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Marketing reference and information services in libraries: a staff competencies framework

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Abstract

The premise of this paper is that the vision of taking your staff with you in the marketing process of reference and information services will be realized only when staffs participate both as contributors and experts of marketing the reference and information services in the library. There is, therefore, a need not only to engage staff in provision of reference and information services, but also to support them to learn about marketing strategies, paying particular attention to perception of user needs and ability to obtain feedback from users; technical knowledge such as the ability to use the Internet and knowledge of various marketing strategies for promoting reference information skills. To this end, the paper explains why professional knowledge and skills for marketing services should play a greater role in the reference services activities and proposes a framework for action for libraries to help raise awareness of the importance of marketing reference services and to better integrate marketing in their staff development activities to improve the benefits of reference and information services.

Introduction

Libraries are faced with the challenge of delivering reference and information services in a new context in which information explosion, coupled with technological revolution, are

expected to play a key role. These libraries are, therefore, continuing to respond to such challenges in the quest to enhance use of their resources and services. Today marketing reference and information services is significant in any dynamic library services in a competitive environment. With the mushrooming of new information providers such as cyber cafes, mega-bookstores, online book dealers, the Internet community, consultants and individual customers, libraries, for example, cannot continue to assume that they are the only sources of information that people will consult. Librarians and other information professionals have to adopt marketing as a tool if they have to exist in the tomorrow environment. Libraries have begun to realize that staff competency is an integral part of promoting marketing of library services such as reference and information services, especially as a means for improving user satisfaction through effective use of reference and information resources by current and potential users. This is critical to achieving the library's reference and information services mission.

The concept of marketing is widely discussed in the literature and accepted professionally. However, this acceptance has not found its way into most library schools' formal curricular yet there is no substitute for the performance of individual librarians in the workplace (Shamel, 2002). Bakar (2005) points out that Library and Information Services (LIS) schools educators' roles and responsibilities are becoming more difficult and demanding. He (p.268) cautions that it is not good to produce graduates who just know how to identify, organize, process, evaluate, synthesize and deliver accurate, timely information in a format that can be used to make decisions. As the information age matures into the knowledge age, it is imperative for LIS programmes to set their targets on producing knowledge workers or managers capable of functioning effectively in the knowledge economies of today. According to Tenopir (2002) library schools tend to emphasize the skills and knowledge that a librarian needs to do the job, "Schools do not focus on how to market to a constituency". Jain et al (1999) observe that marketing courses are not taught in library schools; in most cases marketing does not form part of the curriculum. They further propose that staff and professionals would have to be retrained, reoriented and trained to start thinking afresh. Kavulya (2004) calls for the need of marketing courses to be taught in library and information education in Kenyan library schools. In Kenya only one library school (Moi University) has marketing as a course in its curriculum for students of Bachelors in Science Library and Information Sciences. Adeloje (2003 p.18) commenting on the state in Nigeria appeals for their professional body to take a very hard line with their library schools if they are not producing graduates whose skills are fit for purpose. If librarians are ultimately responsible for marketing library services, then the schools that prepare future librarians must offer the necessary training. Studies on marketing reference and information services are rare in Kenya. It is also true to allege that librarians are deficient in their knowledge in this regard with the lack of know-how. However, studies which can help to uplift and develop the marketing of library services in the country, are essential.

This paper reports some of the results of a larger survey investigating marketing of information products in Kenya. The paper explores the competences that are associated with the marketing of reference and information services in a contemporary library where reference services are provided both virtual and face-to-face. The purpose of the study

was to identify the marketing competencies needed for reference and information services as conceptualized by information professionals in Kenya. It aims to explain why marketing should play a greater role in the marketing of reference and information services. Specifically it focuses on the following questions: What is marketing? Why is marketing important in reference and information services? And; what are the marketing competences that are required for information professionals to provide reference and information services more effectively? The second objective is to propose a framework for action which information professionals and Library Schools could adopt to first, help raise awareness of the importance of marketing in a dynamic competitive environment second, better integrate marketing concepts in the staff development activities and the curriculum.

King (2001) defines reference services as all library services given directly to individuals on a one-on-one basis, regardless of the kind of information, the purpose to which it will be put, or any demographic characteristics of the library user. Chowdhury (2005 p. 258) categorizes reference services into three broad groups:

- information services that involve either finding the required information on behalf of the users, or assisting users in finding information;
- instruction in the use of library resources and services (broadly defined as information literacy skills); and
- user guidance, in which users are guided in selecting the most appropriate information sources and services.

What is marketing?

The literature on marketing does not provide a single definition of the concept. This is in part due to the differences in background and perspectives of the authors, ranging from business to information. Nevertheless, the various definitions also have some common traits. According to the American Marketing Association: “Marketing is a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating, offering and exchanging of products of value with others”. In this definition the concepts of needs, wants, demands, products (goods, services and ideas) and value have been captured. The UK Chartered Institute of Marketing defines marketing as “the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably”. As for Kotler (1994) marketing is concerned with how transactions are created, stimulated, facilitated and valued”. These definitions suggest that marketing requires two sets of actors – the givers and the takers; that is, there must be producers or sellers on the one hand and consumers or users on the other. Hence marketing puts the customer at the centre of everything the business does.

Why marketing?

In order to remain viable in the atmosphere of competition from other information sources such as Internet, and other web-based commercial services, libraries must market their services to make strong connection with community, anticipate trends and use new technology in ways to make services as timely and convenient as possible for their patrons (Lankes et al., 2006).

According to Snoj and Petermanec (2001 p. 315) marketing knowledge is beneficial to libraries because an effective marketing programme can help the library create competitive advantage through:

- development of new services or changes of the existing ones to satisfy their users better;
- improvement of their organizational status and image to different stakeholders; and thereby
- improve their performance in general.

They are also of the opinion that librarians need to comprehend marketing orientation as well as have know-how of marketing as a process. Possession of marketing skills will contribute to better performances, more aggressive marketing and professional library and information service. The key competences that staff needs to develop include, understanding, applying the theoretical and practical concepts of non-profit marketing, to an analysis of library and information organizations, effective measurement approaches to marketing survey design and public relation activities that reflect marketing research (Kavulya, 2004). Marketing research would improve the marketing efforts of the library. It would be used to develop new products that would enhance reference services, for example through measuring the impact of promotional activities. Marketing-minded librarians should continuously ask themselves fundamental questions about users of their services such as: who they are, what they need, why they need, why they need something, in what way they need it, why they choose this service and not the competitors', what components of the service are important to them, how satisfied the users are with these components, what is the value of the components to them , which factors influence their evaluation and choice of services (Rowley, 1998).

Importance of marketing competencies for reference services

According to the Council of Europe, competency can be defined as the set of knowledge and skills that enable an employee to orient easily in a working field and to solve problems that are linked with their professional role (Webber, 1999). Special Libraries Association (1998 p. 4), defines competencies as “a combination of skills, knowledge, and behaviours important for organizational success, personal performance, and career development. Professional competences relate to the special librarian’s knowledge in the areas of information resources, information access, technology, management, and research, as well as the ability to use these areas of knowledge as a basis for providing library and information services. Personal competencies represent a set of skill, attitudes and values that enable librarians to work efficiently; be good communicators; focus on continuing learning throughout their careers; demonstrate the value-added nature of their contributions; and survive in the new world of work”. Essentially, competence is the interplay of knowledge, skills and attitudes required to perform a task effectively.

From the marketing perspective, reference and information services librarians are finding it increasingly imperative to make their focus the satisfaction of customer needs and wants. Reference and information services librarians have an obligation to attract users, much like a business, rather than to give them what they (librarians) think they should

receive from the library. Since the mission of the reference and information service is to attract users in order to remain solvent, goals and objectives must point toward identifying means of attracting people to the library and developing strategies to ensure that users will continue to come back. As a result, one very important activity is to know the community that the library serves and also anticipate what those needs may be in the future. Measures must be taken to map out user needs through whatever tools the library has available, given its funding and number of staff. Users are more likely to continue using the library if they believe their information needs will be met there. Research skills will enable librarians to conduct user needs assessment studies, which are felt to be inadequate due to lack of methodological skills and the fact that they are not carried out on a continuous basis. Such studies will also include market research and segmentation studies (Jain, et al, 1999).

Ashcroft and McIvor (2001 p. 386) question whether librarians are equipped through their training to undertake marketing functions in this era of electronic journals provision. They concur that librarians need a working knowledge of market research techniques in order to cope with, for example, the statistical analysis of data, questionnaire design, and focus groups. Since electronic information is constantly changing, those whose job it is to guide users in using it must be aware of how to use it. Further, they must also be trained in how to communicate its use. They need the communication skills necessary, for example, to promote electronic journals using both traditional means and through the utilization of new skills such as web design and other online promotional techniques. Good communication skills are not only essential for gaining respect but also as a marketing tool of information service (Adeloye, 2003). This is supported by Adeyoyin (2005), who argues that, in marketing library services librarians must recognize that “service providers are often viewed as service itself. Therefore, strategies relating to selecting, training, motivating employees... are very important”.

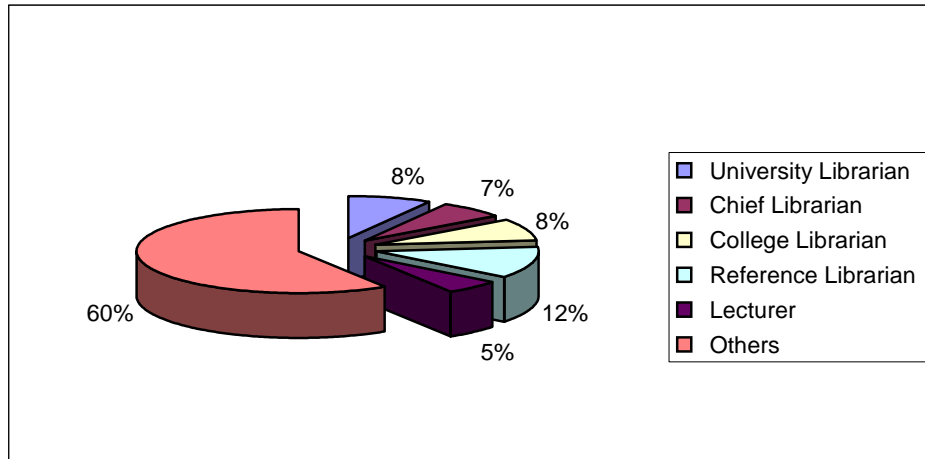
Reference and information services are part of any type of library supporting a wide range of users. A reference and information services librarian needs to have a knowledge base that has three major facets: resource knowledge, subject knowledge, and process knowledge (RISA). Equipped with this knowledge the reference and information services librarians should apply the marketing concept to service. They must begin with aligning the mission statement and the subsequent goals and objectives of their services toward a strong customer orientation by developing strategies that will aid in accomplishing their mission (Rowley, 1995). This will require that they focus on what is useful to the user. If they are to remain in business, they must know the needs of their user population and take steps to satisfy some of those needs. This means offering services that these users will be able to use. For example, service needs might include translating materials in languages that their users will understand.

Methodology

This was a descriptive research design. A self-administered questionnaire was designed to elicit responses on a variety of marketing competencies. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of the respondents' data about their positions and type of institution they worked in. The second part of the questionnaire presented respondents

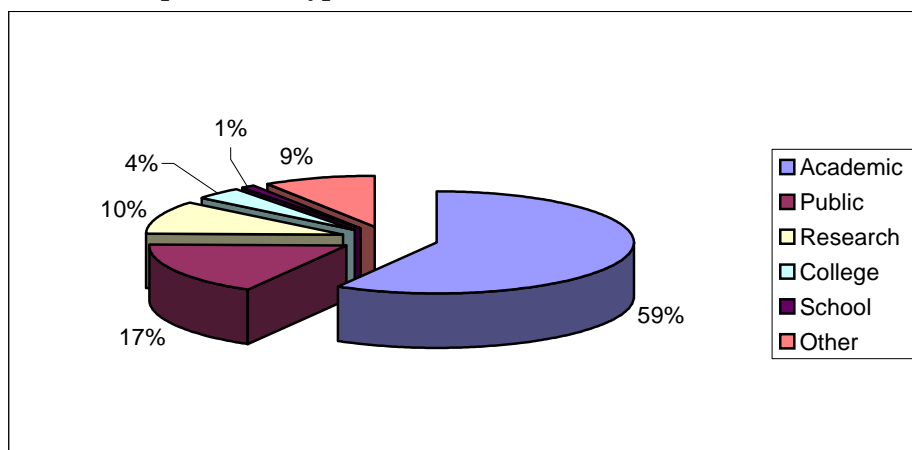
with statements as to their understanding of marketing for reference and information services. Respondents were asked to specify their level of agreement on a five point Likert scale. Data was collected from information professionals all holding various positions in the library. The pie chart below summarizes the sample composition.

Chart 1: Composition of the Respondents



It was assumed that the various categories of respondents were knowledgeable and had a sound experience of what reference and information services involved and could make valid judgment of what they thought about marketing as a concept and the competencies that are associated with it. Out of the targeted 100 respondents, 79 completed the questionnaire. This amounted to 79 per cent response rate which is considered acceptable for survey studies (Gall, Borg and Gall, 1996). More than half of the respondents were from academic institutions (Chart 2). This representation is significant because reference and information services are most common in academic settings such as university libraries.

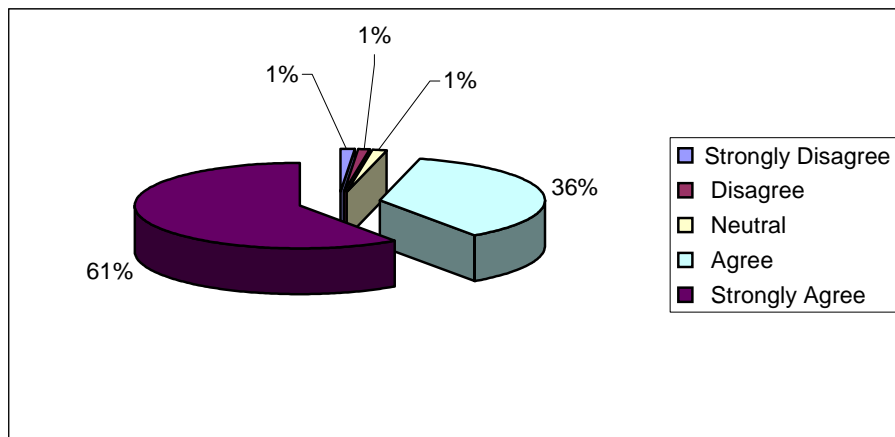
Chart 2: Respondents' Types of Work Institutions



Results and discussion

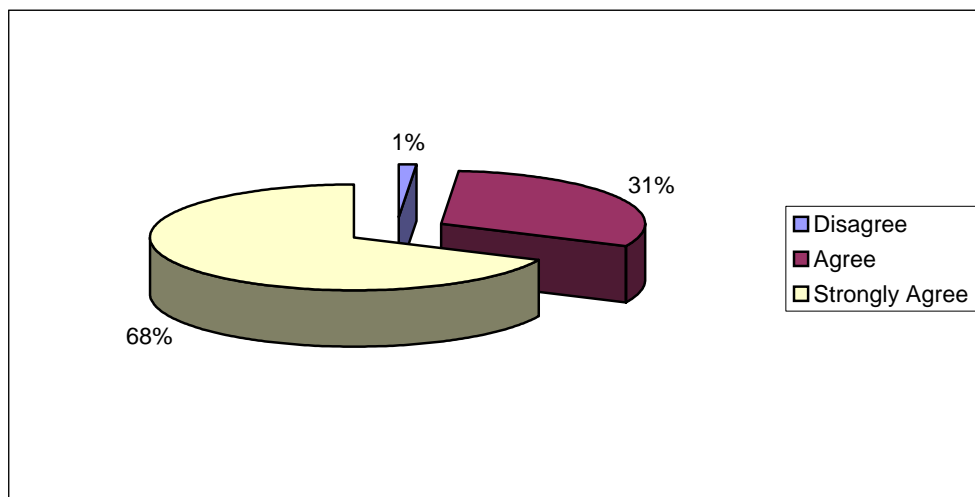
This study aimed at providing an understanding of what librarians thought about various identified marketing concepts and the competencies needed for librarians in terms of marketing. The results were analyzed to discover their understanding of the skills associated with marketing reference and information services.

Chart 3: Electronic Information Age has made marketing essential



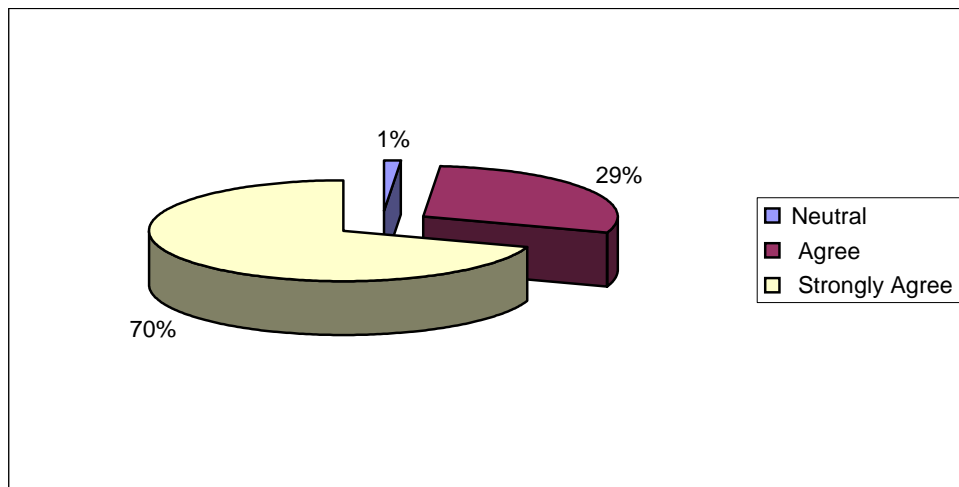
In order to find out respondents' thinking about the implication of electronic age on marketing, 97 percent accepted the notion that electronic age has made marketing essential. This concurs with Ashcroft and McIvor (2001) who acknowledge that librarians are in a state of flux when trying to shape their role in an environment where electronic journals have become commonplace in the library. The reference and information librarian must use these e-resources to answer users' inquiries and also market them as new products to promote usage.

Chart 4: Marketing reference services will enhance the library image as an information hub



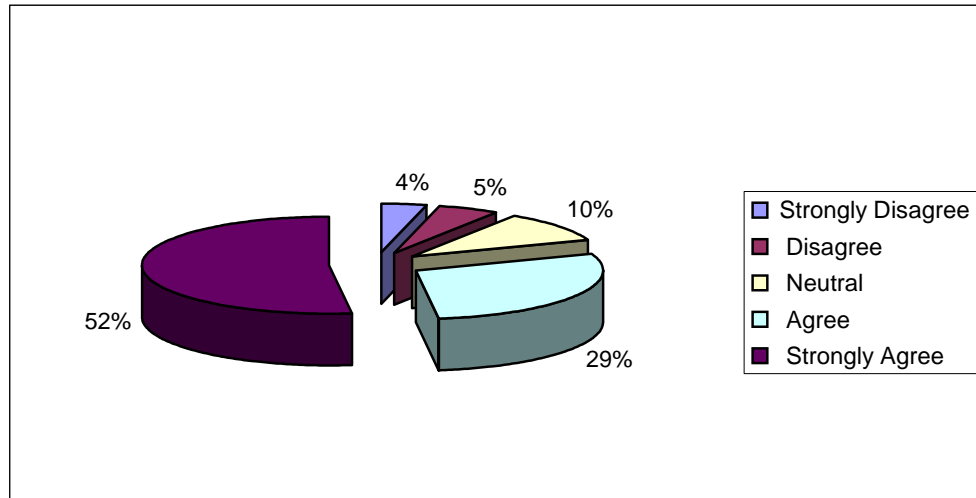
An overwhelming majority (99 percent) of the respondents see the image of the library being enhanced with marketing of reference services. This compares well with the work of Snoj and Petermanec (2001) who advocate for marketing knowledge which they believe if utilized effectively would help the library create a competitive advantage for the organization. Through marketing the library would improve its status and image. In the same vein, Shamel (2002) sees effective marketing as beneficial to library image because it can among other things: increase library funds, increase usage of services, educate customers and non-customers, change perceptions, and enhance the reputation of the library and its staff.

Chart 5: Marketing requires good communication skills



From this (chart 5), 99 percent agree that good communication skills are necessary for marketing. This response is in agreement with Adeloje (2003), Ashcroft and McIvor (2001) and Adeyoyin who argue that good communication skills are not only essential for gaining respect but also as a marketing tool. These skills relate to the ability to convey somebody's knowledge to other people effectively. The reference librarian should have the ability to assist the user with obtaining both intellectual and physical access to the information resources the institution has to offer. This means keeping a functional knowledge of a huge range of resources in various formats some with ever changing interfaces or requirements, while serving diverse user groups. A reference librarian also needs to specialize in serving the users in a particular discipline, such as social sciences or humanities. This individual would normally need to be immersed in the literature of the subject area, and becomes deeply familiar with the journals, authors, and special terminologies of the discipline. The librarian needs to effectively communicate the knowledge gained (King, 2001).

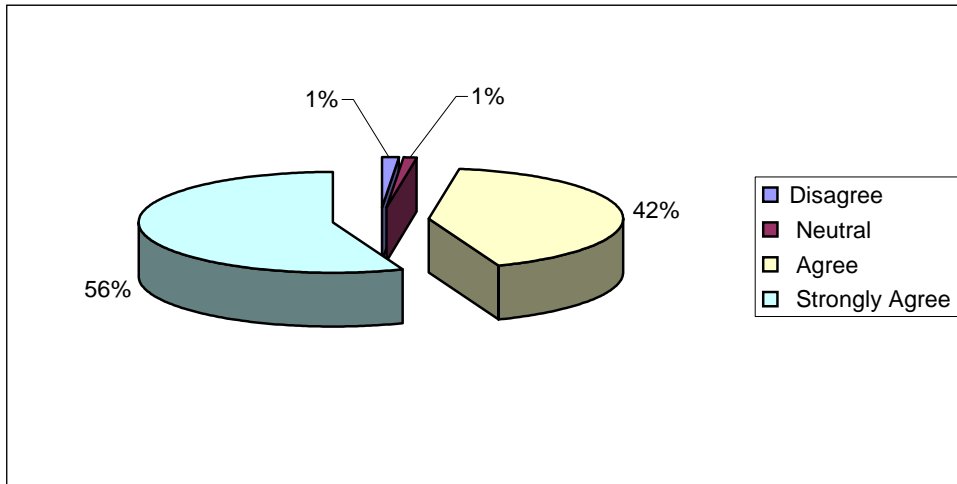
Chart 6: IT skills are required for marketing information services



Half of the respondents strongly agree that IT skills are required for marketing information services, 29 percent agree. Only 4 percent strongly disagree while 5 percent disagree. This response clearly shows that a majority 81 percent accepts that IT competence is essential in the marketing process. This finding is interesting from a developing country where technology is filtering in at a varying pace, with many hindrances. The Bakar (2005) study in Malaysia showed that all the thirteen IT competencies except for system maintenance were found to be important, and yet the respondents were not exposed to these competences. His study gave important insights into the skills that are really needed by information professionals in the knowledge society. He calls for educators to ensure that these competences are part of the curriculum content of the courses offered by the LIS schools.

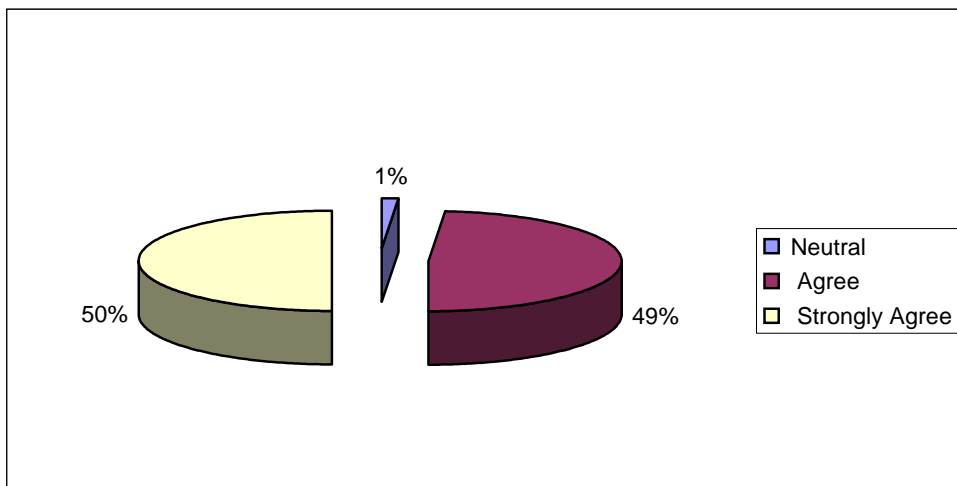
The reference and information services librarian should be familiar with and fluent in the use of the collection, including the traditional books and journals, electronic databases available through vendors or proxy servers, audio-visual materials, microforms, CD-ROM. The reference librarian needs to understand the systems to access these resources, such as the cataloging and classification system in use, how to expertly use the Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC), vendor interfaces to electronic resources, and any applicable indexing languages or terminology for specific vendors, or databases such as EBSCOhost, PsycArticles, or Emerald. This understanding will enable the librarian take informed decisions on how best the service should be marketed whether face to face or virtual (Lankes et al. 2006). In addition, the reference librarian and information services librarian needs to know the various document delivery options available to the user, in order to provide physical access to the information. This includes traditional check-out, electronic full text delivery from various sources, and inter-library loan options for items that are not available.

Chart 7: Interpersonal skills for marketing information services/resources are essential



Ninety eight percent of the respondents accept that interpersonal skills are essential for marketing. These rely on the ability to work with other people. In terms of the reference service the librarian develops a strong rapport with the user groups of the various disciplines, such as the professors and graduate students in an academic library environment, to learn the kinds of information resources they need to consult with, and the preferred formats for information delivery. This rapport and interaction is essential for attracting the users to the service.

Chart 8: Reference librarians require needs assessment skills



Ninety nine percent of the respondents accepted that needs assessment skills were necessary for reference librarians. This response shows the recognition that a marketing strategy where needs assessment is carried out is mandatory. According to Rowley (1995), all organizations that accept marketing including libraries need a marketing strategy. This strategy will ensure that customers stay with the library and the information service. The marketing concept for the reference librarian is based on

customer satisfaction. The librarian has to understand the information processing needs, seeking and use, the kinds of actions the information processing needs to take to respond to the users needs, and the kinds of behaviors and interactions the information processing must be capable of in order to function effectively (King, 2001).

As concerns understanding their user population, the reference librarian should understand that information needs arise from user awareness of gaps in their own knowledge. The reference librarian needs to have the ability to conduct an effective reference interview, focusing on the user's true information need that underlies his or her question. This will largely determine if that user's need is effectively met, or if it remains unsatisfied. The reference librarian should understand the information seeking behaviour while keeping in mind the fact that information seekers will often “satisfy” themselves with less appropriate resources that are more easily obtained. The reference librarian must have a solid theoretical and practical knowledge of the processes of information needs, seeking and use from a user perspective, in order to serve their clients efficiently and effectively. However, it should be noted that the customer needs are not constant and will change depending on a variety of factors such as technological changes, economical changes and computer offerings (Rowley (1995).

Conclusion

Clearly, the knowledge base required of today's information professional, specifically a reference librarian is both extensive and multi-faceted. In the current environment of rapidly proliferating information resources, changing user expectations, and financial challenges, librarianship demands that its practitioners continually update their existing knowledge and skills to effectively serve their various user groups.

The vision of delivering an effective reference and information service efficiently will be realized only when librarians participate in marketing of these services. Librarians must develop an in-depth knowledge of models, theories and processes to market reference and information services effectively. Skilled and competent staff can contribute towards improving the quality of reference and information services provided and further accessibility to all potential users. A skilled and competent staff that is well prepared to develop a marketing approach in its reference operations and services is mandatory, given the increased competition in the world of information for survival.

Framework for Action

These research findings emphasize the necessity and need for skills and competences for marketing reference and information services. This paper proposes a framework for action to respond to the challenge of staff competence in marketing reference and information services. Key actions include:

Continual learning and adaptation

- Staff should be facilitated through workshops and seminars to acquire and sharpen ICT skills. Such skills will enable them sell their services, products and themselves by designing library websites and portals that will enhance the image of the library.
- Staff should also continuously keep pace with new developments and improve on their user needs assessment skills. They should acquire and update their skills to enable them, for example, process data using the various software packages that are now available on the market.
- Frequent attendance to short courses in areas such as communication and customer care will go along way in sharpening some these essential marketing skills.

Teaching Marketing in Library Schools

- These schools should view a library service from the point of view that it is functioning in a competitive environment. They must develop a curriculum that includes marketing as a course in its won right.
- Library schools must, together with the library association be at the fore front in initiating programs for continuous education.

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