
NEGATIVE EXCHANGES BETWEEN STAFF AND PATRONS OF ACADEMIC LIBRARY : REFLECTIONS ON READER SERVICES AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GHANA CENTRAL LIBRARY (THE BALME LIBRARY)

Daniel Opaku

Head of Periodicals & Exchange, Balme Library, University of Ghana,
Balme Library, Legon-Accra, Ghana.
Email: dyopoku@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

Seeks to find out the sources of tension with regard to service provision that often results in negative exchanges between the library patron and staff. It also examines the methods and strategies that could be adopted for “service recovery” and handling of patron complaints. Adopted a survey research design using both questionnaire and interview techniques. A time-use study was also conducted during which the activities and services of the Reader Service Staff, and their interaction with the library patrons were repeatedly observed. Revealed that more than half 165(63%) of patrons have had a bad service experience in one form or another. Factors that trigger negative exchanges include absence of general service guidelines, delays in meeting patron requests, lack of positive attitude for exceptional customer service, as well as incivility, etiquette and decorum on the part of both patron and staff,

KEYWORDS: Negative Exchanges, Academic Library, Reader Services, Ghana.

Introduction

Established in 1948, the University of Ghana Central Library (The Balme Library) is the largest library on the university campus. With the large and varied collection of both print and electronic media, it occupies a vital position in the academic life of the university. These collections comprising both electronic and print resources provide essential background knowledge to the courses offered at the university (Alemna, 1994).

Reader Service at the Balme Library is one of the most vital and visible expression of the Library's purpose which is key to its primary role of supporting teaching, learning and research at the university. Reader Service is defined in this paper as personal assistance provided to library users and potential users of information. Reader service at the Balme Library takes a variety of forms including direct personal assistance directories or signs, exchange of information culled from a reference source, readers' advisory assistance, dissemination of information in anticipation of user needs or interests, and direct end-user access to information (Katz, 2002). Based on its clients known needs and interest, the library provides information even if it has not been explicitly requested. When the library is not able to provide a client with needed information, it refers the client's question to some other agency, an expert, or another library which can provide the needed information. It is the policy of the library to consider each individual information query to be of equal merit regardless of the age, gender or status of the inquirer. The library's intention is to accord equal attention and effort to each inquiry, although the time spent by staff on a question may vary in response to the perceived needs of the patron, the information resources (both staff and collections) available and the methods of receipt of the inquiry (Nwalo, 2003).

Though the library strives to provide the best possible service for all patrons at all times, given the volume and diversity of questions handled, problems do arise concerning the patron's satisfaction with service received, which sometimes result in negative exchanges between the staff (service provider) and the patron.

Patrons of the library are constantly judging the library first on how it handles the problem of service failure, then on its willingness to make sure similar problems do not happen in the future (Yusuf, 2011). The reader service staff, for example all frontline staff always bear the brunt of service failures. They always have the difficult task of dealing with difficult patrons of the library who hold them responsible even when the failures are completely out of their control (Ulwick & Betencourt, 2008). The purpose of the library is therefore defeated if patrons are not only dissatisfied with the services but also, engage in negative exchanges with the library staff particularly those at service points. The study therefore seeks to examine the sources of tension with regard to service delivery that often result in negative exchanges between the library staff and patron. The study also examines the methods and strategies often adopted by the library for "service recovery" and handling of user complaints.

Methodology

The study adopted a survey research design, using both questionnaire and interview techniques. Due to the small size of the sample frame, a census approach was used to survey all the 46 Reader Services staff of the library. A total of 46 questionnaire was administered, out of which 42 response were

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obtained, giving a response rate of 91%. Personal interview were also held with Reader Services sectional heads.

Critical Incident Technique (Bitner, 1990) was used where regular patrons of the library were randomly interviewed. They were asked to recall their positive and negative service experiences, and then elaborate on what made them effective or ineffective. In all, 260 patrons (users) made up of 185 undergraduates and 75 postgraduate regular users of the library easily availed themselves to be interviewed. A time-use study was also conducted during which the activities and services of the reader service staff, and their interaction with library patrons were repeatedly observed. Data was analysed using simple percentages and frequency counts.

The study was carried out during the first one month (25th January – 25th February, 2012) into the beginning of the second semester of the 2012/2013 academic year. This was when students had been issued with course reading lists and were “rushing” to the library to search for relevant literature and information.

Review of Literature

No library can provide service without making occasional error. Even if error-free service could be provided, human nature is such that some patrons would still complain. And patrons may go wrong, misinterpret and make mistakes too (Robinson, 1986). The major purpose of a complaint handling programme is not to discover whether the patron or the library is at fault, but rather to identify the cause of dissatisfaction and then to eliminate the cause. Many complaints about library services are based on unrealistic expectation, while unrealistic expectations may be caused by patron ignorance or by librarians who promise too much for a product or service (Robinson, 1986).

The essence of reader service work or any frontline service in the library is personal service. One of the major ways through which these duties or functions can be performed effectively is through interpersonal communication between the reader service librarian or the frontline staff and the user (Yusu, 2011). According to Katz (2002) staff at the Reader Services units in the library are the image makers for the library and the link between the library, library resources, and library users. Interpersonal communication is therefore one of the core competencies that all information professionals should possess.

Nwalo (2003) opines that one major step in the reader service process is the question clarification process. For reader services to be well delivered, library service staff must be able to interact at the level of their clientele and answer queries. They must build enough capacity to be able to sustain a high level of communication with clients. Low level of education manifests in diverse ways which include but not limited to lack of capacity to understand user needs and wrong feedback as a result of

inability to comprehend user requests (Nwalo, 2003).

According to Simmonds & Andaleeb (2001), several factors can influence users' satisfaction; these factors include responsiveness, competence and assurances, tangibles and resources. Sowole (1995) therefore implored librarians to make maximum efforts to ensure that their library users derived the best possible benefits from the services they render. Libraries need to re-examine the range and quality of services they provide and develop systems for consultation and cooperation with their customer needs and customer expectations to the highest degree. By providing quality services and satisfaction to users, academic and research libraries can distinguish their services through friendly, helpful and knowledgeable advice and the best technical resources available (Simmons & Andaleeb, 2001). They further opine that, because academic libraries users have varying needs and expectations, it is the responsibility of the library staff to know these need and expectations and strive to meet them.

In the view of Michel et al. (2008), fairness is typically the biggest concern of customers who have lodged a service complaint. Because a service failure implies unfair treatment of the customer, service recovery has to re-establish justice from the customer's perspective. According to Bitner et al. (1990) being at the frontline means that service employees are often the "face of the organisation" in the mind of customers. Thus, they are typically required to endure the complaints and frustrations of customers, in addition to other stressors often associated with service jobs, such as low pay, long and inconvenient working hours, low social status, and abusive supervision (Bitner et. al.,1990). The quality of the employee-customer interaction is therefore of vital importance to both customers and employees, as it provides customers with important clues about a company's service quality standards while also influencing employee's satisfaction with work (Groth & Grandey, 2012).

Zeelenberg and Pieters (2004) found that regret and disappointment are two common effective reactions to service failure and linked these emotions with behavioral responses such as complaining, negative word of mouth, and service switching. Another theoretical framework that helps explain why a customer feels negatively and engages in antisocial behaviors towards a service provider is that of justice perceptions (Groth & Grandey, 2012). A service failure may be perceived as a form of distributive justice (fairness of outcomes received), procedural justice (fairness of the procedures or process), and interactional justice (fairness of treatment) (Folger & Gropenzano, 1998).

Echeverri et. al. (2012) observes that the very existence of customers deliberately acting in a dysfunctional or abusive manner has implications, especially for frontline employees who have to deal with such issues on a day-to-day basis. The incidents of abuse and mistreatment by customers have been found to have such a profound effect on frontline employees, the organization as a whole, and other customers present during incidents (Harris & Reynolds, 2003).

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Users of the library expect responsive, caring and friendly treatment from staff of the library. Users therefore become dissatisfied when library staff are less responsive, caring or friendly. Users' perception that a service failure has occurred often hinges on the social and interpersonal nature of exchange (Menon & Dube, 2000). In support of this view Hoffman, et al. (1995) observed that employee rudeness, inappropriate verbal exchanges, and poor attitude were key characteristics of service failure. Service failures, especially interpersonal ones are likely to elicit negative emotions in customers. Menon & Dube (1995) found that rude and unhelpful behaviours of employees are the most frequent triggers of customer anger.

Results and Discussion

Reader Service at the University of Ghana Central Library (Balme Library) is one of the most vital and visible expression of the library's purpose which is key to its primary role of supporting teaching, learning and research. Nine (9) subunits/sections constitute the reader services at the Balme Library. These include: Reference/Issue Desk, Circulation Desk, Students Reference Library (SRL), United Nations (UN) Depository Library, Development Information Centre (DIC) (World Bank Depository Library), Africana Library, the Knowledge Commons and the Research Commons, and the Photocopying Unit (see Table 1).

Table 1: Population of Reader Services

Unit/Section	Professional Staff	Para-Professional Staff
Reference Issue Desk	1	6
Circulation Desk	-	3
Students Reference Library (SRL)	1	4
United Nations (UN) Depository Library	1	3
Development Information Centre (DIC)	1	3
Africana Library	1	4
Knowledge Commons (KCs)	1	4
Research Commons (KCs)	1	4
Photocopying Unit	-	4
Total	7	35

Consumers have an expectation of emotional input as part of the service offering Pugh, 2001. For example, service providers reacting with empathy was considered an important dimension of service quality. An emphatic response within service encounter includes both cognitive and effective elements where service provider tries to both understand as well as experience the consumer's findings as if they were their own (Menon & Dube, 2000). The creation of desired consumer emotions is said to be achieved through the service provider maintaining appropriate positive expressive displays during all interactions Ashforth & Humphrey, 1993.

More than half 165 (63%) of user respondents said they have had a bad service experience in one form or another. A major cause of negative exchange that was cited by majority of user respondents 132 (51%) was the issue of incivility on the part of some reader service staff. Incivility is defined as insensitive, disrespectful, or rude behaviour directed at another person that displays a lack of regard for that person (Cortina, et. al., 2001). The finding corroborates (Porath et al. 2010) assertion that anger from incivility often causes the library user to reflect on the uncivil encounter and to make rapid and negative judgements about the entire library service staff. On the issue of etiquette and decorum on the part of reader service staff, 112 (43%) of user respondents described the staff as lacking decorum and finesse in language, and poor disposition towards the users. A respondent said he once felt so ridiculed by a particular staff at the Reference Desk that he resolved to avoid him, and always located someone else to assist him in searching for any information in the library.

In a modern academic library services there is likely to be some element of contact with equipment electronic or otherwise by the customer. Such an aspect of service is likely to have a significant impact on users' evaluation of the library service as it determines how readily the user's request can be met. Most user respondents, 165 (63%) either complained about or expressed dissatisfaction and demanded a better explanation from staff. These complaints included mechanical problems such as inoperative computers, slow Internet speed due to inadequate bandwidth, "no photocopying" signs because the library had run short of toner, which inconvenienced and annoyed the user.

Research indicates that some people are assertive and seek redressal whenever they are dissatisfied with a service, while other people are reluctant to complain no matter how dissatisfied they might be (Blodgett, et. al., 1995). Dissatisfied customers are less likely to complain if they suspect that the service provider will not attempt to offer a refund or otherwise solve the problem Blodgett, et. al., 1995. As many as 91 (35%) of user respondents said though they had on one occasion or the other been dissatisfied with the library service, they never complained. They offered varied reasons for not complaining. For example, 58 (63.7%) felt that complaining would not be effective, while 46 (50.1%) saw complaining as time consuming. There were still others 42 (46%) who said they understood why the incident happened and therefore did not complain until the situation became so

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serious, while 38 (41.5%) said they did not know where and how to complain. Of the 64 user respondents who complained openly, 38 (59%) complained to a supervisor around, 16 (25%) complained in person to the University Librarian or his secretary, while 10 (15%) wrote a letter to the University Librarian.

One of the causes of negative exchanges cited by both user and Reader Service staff respondents was time accorded in serving a client. Maximum time accorded in-person client is determined by the pace of activity at the service point, the number of available staff, and the library's staff discretion as to the clients' needs. Only 99 38% of the user respondents agreed that they obtained the needed information or assistance from the library promptly, 104 40% disagreed, while 57 22% were indifferent. The study revealed that some service points in the library like the Reference and the Circulation Desks were understaffed with demands of service sometime exceeding the available staff's resources. Sometimes too the library patron especially the fresh undergraduate does not know or is not articulate enough in expressing what he/she is looking for, and the library staff does not have the knack in interrogating the patron either. The study corroborates, (Yusuf 2011) question that, if patrons do not know what they are looking for, and librarians do not know what patrons are looking for, a lot of time can be wasted, to the annoyance of both the patron and the librarian. Some of the staff at the service points were also found to lack adequate professional and communication skills needed to provide short, factual information and answers to patron's queries within a reasonably less time period. The staff were also found to have low self-esteem and perceived the patron undergraduate and postgraduate student to have higher qualifications and superior knowledge. The staff often lack the skills to tease out question from the patron and are unable to help them to articulate their information needs (Yusuf, 2011).

At the photocopying unit, delay in getting a material photocopied on request often generated negative exchanges between the patron and the library staff. At the Balme Library, a patron first has to make a request by completing a designed form and paying for the cost, depending on the volume and quantity of material to be photocopied. The patron is then given time frame within which to come back to collect the work done. A patron therefore gets upset when he/she comes back only to be told that the work was not ready, especially where the staff is not able to articulate a convincing reason for the work not done. This could generate into heated argument and insults between the patron and the library staff.

Most face-to-face service transactions involve a range of normative behaviors, such as polite greetings, smiling, and general pleasantries (Pugh, 2001). From the Reader Services staff perspective, just about 30% of patrons of the library on daily basis exhibited politeness and general pleasantries while seeking staff assistance and attention. Receiving and giving respect is understood

in philosophy and ethnics to be fundamental right and duty of being human (Kant, 1993). According to Pugh 2001, respect communicates recognition of one's existence, and conveys positive views of the self to which all human beings are entitled. Disrespect and disregard by patrons was cited by 19 (45%) staff respondents as a common cause of negative exchanges between patrons and staff of the reader services. Such disrespect and disregard for service point staff by patrons is often influenced by the perception of the latter that the former is of low academic qualification, intelligence and importance.

A positive attitude is the foundation for the appropriate actions or behaviors required for an exceptional customer service (Miao & Bassham, 2006). The study revealed that 18 (42%) of the Reader Service frontline staff were junior and less experienced, who sometimes had difficulties in applying their discretion and judgement in responding to highly technical patron queries, thus overemphasizing the goals of their activities to the detriment of the overall library service (Opoku, 2012). The finding corroborates Blume 1998 observation that, an outstanding faculty, excellent programming, wonderful collections, and cutting-edge technologies will not keep customers satisfied if staff members are incompetent, unfriendly, indifferent or inflexible.

Yet another cause of negative exchanges observed was the absence of general service guidelines. The study revealed that the library does not have clearly stated service guidelines to help clarify for both staff and patrons the level of assistance that can reasonably be expected at specific service points in the library. In rendering services staff often used their own discretion and judgment, which sometimes backfired, resulting in unnecessary negative exchanges between staff and the patron.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Academic libraries are being challenged to make conscious efforts, including conducting user surveys and service reviews to ensure that they are hearing what users expect. Bad service experience on the part of a patron, in one form or another could generate into negative exchanges between the patron and the staff. Such bad service experience have arisen from a number of factors including absence of general service guidelines for staff; undue delays in getting patron's request met; lack of positive attitude for exceptional customer service; incivility, etiquette and decorum on the part of both staff and patron, as well as inoperative computers and slow Internet.

In the light of the above, the study makes the following recommendations:

- The library should continuously and actively publicize the scope, nature, and availability of the information services it offers. In rendering services, the library should take into account the information-seeking behaviors, the information needs, and the service expectations of the patron. Based on patron's known needs and interests, the library should provide information even if it has not been explicitly requested.

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- The library should have service guidelines clearly stated to help clarify for both staff and patrons the level of assistance that can reasonably be expected at specific service points in the library.
- The library should designate a location that is visible and accessible in the library to receive complaints, and publicise its existence. The library should also develop a system for record keeping, so that complaints data can be easily analysed and used to monitor the efficiency and effectiveness of complaints response.
- The library should staff service points with sufficiently qualified personnel with appropriate knowledge and preparation during the hours that best meet the information needs of patrons.

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