CLIENT RELATIONSHIP MARKETING IN THE PROVISION OF ANIMAL HEALTH INFORMATION: IMPLICATIONS FOR LIBRARIANS

Zanele C. Hadebe

Veterinary Science Library, University of Zimbabwe, P O Box MP 45, Mount Pleasant, Harare, Zimbabwe

E-mail: zanelec@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT: The marketing mix management has dominated market thought and research since it was introduced 40 years ago. Recently, the emphasis has moved from traditional marketing to a more relationship/customer-oriented approach. With the advent of technological developments offering easy availability and instant access to information, customers' expectations for information have been raised to an enormous extent, both in terms of delivery as well as in the quality of information services and products. It is incumbent upon us, therefore, as librarians to build, develop and maintain relationships with our customers for long-term survival and growth in this competitive environment. These changes have also put under the spotlight the entire concept of what a library is and what it does. For us operating in the framework of an academic setting, libraries will always be necessary as a resource for gaining knowledge for students, faculty and staff. How well we maintain this level of necessity is in our hands. Our value will be judged by the effectiveness and quality of our service.

Introduction

Literature abounds with the importance of marketing in our organizations. Several research papers have been presented on the benefits of marketing our services in order to stay relevant in the respective communities we serve. However, over the past two decades, it has been argued that business, whether for profit or non-profit making will have to change their approach to marketing. New approaches have emerged in market research. Marketing is no longer simply about developing, selling and delivering products. It has progressively become more concerned with the development and maintenance of relationships with the clients (Buttle, 1996).

One approach that has entered the marketing literature is relationship building and management or what has been labelled relationship marketing (Groonroos, 1994). This type of marketing is very different from the more traditional one based on transactions affecting the 4 Ps: product, price, place and promotion. The traditional marketing mix and its 4P model has been criticized as "a strait jacket fostering toolbox thinking rather than an awareness that marketing is a multi-faceted social progress" (Groonroos, 1994).

It has also been criticised for constituting a production-oriented definition of marketing and not a customer oriented one. This approach is perceived as clinical, which makes the seller/provider of a service the active part and the client passive. As a result, no attempt is made in personalizing the relationship. This, however, cannot be said of customer relationship marketing, which is a central part of relationship marketing and consists of relationships with current and potential clients of an organisation. In this type of relationship, both client and the service provider can be active and should be seen as equal partners in a win-win situation.

The philosophy or foundation of relationship marketing is the belief that strengthening ties with existing clients
heightens customer satisfaction
heightens our abilities to serve clients (Claycomb, 2001)

So it can be seen from this that the customer market is increasingly gaining greater importance and thus there is the need to focus on building or fostering relationships
(Lindgren, 2005). Client relationship marketing also encourages organizations to adopt a longer-term perspective. It relies on issues of trust, responsibility and commitment (Manso, 2000). We should recognize that in investing in customer relationships, we can create a community for and with whom the Library can develop and market communication strategies. As information workers, we have long recognized that. In our field of work, the commitment to customer service is well established. Nevertheless, some of the ideas from relationship marketing offer new perspectives.

Importance of building relationships with our clients

The need to build or enhance relationships with our clients has been necessitated by the following issues:

Global competitiveness

Traditionally, libraries have been centers providing the organization and accessibility to written information. Now, with information centers sprouting up everywhere, the Library is facing competition from these competitors. Institutional libraries are no longer society's exclusive retailers, they are but one of a set of players on a rapidly expanding

information stage. So, for this reason, it is vital that the Library commits itself to principles of customer service. Failure to do this will result in the Library being irrelevant for the clients that they are purporting to serve.

Changing consumer behaviour
Because of the "information explosion" brought about by the introduction of ICT (Information Communication Technology), today's information client is different from the patron of just a few years ago. Easy availability and instant access to a variety of ICT products and services have raised their expectations for information to an enormous extent, both in terms of delivery as well as in the quality of services. Traditional products and services offered by the Library are being questioned. Clients do not want to spend long periods of time in the reference section looking for information. They want information supplied to them on a continuous and consistent basis.

The challenge is how do we provide quick access to information without compromising service quality while keeping total customer focus at the same time. The answer I believe lies in committing to the principles of customer service. Most of us still have a transactional approach in delivering the service. We have not paid much attention to the qualitative services offered to our clients on a continual basis to form a viable relationship with them. Such relationships depend on the clients' information needs and on libraries in fulfilling those needs. It is ultimately the quality of service that helps in establishing the relationship. In libraries, changing needs of our clients demand a constant review of the processes that lead to continuous improvement of the library's relationship with its clients (Singh, 2003).

How do we build relationships with our clients?
A relationship by definition is a two-way street. If we are to build relationships with our clients we need to have the following pieces of information
- who are they?
- what are their characteristics?
- how much do they know about what the Library has to offer?
- what triggers their decisions to use the Library?
- how do they use the Library?
- what services do they want now?
- what services will they want in future?

In the context of library and information services, the relationship marketing approach suggests that:

- libraries are required to go beyond the needs, wants and demands of their clients and should try to fulfil them by anticipating them as far as possible. In other words, we should "under promise but over deliver."

- there should be continuous and well organized efforts in identifying and reaching out to target groups.
- information products or services should be customer driven.

In other words, we should take responsibility for the satisfaction of our clients in their quest for information. This is the first and most important move towards a customer-driven relationship marketing approach. (St. Clair, 1997)

Communication
Communication, whether formal or informal, should be consistent. Communication is a fundamental aspect of relationship development. It is a prerequisite for building relations with our users. As information providers, we should avoid lengthy gaps in contact. By not communicating, we are sending out distinct messages, which could be misinterpreted by our clients. The tendency is to await the publication of a library monthly newsletter, to announce any latest developments/services in the library. We should communicate to our clients as and when these developments are introduced. It doesn't matter how "trivial " we think these might be. An easy flow of communication is an important characteristic of a strong relationship.

Communication is enhanced when it is interactive. We should try and engage our clients in dialogue. It should shift from being a monologue to a dialogue. In a relationship marketing context, attempts should be made to create a two-way communication process. Although not all communications are direct communications, all communication efforts should lead to a response of some sort that maintains and enhances the relationship. We should seek responses from our clients in the form of feedback from previous interactions, whether they need additional information about a particular product or they need assistance in using a database. While it is well and good to respond to a request from a client, it is an added bonus to get them to talk about their subjects of interest. In that way, there is interaction and the customer will feel that you have a genuine interest in them.

Interaction is also important in the building of relationships. Successful marketing requires a good enough solution for a client. In transaction marketing, the solution is a product in the form of packaged goods or a core service. In relationship marketing, the solution is the relationship itself and how it functions and satisfies the needs of the client (Groonroos, 2004). Customers' perceptions of relationships are holistic and cumulative. Delivering a service in a timely and trustworthy manner is part of the relationship building process, but other elements might jeopardize the service if they are not considered. These include delayed deliveries, late calls, badly handled complaints, lack of information,

or unfriendly personnel and these may destroy an otherwise good service (Groonroos, 2004).

Improve the quality of service

What do we mean by quality of service?
Here we are referring to the consistency with which we meet the expectations of our clients. The delivery on promises is the essence of a mutually satisfying service relationship. Whatever services we offer are as important as how we deliver them. We need to ask ourselves the following questions in the improvement of the delivery of services:
• are we friendly/professional towards our clients?
• are we reliable?
• do we make efforts towards understanding their circumstances?
• do we display empathy?

Building relationships requires exceptional listening skills, combined with the willingness to unlearn "common knowledge". We should try not to second guess what the clients want, but listen to what they have to say for themselves.
• do we give prompt services?
• do we respond to queries and complaints in a responsible, courteous and timely manner?

Responsiveness and prompt service, speed, and accuracy have always been measures of quality service. Today's information customers not only expect immediate answers but also expect them to be in the format most useful to them.

Feed-back from our clients is also important in enhancing service. Clients define what quality is. In other words, service quality is what the customer says it is (Philip, 1999). The library can carry out surveys using customer satisfaction indexes on matters such as service, personnel, treatment, etc. From there, we can deduce matters that are not up to scratch and come up with an active plan for improving the library's weaknesses. One author (Nyer, 2000) even suggested that we should encourage our clients to complain, because in doing that, their satisfaction is increased.

So if we can be all these things and more, then our customers will trust us to deliver on what we promise to do. Trust is often described as the cornerstone of any healthy relationship. If we are reliable and the clients trust that we can deliver the information, this will have a positive influence on the client's willingness to maintain the relationship and further invest in strengthening the relationship.

Relationships characterized by trust are so highly valued that parties will desire to commit themselves to such relationships. Therefore, trust is an important element of a relationship building programme because it builds confidence, fosters co-operation

and gives the service provider a second chance when inevitable mishaps occur. We will not always be able to satisfy the information needs of our clients, but we have to see every problem as an opportunity to impress. Remember it is not often the size of the problem, but the speed of response that counts. Perceptions of service quality develop over time, not from a single encounter. Each of a series of contacts with the library reveals something about our abilities as information providers. I do not agree that clients only give you one chance. They will give you a second, but not a third. If you bend over backwards to put things right, you can actually seal the relationship. According to Claycomb (2001), it may not be possible to rebuild relationships when trust is broken.

Develop a service culture
This should not only be the responsibility of the front-line employees, who deal directly with the clients, but the responsibility of everyone in the library. Support must come from the top. The leader should state that there should be an appreciation of the client in all tasks performed in the library. The manager must create an environment "allowing employees to act locally and think globally". In other words, the client is the responsibility of everyone, from front line to the backroom employees, from book issue clerk to the chief librarian. The client doesn't belong exclusively to the front-line employees. The technical service personnel are involved, too, with customers as they get customers' queries indirectly via the front-line staff in respect to the acquisition, organization and dissemination of information. If there is delay in the processing of books, staff must be made aware of the impact this has on customer service. Unexpected delays for requests should be communicated to the clients. Paying attention to the small detail/finer points reflects a service is that is customer-focused.

Be innovative
Innovations can play an important role in establishing and building relationships with our clients. As librarians we have technology as an ace in our pack. With technology, communication becomes faster and it enables us to keep our fingers on our users' pulses and to respond to their changing needs. We can offer them personalized services, interest them in new databases, and advertise current awareness services or discussion groups that could be of interest to them. We can also advertise training sessions available for them e.g. how to access e-journals from the databases on our Library web page.

The above suggestions could be used to enhance our relationships with our clients. It is important that libraries concentrate on relationship building to remain relevant in the organization. Furthermore, we should invest in the long-term infrastructures to support a client-oriented approach, which entails the

need to improve the quality of our service and training our staff in handling clients. In this way we will enhance the clients' confidence and trust in our abilities to deliver what they want. I will conclude with a quotation from Levitt (1983), who used a marriage analogy in defining a relationship with our clients.

He "says" the product merely consummates the courtship; how good the marriage is depends on how well the relationship is managed by the service provider".

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