraints still exist: classification norms of books and other documents; height of the bookshelves; space occupied by computer stations; optimising shelf spaces, etc. not to mention a general attitude from librarians which can be a barrier to new initiatives (Parker, Kaufman-Scarborough, Parker, 2007).

This is why we feel the need to underline this specific aspect of merchandising, usually defined as: “the part of marketing including retail tools which allow displaying products and services to the potential buyer in the best material and psychological conditions.” (Dioux, 2003).

In addition to these concepts, we believe that the principles indicated by Addis (2005) with respect to **edutainment** are also relevant. This neologism is a contraction of “education” and “entertainment”; more specifically, it refers to how consumers engage in sophisticated cultural experiences through new technologies (providing the entertainment part) leading to new ways of perceiving and sensing cultural productions. There is no doubt that the

digitalization of books as well as the popularization of electronic tablets such as the iPad and e-readers, such as the Kindle, will certainly have a major impact on public reading.

This is not to say that we recommend applying these concepts blindly. Obviously, a library is not a store, the core business of which is first and foremost to give individuals access to a wide range of editorial content, thereby fostering a cultural mission. There are also major differences between the different types of libraries: the goals and the audiences targeted by public libraries are different from academic or university libraries.

Given the results of this initial exploratory study, we wish to pursue our investigation by interviewing library users to better understand their perceptions and attitudes on these subjects. Additional research avenues deal with the mediation processes put in place. Indeed, if we think of the library as a true service area, additional studies must be implemented. Similarly to commercial spaces, libraries are confronted with the issue of promoting their location as well as their physical and digital products, in an ever-changing environment. Library merchandising can also be considered from the point of view of the assortment, i.e. determining and managing the products at the point of service as well as designing the communication strategy, which includes greeting and information counters, key for this type of environment.

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