THE BUSINESS OF THE INDUSTRY

INCITE

It's the same – but different

Tim Burke has just returned to the business of subscription services after a bit of a sabbatical and says he's finding that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

You'd think that returning to subscription services after several years would be like getting back on a bike.

Well, it is, and it isn't.

It is the same, because the basic need is still there – that institutions still need specialised services to help them cope with the challenges of managing subscriptions, to enable them to focus their expertise on more client-focused activity.

These days it's called Business Process Outsourcing, BPO. A law firm, for example, might want to concentrate their expertise on the practice of law, so they'll outsource what they see as non-core functions like marketing, accounting, IT management – and managing subscriptions.

But then it isn't the same, because there has also been an enormous contraction of publishers into a small number of publishing empires, so there are simply fewer suppliers to deal with. Still, there are a lot who haven't been gathered up.

So much is delivered electronically these days. When I entered the information industry in the 80s, we were dipping our toes into online databases, and you had to be a speed-queen typist to keep the connect costs down. Then along came CD-ROM, the internet and the world wide web, with calm and easy interfaces that patrons could search themselves.

Nowadays I hear, particularly in hospital libraries, that they subscribe to journals, but then these odd things made of paper turn up, and they don't have anywhere to put them!

I've just joined global subscription company Prenax as Managing Director for the Australia, NZ and Asia-Pacific region. These days the majority of our business comes from multinational corporations who closed their libraries, then discovered that they are spending way too much on content, and way too much time on managing that content, if only they could determine who is getting what from whom, and at what cost.

The challenges for organisations, their libraries and us as suppliers of a service are substantially the same of course. With print subscriptions there are issues that don't arrive, publishers who don't return communications (and/or have never heard of email), invoices in exotic currencies with amounts and titles bearing no relation to what you've requested or renewed. And so on.

With electronic subscriptions in many cases you need both a lawyer and negotiator on hand to help you navigate the licence terms and pricing so you can get the content you want out to your patrons, and at a price that is fair to all. Then you have to police it, and you have to try and keep track of the volatility and shifting landscape of publishing on the web ("it was at that URL yesterday, where is it now?").

Sometimes, you need a friend – even if it's just a shoulder to cry on. That hasn't changed, either!

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A choir of 192 186

Imagine a choir of that size with no score, no conductor. The result is more a cacophony than a choir, but with a compelling message nevertheless. It's a message that university library patrons have been sounding for some time now through the medium of the Insync Surveys flagship benchmark Library Client Survey *and the results are helping those libraries refine their day-to-day business strategies.*

The *Library Client Survey* itself is more than a decade old. However, it wasn't until 2008 that we began to systematically analyse the vast amounts of open feedback that was being generated – between 1000 to 8000 comments per survey. The aggregate data – 192 186 responses from nearly all the universities in Australia, and some in New Zealand – now represents an excellent indicator of the experience and behaviour patterns of library users.

We asked survey respondents to "please give us your suggestions for improvement or any other comments about the library". When the responses began to flood in, we employed a software package to

Verbatim comments → Extraction of responses → Development of themes

help us classify the data and build some constructs around it. It's fair to say that automated analysis of open feedback can only go so far; we had to actually read each comment – yes, that is right, read every comment – to decipher responses, create themes and identify patterns. Comments were analysed and responses were quantified into themes and best practice categories.

The undertaking was well worth the effort. Qualitative data provides additional value and informs the benchmark results. The feedback provided insights into why library users thought and behaved the way they did and even suggested how their expectations could be better met.

It's necessary to look beyond the overall results at the differences between each of the demographic groupings. The comments for each community were cross-referenced by the various demographic groupings, including campus, faculty, and type of user. In addition, comparisons were made against the aggregate results.

Five best practice categories were identified – communication, service delivery, facilities and equipment, library staff, and information resources – in line with those used in the *Library Client Survey*. Responses were also classed into positive and negative feedback.

After four years of thematic analysis, themes and patterns have emerged. On the up side, there is overwhelming appreciation for staff and customer service, and overall satisfaction with service quality and delivery. Library staffs are portrayed as professional, approachable and helpful, fair, non-discriminatory, and proactive. Interlibrary and campus loans staff and operations attract positive feedback.

One can never have too many computers and printers, and the call for more laptop facilities and wireless is growing. However the focus shifts away from facilities and equipment into the quality and depth of information resources as we examine the data from university postgraduates and staff.

The demand for textbooks and course-specific readings is universal across the undergraduate cohort. However, all users want more access to full-text digital resources. The health of collections can't be assessed in isolation from the tools required to access them. Search tools (catalogue/metasearch) generate relatively high levels of frustration, and more so with the implementation of new search software for which

the library patrons have not been adequately prepared.

The correlations between the qualitative data shown here and our quantitative data are interesting. For example, we know that international students spend more time in the library and value face-to-face contact with library staff more than domestic students.

The strongest message that has emerged is to do with the library environment. There appears to be a clear divide between those who want to use the library as a place of scholarly learning, and those who want a more relaxed environment. This has everything to do with noise levels, and something to do with the generation gap. The challenge facing libraries is one of good design and supervision.

This year will mark our fifth year of work in the qualitative analysis space. We look forward to working closely with universities in examining the voices of library users and identifying the messages that emerge.

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> ## THE LIBRARY ENVIRONMENT."

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Insync Surveys will be at the ALIA Biennial Conference next month. Visit them on Stand 66 to get the latest news on the Library Client Survey and more.

LIS
MANAGEMENT IN FOCUS

LIS Management in Focus is a quarterly electronic publication sent directly to ALIA institutional members. It provides members with information about management products and services available, across areas of leadership, project management, industrial relations, copyright, human resource development and other topics of interest to library and information service managers. Want to know more?
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Best practice categories