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Marketing Reference Service of Public Libraries in Developing Regions

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Abstract:

Because information resources are lacking in developing regions of China and the local citizens' information literacy is low, so most of the citizens do not have the habit of utilizing information resources in their work, life and study. In recent years, as Internet was becoming more and more popular reference service users of some public libraries in the developing regions began to utilize information and services on Internet. At this time the reference services of the public libraries appeared atrophied and the number of users was gradually reducing.

Faced with the situation, some of the public libraries did not stop their reference services or ignore the situation and they have been fulfilling the role of dynamic engines for knowledge and information society. They actively introduced a new concept of marketing reference service. They organized and managed the reference services based on market law. They cultivated the market by information literacy education, occupied the target markets by the free quality services and the advantage in sales promotion and enlarged the market by joining Cooperative Digital Reference Network on Internet.

The article gives the examples of successful marketing experience for several large public libraries in developing regions of China and illustrates the marketing law of the reference service for the public libraries in developing regions.

1. The Concept of Marketing Reference Service

Marketing means the management, the distribution and all the related activities of profit-making organizations in market.

Since marketing science was born at the beginning of 20th century, in the period of close to 100 years, this science has been developing by the promotion of market economy. The marketing theory endlessly changed from “4P”(Production , Price , Promotion and Place) , “4C” Consumer , Cost , Convenience and Communication to current “4R” (Relativity, Response , Relation and Retribution). The “4P”is market-oriented; the “4C” is consumer-oriented; the “4R” Emphasizes the interaction and the win-win cooperation between consumer and seller.^[3] On the other hand, because of the guiding function of the science in managing activities of enterprises, the global economy could be continuously developed and the entire human society was made to progress without interruption.

Ten or twenty years ago, after profit-making organizations had obtained a lot of successful experience in marketing, some governments and non-profit organizations began to research into the guiding function of marketing science in their undertaking. Until now, some progress has been made. However, how can the principle of marketing science be applied to library services, especially to reference service? This is the problem being studied and explored by library science scholars and professionals in various libraries.

Enterprises apply the marketing science to business operation in order to make profit and maximise the rate of return on investment. Nonetheless public library is a social welfare organization; its social role is to provide free the knowledge and information which society and public need as well as the place and the environment available for lifelong learning. So the purposes of marketing reference service in public libraries are not to make profit but to satisfy the maximum needs of society and public and to obtain the optimum social and economic benefits.

1.1The Formation of the Reference Service Market

The development of economy and the progress of society promoted the development of libraries and improved the services of libraries. From the year 1876 when reference service emerged to the year 1984 when digital reference service formed, the traditional reference service experienced the development course of more than 100 years. In this period, its development was driven mainly by social and public demand and the competition from outside did not substantively impact its progress. However, with the emergence of digital reference service in the year 1984, library was not already the only provider of reference services, companies and other non-profit organizations were entering into this field and a big reference service market was forming accompanied with the rapid development of digitizing and networking of information. The service providers of the market were libraries, companies and non-profit organizations. The consumers of the market were the users of traditional reference service and those of digital reference service.

There is a market in which competition must exist. Like other types of market, the competitive core of the reference service market is also in creating clients. In traditional reference service market, the users and the service providers are mostly in the same geographical areas. Now in the big market of reference service, the competitors and the users are often in different geographical areas and sometimes those are in the same country, sometimes elsewhere in the world.

1.2 The Significance of Introducing Marketing Concept in Reference Services of Libraries

The big market of reference service has huge potential and space for development. So the competition is extremely keen in the market. Based on traditional reference service, the various forms of digital reference service such as e-mail reference, web form reference and live on-line reference etc. came into existence one after another and continue to be developed.

To some extent the development of digital reference service influenced the traditional reference services. The expert's research showed that the reference services provided at reference desks in 84 percent libraries in United States were decreasing during the last few years. The reasons are that some of traditional reference service users had become digital reference service users and in Internet environment the users could utilize a lot of digital resources and conveniently found the answers by themselves.^[2]

Besides the decreasing of amount of traditional reference services, the research showed that the total amount of reference services of American libraries was also decreasing in the last few years. For instance, according to the statistical data of Association of Research Libraries (ARL), the amount of reference services transacted by professionals of some research libraries in America was falling in the last years. Further, in the light of the statistical data of National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the amount of reference services of American university libraries dropped to 1.9 million each week in 1996 from 2.1 million each week in 1994, the drop was about 10 percent.^[2]

Why was the total number of library reference services decreasing? Where did the users go? The answer is that a lot of reference services provided by companies and non-profit organizations appeared in Internet and a lot of library users had been lost or transferred to those organizations.

In the last years, the number of establishments providing reference services was going up continually. There were AskJeeves, Webhelp, Askme.com, Exp.com and Google answers and so on, which were all very influential. The digital reference services of the establishments were developing at high speed. AskJeeves received 20 million questions each day and till June of 2004, they had completed over 150 million questions and the utilizing number of AskJeeves was increasing at the speed of 46 percent per season. The development speed of Webhelp was faster than AskJeeves, even they received 3.4 million requests in the period of a morning. Askme.com had had 10 million users by the end of 2000. Exp.com had a hundred thousand experts and 1.6 million users a month.^[2]

In the last years, the digital reference services of non-profit organizations were developing fast too. The influential organizations were the Internet public library, Ask a question, <http://www.ipl.org/div/askus> and <http://www.eduref.org/> and so on. Among them,

Eduref (Askeric) had to deal with 7 million requests in a month. ^[2]

The establishments and the non-profit organizations have seized so many of our users in such short time, which makes us be aware of the urgency of market competition. We have to enhance the competition power of library reference services and put it first on our agenda. Moreover we must guide the management of library reference services with marketing principle. Otherwise libraries won't change the situation actively and the users will not need to go into libraries to get knowledge and information from the whole world, at that time the libraries as the center of knowledge and information will not exist at all. ^[6]

2. Marketing Reference Service in the Public Libraries of Developing Regions

The information resources of developing regions are lacking; the citizens' information literacy is low. Many people don't know library and library services and also don't know the role of knowledge and information in their study, work and life. So marketing reference service in the public libraries of the regions has its own laws and features.

2.1 How to Cultivate the Reference Service Market

The features of developing regions determine that before occupying the target markets of reference services, there has to be a process of market cultivation. Through this process, the citizens will know the library and its services, the role of the information resources in the library and the methods of utilizing the library and its services. In this aspect, it is a successful case that our Harbin Municipal Library (HML) has cultivated some reference service markets.

Harbin City is the capital of Heilongjiang Province in Northeast China; the local economy belongs in developing region. As the citizen' information literacy is low, so most of the citizens do not have the habit of utilizing information resources in their work, life and study. In this circumstance, Harbin Municipal Library did not have many users of reference services in the last years. Especially after the growing availability of Internet, the number of reference service users continued to decrease. Faced with the situation, our library did not stop the reference services or ignore the situation, we have been fulfilling the role of dynamic engine for knowledge and information society. We began to cultivate the market of reference service by starting from the information literacy education for the citizens.

At the beginning of 2005, we made the plan on training users' information literacy free. The training methods include explaining on Internet and face-to-face lecture. The explaining on Internet has the two forms of electronic text and multimedia. In the last year, we tried to explain the usage of e-mail and how to utilize the digital reference service of HML by the functions of e-mail on Internet. The face-to-face lecture has the two forms which are for organizations and for individuals. In 2005, we held some face-to-face lectures on information literacy education for some organizations and some individuals. In the lectures, we introduced users to various information resources in our library, their use methods and some typical cases in utilizing those resources and so on. The result was very remarkable. The reference service number of HML in 2005 increased by 130 percent over that of 2004. We are continuing to cultivate the reference service market in a on-going way in 2006. We expect that more citizens will utilize our reference services by these market

cultivating works.

2.2 How to Occupy the Target Markets of Reference Services

In order to occupy the target markets of reference services, the public libraries in developing regions should also have the advantage of two aspects which are reference information resources and reference librarians, besides cultivating markets aiming at the target markets. In addition, the necessary sales promotion is carried out to strengthen the achievements of cultivating markets, to make potential users become present users, present users become future users. In this aspect, our Harbin Municipal Library has got some successful experience.

We segment reference service markets into city users and users outside the city in accordance with geographical location where users live. We further segment city users into enterprises and research organizations, universities, governments, other education organizations except universities and numerous citizens. Users outside the city are the users who utilize the digital reference service of our library in the places outside Harbin City. Because the university libraries in Harbin City generally have abundant information resources and perfect reference services, we don't get them amongst our target users. So our target users mainly consist of users outside the city, enterprises and research organizations, governments, other education organizations except universities and numerous citizens (see table 1).

Tab. 1 the Target Markets of Reference Services of HML

Users outside the City	City Users			
Digital Reference Service Users	Enterprises and Research Organizations	Governments	Other Education Organizations Except Universities	Numerous Citizens

If you want to occupy the target markets of reference services, you have to have the advantage surpassing other competitors in three aspects which are as follows.

(1) Need to have the advantage of reference information resources

Harbin City is a developing region, information resources as a whole are lacking. So it is necessary that we have the advantage and features in reference information resources. In spite of the shortage of books-purchasing funds, our library invested considerably in reference information resources in order to form this aspect advantage in the last years. For instance, our library ordered *Firstsearch database* of OCLC, *Dialog International Online retrieval System*, *Chinese National Standards and Industrial Standards Database* and *Chinese Academic Conference Papers Database* and so on. Now our reference information resources as a whole have formed a certain advantage.

(2) Need to have the talent advantage of reference librarians

The knowledge structure, position skills and duty sense of reference librarian have to satisfy the needs of servicing target markets. First, in actual work, the professional knowledge of reference librarians ought to be close to or in accordance with the professional knowledge required in services. Second, in order to make reference librarians know well the position skills of Internet, computer and database search and so on, the method to combine training with self-learning was adopted and the professional exchange activities of reference librarians were frequently carried out to ensure the speed to renew knowledge and to be able to catch up with the pace of the times. Third, reference librarians were instructed to have the wholeheartedly sense of responsibility to service users, because that is the premise for qualified reference librarians.

(3) Need to have the advantage of sales promotion aiming at the target markets

If the public libraries in developing regions want to occupy the target markets of reference services the activities of sales promotion of marketing reference service are organized to form the features of sales promotion aiming at different users in target markets.

According to the survey for 500 small and middle-sized domestic enterprises in the last few years, it was shown that the enterprises which could easily get information they needed accounted for 2.5 percent of all those enterprises, and the enterprises which found difficulty getting information they needed accounted for 30 percent of all those enterprises.^[4] So our library made enterprise users become the focal point user in the target markets and carried out some characteristic sales promotion activities aiming at the features of enterprise users. At the beginning of 2005, we established Servicing Enterprises Network (SEN) of HML. The purposes of SEN are to propagate the information resources and the services of HML, to improve the information literacy of enterprise users, to widely solicit the demands of enterprise users in the information resources and the services of HML and to better provide information services to them. In order to achieve the purposes and make the enterprises which enter into SET become our long-term users, we also put forward five requirements for the enterprises, which are that the enterprise pays attention to the gathering and utilizing of business information and scientific research information on home and world; the enterprise emphasizes the training and improving of the staff's information literacy; the enterprise designates an employee to be the person to maintain the relations with HML; the enterprise web is linked with HML web; the enterprise actively joins every activities of SEN. At one time, the enterprise may enjoy every rights which are to freely utilize all databases (non-controlling) and the digital reference services of HML, to freely take part in the training activities of information literacy, that Selective Dissemination of Information Service (SDIS) is provided free and when our library provides Document Delivery Service (DDS) for enterprise, the administration fee is not charged.

By the end of 2005, there were 50 enterprises to have joined SEN. In 2005, the professionals of some enterprises were trained for information literacy, which had achieved very good results, therefore the numbers of enterprise users rapidly increased. At the beginning of 2006, we started editing and distributing periodically two newsletters whose names are *SEN newsletter* and *information literacy education*. We plan that this sales promotion is long carried out in a on-going way.

In addition, we also plan to carry out the necessary sales promotion aiming at other users in the target markets. Thus our markets will be expanded step by step.

2.3 How to Enlarge the Reference Service Markets

Enlarging market means to expand original target markets or to further occupy new target markets based on original target markets. So the advantage needed when occupying target markets can also be applied to the process of enlarging market.

In this aspect of enlarging market, some great achievements have been made by Collaborative Digital Reference Network (CDRN) which is transprovincial and was founded by Sun Yat-sen Library of Guangdong Province (SYLGP). Some public libraries in developing regions rapidly enlarged their own reference service market through joining CDRN.

In 2000, SYLGP began the first stage engineering of Digital Library of Guangdong Province. In two years, the large-scale digital resource and databases system with the total amount of ten TB was established to provide the necessary condition for collaborative digital reference, which had 0.9 million books, 15 million journal papers, 120 thousand dissertations, 160 thousand conference papers and more than thirty databases on various special topics.^[1]

In August of 2001, SYLGP began to provide the digital reference of single library for users. At the beginning of 2003, SYLGP began to collaborate with other libraries by a system researched by themselves. In August of 2003, the second edition of the system which was called the Centre of Digital Reference was put to use and SYLGP established collaborative relations with twenty-two libraries by this system. The member libraries used the resources of their own library to answer users' questions to have preliminarily realized experts sharing. At the beginning of 2005, SYLGP entrusted a software company with developing CDRN and in May 2005, CDRN was formally put to use. This system enables the member libraries to utilize the digital library resources of the system for users to share the experts and the resources. The member libraries link the web page of CDRN on their own web to make the single digital reference utilized previously only by the users of SYLGP become CDRN utilized together by the users of all the member libraries. Till now, the thirty-seven libraries, coming from sixteen provinces or autonomous regions, have joined CDRN.^[1]

Now CDRN founded by SYLGP has already run for three years and the service number of CDRN has been increasing at a significant speed and 199,611 requests in 2004 and 245,260 requests in 2005 have been met by all of the member libraries of CDRN. The public libraries of developing regions in CDRN have also completed a lot of digital references. The service quality was also improved to different extent. The qualities and position skills of reference librarians are generally enhanced. The writer has looked into the case of the reference services of four public libraries in CDRN in developing regions, which are Fujian Provincial Library, Changchun Library, Haikou Library and Tianjin Library. About the numbers of reference services of four public libraries in 2005 see Table 2.^[5]

**Tab. 2 the Numbers of Digital References of Four Public Libraries
in Developing Regions in 2005**

Public Libraries in Developing Regions		Digital Reference Number on CDRN	Single Digital Reference Number	Traditional Reference Service Number	Total Number
Fujian Provincial Library		24022		489	24511
Changchun Library		15819	540		
Haikou Library		1769			2858
Tianjin Library	from Jan. to Sept.		190		
	from Oct. to Dec.	2600			

The data of Tab.2 shows that in 2005, the digital reference number completed by Fujian Provincial Library on CDRN was forty-nine times as great as that of its traditional reference services; the digital reference number completed by Changchun Library on CDRN was twenty-nine times as great as that of the digital reference of single library completed by the library; the digital reference number completed by Haikou Library on CDRN was sixty-two percent of its all reference service number; The digital reference number completed by Tianjin Library on CDRN from Oct. to Dec. was thirteen times as great as that of the digital reference of single library completed by them from Jan. to September. The above indicates that for the public libraries in developing regions, it is very effective method to enlarge the reference service markets by joining CDRN. Why can the public libraries in developing regions enlarge the reference service markets successfully by CDRN? The reasons are as follows.

- 1 The software system of CDRN means that the member libraries can conveniently utilize the digital library resources of Sun Yat-sen Library. So the public libraries in developing regions are able to have the same advantage of reference information resources as that of Sun Yat-sen Library after joining CDRN.
- 2 After public libraries in developing regions join CDRN, their reference

librarians jointly constitute the experts system with other reference librarians on CDRN, which promotes the whole advantage of CDRN.

- 3 *The Regulations on CDRN and the Agreement on Sharing Information Resources for CDRN* ensure the effective marketing of CDRN from the organization. And *the Program of Training Professional Talent for CDFN and the Service rules on CDRN* ensure that the qualities and position skills of reference librarians on duty can satisfy the needs of servicing users. It ensures the high quality of the digital references that the service quality on CDRN is simultaneously controlled by all of evaluation system, inspectors and user estimation.
- 4 CDRN provides digital references relying on Internet, so it has the same character of gaining the attention of audiences as that of other media. Its success also indicates that the total attention of single digital references of all the member libraries is below the total attention of every CDRN linked on the webs of all member libraries. Especially, the public libraries in developing regions could only gain limited attention resources in the past and after joining CDRN, their attention is apparently increased, this is very important to enlarge its reference service market.

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