

Remaining Relevant – how airports, banks and geeks can save frontline library services

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Abstract:

It is often said that libraries must change to remain relevant but that is often easier said than done. The UNSW Library Client Services Unit (CSU) experience of the last two years supports the idea that change can do much to re-invigorate a library’s frontline relationship with its clients and at the same time re-energise its staff.

Drawing from lessons learned from client service developments in the transport, banking and retail sectors, UNSW Library took the radical step of removing the service desk completely and replacing it with a “Help Zone”, a zoned area designed to not only allow staff and clients to work side-by-side, but also to allow clients to access and use the area after staffed hours. The Help Zone features self-check/self-return machines, shopping centre-style kiosks for information (now replicated in a mobile application) and private booths for longer client consultations. Along with the physical changes, CSU’s staffing structure was also reviewed. As strong client service skills were considered essential for staff, new staff are recruited on their ability and experience in dealing with people rather than focusing on what library experience they have. However, with a strong commitment to the library profession, non-qualified staff are encouraged to pursue a library career. The new structure also incorporates an intern program. This involves employing new library graduates for twelve months to work across UNSW Library’s three locations. Interns are involved in all day-to-day activities of the unit and at the end of their internship have solid library experience to improve chances in finding full-time library positions.

In-line with the Library’s objective of increasing and improving self-service facilities, in 2013 a new enquiry management system has been introduced, providing a comprehensive knowledge base that

will allow clients to find the right answer at the right time without requiring staff intervention. The system will also enable accurate, personalised responses to more in-depth queries requiring staff input, consistent quality control, short and long-term trends analysis and targeted surveying of clients, all of which will further enhance CSU's client service offering.

This paper looks at how and why these changes were implemented and will describe the significant impact they have made on improving relationships with clients and building a strong frontline team. The presentation is intended to be inspirational for any library interested in seeking strategies to revitalise its front line client services.

Keywords: client service, self-service, staff, transformation, change.

Introduction

It is often said that libraries must change to remain relevant but the reality is that this is often easier said than done. Too much change takes place within the confines of traditional library structures or spaces. Clients entering an academic library are very often confronted with a traditional library set-up that has not changed much from twenty or even fifty years ago. Service takes place at a circulation or reference desk, which the client approaches, or queues to approach, in order to have their query answered, no matter whether the question be as simple as “where is the ...”? or as complex as a research consultation.

The juxtaposition with the client experience at leading retailers, financial institutions and airports is jarring. In all three sectors the leading companies are driving changes to client service by placing a strong emphasis on self-help technologies both onsite and digitally; imaginative use of physical space; and well-presented, informed, enthusiastic staff who greet clients on arrival and later either work with the client to complete transactions or leave the client alone to browse as desired. These are all elements of best practice client service that can be adapted to the library environment.

This paper discusses the transformation of front-line client services at UNSW Library, and how we drew upon lessons from the retail, airport and banking sectors when reconfiguring the physical spaces of our service areas and restructuring the Client Services Unit (CSU).

Background

The University of New South Wales (UNSW), founded in 1949, is a leading research and teaching institution with a diverse cohort of staff and students. UNSW currently has approximately 50,500 students from over 120 countries and over 7,500 staff work in its various schools, research centres and administrative departments.

There are three libraries within UNSW Library; the Main Library at the Kensington campus houses collections in the fields of arts and social sciences, built environment, business, engineering, medicine and science; the Law Library located at the lower Kensington campus offers access to a wide range of materials in the field of law and legal studies and the College of Fine Arts (COFA) Library, located at the COFA campus in Paddington, holds a wide range of materials in the field of art, design and media arts.

The UNSW Main Library underwent major renovations in the mid to late 2000s, and by 2010, the Library had been refurbished with new furnishings and a variety of study, reading and meeting spaces, all with easy access to power points. The Law Library underwent similar renovation works in late 2011.

At UNSW Library CSU provides frontline services to clients, face to face, electronically and by phone. Staff from CSU deal with a wide range of queries ranging from traditional lending services

questions to more general university-oriented enquiries. The introduction of the Help Zone at the Main Library in February 2011 was not only a radical change for an academic library in terms of the use of service space, but also proved to be the catalyst for the transformation of CSU into a leading example of best practice in Library front-line client services.

Airports, Banks and Geeks

In a rapidly changing client service environment it is important for libraries to continually re-examine how they provide services to clients. At a most basic level, academic libraries need to evolve in response to the changes in client expectations in order to ensure their own future sustainability. The lessons learned from studying developments in the retail, banking and airport sectors were invaluable in undertaking the transformation of front-line client services at UNSW Library. Repeatedly, the lesson learned was that physical changes are only part of the solution to remaining relevant. Physical change without staff buy-in and enthusiasm is ineffective and at worst wasted change. Furthermore, staff buy-in comes from high quality leadership and training.

The Apple Store is possibly the greatest success story in modern retailing, and its formula for success has been much studied. Many companies “dwell on the obvious but superficial features of Apple’s success including: the good design (airy interiors and attractive lighting)” (Denning, 2011), and many companies have tried unsuccessfully to replicate this formula, while missing the point that a key element of Apple’s success is undoubtedly its staff. Apple Stores lead the way with service innovations such as greeters as you enter the store; well-dressed, knowledgeable staff (or geeks!) who know and love the products they are selling; and store layouts that allow customers to “play” with the product before buying. It has been observed that, “Anyone visiting an Apple Store is greeted by a bevy of helpful employees. They are enthusiastic. They wear colourful Apple T-shirts” (Coget, 2011). Furthermore, studies have shown “that store managers level of organisational identification influences sales employees level of identification...the findings can be dubbed the ‘Apple Store Effect’”(Coget, 2011).

Retail Banks have similarly made great advances away from the traditional bank counter structure. Banks have embraced mobile technologies, recognising that “the innovation and evolution of mobile devices...has caused the world to demand mobile capabilities in their personal and business lives” (Bacher, 2012). The demise of the bank branch continues to be predicted but branches remain, and have instead evolved away from the traditional queue and service counter model, and employ greeters - professional staff who triage customers banking needs before directing them to self-help tools or staff assistance based on need. Innovation abounds in the retail banking sector - for example, Denmark’s Jyske Bank has incorporated sleek “AskBar” concierge stations and “TestBar” product tutorials; Citibank in Asia is piloting touch screen walls that allow the client to browse and get tutorials on products; and German banks Fortis and easyCredit operate self-service terminals that provide far more than basic ATM transaction capabilities, including paying bills, purchasing airline tickets, stamps and transit system tickets (Bain & Company, 2012).

Similarly, airports have been transformed. The modern airport check-in process is now a very different experience, with strong emphasis on self-check in, and knowledgeable, well presented staff on hand to provide assistance when or if required. Airlines are investing in “mobile service agents to improve customer service...equipped with handheld devices...these agents are trained to be proactive, approaching passengers without waiting to be called upon” (www.futuretravelexperience.com). Check-in areas are spacious and wherever possible the self-service technologies have removed the need to queue. In Australia, Qantas has upgraded its check in space, in an initiative called “Airports of the Future” (Qantas press release, 2009) which highlighted the introduction of “next generation check in”, featuring hosted kiosks and rapid bag drop.

In all these sectors the last decade has seen the emergence of a common theme - strong emphasis on self-help technologies, co-production, and knowledgeable staff providing assistance as required, and more imaginative use of space.

Taking on board the lessons learned from our study of the leading service providers, the process of renewal began for CSU in 2010 when UNSW Library took the radical step of removing the service desk and replacing it with a 'Help Zone'. Working with architectural firm Lahznimmo, the UNSW Library senior management team embraced the concept of changing the way in which the Library used the physical space where the service desk was located.

Changing the physical space is important, but cannot be done in isolation, as leaving the old structures in place means that service does not improve to match the new surroundings. Taking the physical changes as a starting point the structure and work processes of CSU were completely remodelled, with all aspects of day to day operations underpinned by strict adherence to three basic strategic principles learned from the study of the leading providers of client service:

- Clients should be able to resolve their issues via self-service technologies wherever possible, including mobile assistance.
- Help should be available at physical or digital point of need, be it directly from staff, the Library website, a comprehensive, easily accessible enquiry management system, mobile apps or self- help tools located on site within the library buildings.
- CSU staff are first and foremost client service-oriented, acting as first points of contact for clients and either being able to answer a query directly or being able to find the right source for a solution, within or outside of the library.

Help Zone

At the commencement of semester 1 2011, the Help Zone at the Main Library was launched. The rationale behind the creation of the Help Zone was to create a zoned area that is spacious, inviting and contemporary.

The three strategic priorities of the Help Zone are:

- To create a user friendly environment where Library staff approach and greet customers rather than the other way around.
- To transform the service model from staff assistance to self-service by providing self-service check/return machines, computer terminals, shopping centre-style kiosks, knowledgebase information online and mobile applications.
- To ensure that the Library's prime real estate is used even when Library staff are not present.

Entering the UNSW Main Library clients see a welcoming area; a brightly lit pillar with [i] and Help Zone signage; a variety of stand up or seated PCs to work at; a large comfortable couch; consultation rooms for longer or more private queries; self-check/self-return machines; and an information kiosk. Well presented, uniformed, name badged staff members greet clients, triage their needs and either help to resolve their query or guide the client on to Reference Librarian support or to other parts of the Library or wider university as required. The Help Zone space and equipment is available to clients at all times that the library is open, including outside of staffed hours.

Self Help Tools

As part of the implementation of the Help Zone, information kiosks, similar to those found in major shopping centres, were launched in Main Library and, more recently, in the refurbished Law Library.

These kiosks provide touch screen directional guidance and other information, and are also available in a mobile app version.

The UNSW Library mobile app was launched early in 2012. This app allows clients to search across the library collection for e-books, online journal articles, books, journals, CDs and a wide range of other items, including items located in the High Use Collection. In addition, clients can also access subject guides, check opening hours and log into their *myLibrary* record. This app is available on Android and Apple devices.

The UNSW Library mobile directory app has to date been made available for the Main Library and Law Library. Clients can download the app and then take virtual tours of both locations on their mobile devices. Each tour identifies Library services, collections and other student facilities, guiding clients to the shelf location of books and journals as well as to group study rooms, computers, printers and other building facilities.

Enquiry Management System

In February 2013 a new enquiry management system was launched on the Library website. This resource allows clients access to a wide range of questions and answers relating to the services, resources and policies of UNSW Library without the need to contact the Library and wait for a response. The Library previously had a rudimentary client enquiry service which allowed clients to select a link to a web form, which they filled out and submitted. During staffed hours Library staff would respond to the email request. The new system encompasses a comprehensive knowledgebase which allows clients to view the top 5 current popular questions, search the knowledgebase at any time from any device, submit questions or standard requests via easy to use web-based forms and also to rate the usefulness of answers and provide feedback on answers that don't completely answer their questions.

Contact management is a major feature of the new enquiry management system, allowing staff to access all information entered by clients, including contact details, user type, feedback and previous incident activities. Having this information available will allow UNSW Library staff to assess the needs of the client based on their client type and their previous enquiries. The new system also provides staff with access to a wide range of analytical and survey tools.

Staff

Along with the physical and digital changes to UNSW Library's front-line service portfolio, CSU's staffing structure was also reviewed. In December 2011, what was then known as the UNSW Library Customer Support Unit underwent a workplace change process, reducing the total number of staff, increasing the number of supervisors, and creating a Client Services Team Leader position to oversee daily operations. The rationale was to put in place a structure that would in effect create UNSW Library's own version of the "Apple Store Effect", with "floor manager" supervisors leading front-line employees in the provision of high quality client services, contributing hands on, day to day guidance of staff in their work, continually refining work procedures and cross-training, up-skilling and developing staff skills so that all CSU staff would provide equitable, consistent client services across all three service point locations.

A strong client service skillset was considered essential for all staff, with a major focus placed on the recruitment of new staff who demonstrated strong customer service skills and experience, rather than focussing purely on previous library experience. Time was spent in identifying supervisors with demonstrated expertise in leading teams in the provision of quality client service, and an interest and enthusiasm for the job at hand. Library knowledge was not considered the most essential element of a potential staff members' skillset, particularly for supervisors, with the emphasis instead being placed on client service skills, alongside a willingness and enthusiasm for a move into the library sector. With all this said, a strong commitment to the library profession is desired and non-qualified staff are encouraged to pursue a library qualification.

Upon the completion of the Workplace Change in CSU, by the end of April 2012, the newly named Client Services Unit management team had successfully recruited a Client Services Team Leader, three new Team Coordinators and a number of new team members.

Intern Program

An exciting new development for CSU has been the introduction of an intern program as part of the restructure. Four new intern positions were created, with new (in final year of study or newly qualified) library graduates employed on twelve month fixed term contracts. CSU recruits interns from either the Library Technicians training at TAFE or university graduates – no differentiation is made between the two types of Library staff. During their time with CSU each intern works across all three physical library locations and participates fully in all activities of the unit. These are full-time, paid positions.

The intern program gives library graduates the opportunity to build a network of contacts within the library industry, gain valuable hands on work experience and increases their employment prospects in a sector that has fewer opportunities than in the past. The benefits of this program for UNSW Library include; recruitment of fresh faces, enthusiasm and ideas; identification of potential future permanent hires; and the opportunity to contribute to the development of the sector.

The intern program has been operating now for 18 months and has been a great success. The following quote from an intern who recently completed her twelve month contract exemplifies the feedback received:

“It has been amazing working at UNSW Library with the Client Services team. It has been a fantastic experience and huge learning curve. I've enjoyed so much of the past year, working with so many different people and getting a feel for the library environment”.

Staff Development

To assist in establishing a shared vision, goals and values for the CSU team, a Team Development workshop was held in July 2012. Prior to the workshop, CSU Management established a Client Service Code for the unit, providing staff with some core fundamentals to enable them to work cooperatively and collectively towards common goals (see *Appendix One: CSU Client Service Code* for details).

This workshop allowed CSU staff to gain a better understanding of their own and others' behavioural styles, enhancing their awareness, understanding and resilience, and brought the team together. A new team culture was cultivated with the focus on teamwork, delivery of consistent and quality services, and common goals and values.

Staff Rotations

Prior to the workplace change CSU staff were really only located in one “home” location, at Main, Law or COFA. Under the previous structure staff did not move between locations at all, which created a number of issues, including difficulties in managing staff shortages at any location, the development of “local” procedures, and a misplaced sense of “ownership” of that location.

This way of working was reviewed, and to align with the goal to build a specialised, client focussed work team that delivers consistent and high quality services across Main, Law and COFA libraries, CSU team members are now regularly work at all three locations on a rotation basis. This has allowed us to provide opportunities for team members to experience working with a variety of clients and colleagues across different faculties, and to share various tasks. Having all staff working across all three locations has encouraged collaboration and teamwork, has enabled supervisors to cover

staffing gaps with minimal effort and has created a more equitable standard of service across all three service point locations.

Conclusion

At UNSW Library CSU has studied best practice client service initiatives from across different sectors, and applied the key lessons to the academic library environment, always maintaining our focus on the three central pillars of service:

- meeting clients' needs for a greater level of self-service;
- offering help at point of need, be it web-based or staff-based; and
- recruitment and/or up-skilling of staff so that they are client-service oriented and flexible in handling a diverse range of queries from across the entire client community.

In doing so, our unit has been transformed. CSU Staff now work alongside clients to provide them with consistent, equitable, high quality client service across all three physical service point locations, and clients have the benefit of a wide variety of self-help tools that enable them to most effectively use UNSW Library's resources and find answers to queries quickly at point of need.

The main message to come from our achievements to date is that any change such as this needs to be applied holistically, as there is little point in working to change one of the "pillars" but leaving the others untouched. Physical change alone won't be successful. An institution must also be prepared to work to review and change its staff culture and virtual service offerings.

Appendix One : CSU Client Service Code

Client Service Ethos – our clients are our focus - we demonstrate commitment at all times and deliver on commitments; we set high standards for ourselves and take pride in serving our clients; we maintain consistent service levels across all service points.

Respect and Inclusion – we maintain a positive and supportive attitude with clients and colleagues; we explain our processes, policies and procedures in clear plain language; we ensure the privacy of all clients in accordance with UNSW policies.

Communication – we give our clients our full attention; we greet clients in a friendly, professional manner; we are open and approachable; we interact appropriately with our colleagues and ensure a good team image.

Timeliness – we are punctual for all shifts; we complete interactions with clients before leaving a shift; we assist clients, monitor the library and report problems even when not rostered.

Dress and Appearance – we are always well-presented; we always identify ourselves by wearing a name badge.

Staff Knowledge – we give accurate information, and keep up to date with new developments in the Library and the wider UNSW community; we refer clients on effectively to relevant colleagues, or to other UNSW services.

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