



Innovative Practice

Recession-Friendly Library Market Research: Service Learning with Benefits

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Abstract

By partnering with two advanced marketing research classes, the W. Frank Steely Library at Northern Kentucky University obtained significant qualitative and quantitative market research at a minimal cost. The experience also afforded the library an opportunity to contribute to the service learning experiences of two senior level marketing classes.

Appointing a Marketing Work Team

Northern Kentucky University (NKU) is a regional, comprehensive state university, located just seven miles southeast of Cincinnati, Ohio in Highland Heights, Kentucky. NKU is a growing metropolitan university comprised of 15,000 students in undergraduate, graduate, and some doctoral programs. The campus has two libraries: the W. Frank Steely Library and the Chase Law Library.

In the summer of 2008, the Associate Provost for Library Services at W. Frank Steely Library appointed six members of the library faculty and staff to serve on a Marketing Work Team. This team was charged with determining needs through market research, promoting the library's services and products, and coordinating and supporting marketing efforts of the library as a whole. The team began meeting weekly to:

- identify internal and external audiences,
- formulate a marketing and communication plan for the library,
- design a logo and consistent look for all library publications, and
- realign the faculty liaison program.

Since the team's primary charge was marketing research and there was no budget to hire a consultant, it was necessary to maximize available resources. One of the team members had heard that a marketing class on campus had a field research component. Further investigation uncovered a program that paired senior advanced marketing research classes with campus departments in a service learning arrangement that allowed the students in the class to learn by simulating the skills of actual marketing researchers. The library was added to the client list for spring semester, and a successful partnership was initiated.

The Library as Client: Part 1

Early in the spring semester of 2009, the professor of Marketing 492 (Advanced Marketing Research) contacted the Marketing Work Team requesting background information that might be useful to the class. The Marketing Work Team forwarded the library's annual report, SWOT Analysis, strategic plan documents, and past student satisfaction surveys to the professor. Afterwards, the professor informed the library that the service learning experience would simulate that of a real marketing firm, with the library treated as a paying customer. He indicated that the class would think of the library as a brand, analyzing its current state and determining unmet needs and opportunities.

Since the library was currently obtaining quantitative assessment data through the 2009 LibQual+® survey (a web-based survey used by more than 1,000 libraries to evaluate service quality), the students decided to employ qualitative research methodology to supplement these LibQual+® findings. The students planned three 90 minute student-led focus groups (1 faculty, 2 student groups). Key discussion topics of the focus groups included current library usage, awareness of services, overall perceptions, and anticipated future needs. The students asked the library to provide restaurant gift cards in the amount of \$25 as an incentive to focus group participants, as well as snacks during the focus group sessions (an expense of less than \$600). One room in the library was used for videotaping focus groups, and a second room was used for simultaneous viewing by the other class members and interested library staff.

At the conclusion of the semester, the class provided the Marketing Work Team with audio recordings of the three focus group sessions, as well as a report of the qualitative research findings from the class (methodology, key findings, recommendations, and verbatim responses of the participants). Shortfalls were found in the areas of awareness of services, technology, and environment. The focus group report determined that most students and faculty were reasonably satisfied with the current services provided by the library, or at least the ones they were aware of. The students in the marketing class recommended that:

- interactive directional signage be installed on all floors of the library,
- student assistants be better trained,
- computer software in the library be standardized,
- social areas and quiet study areas be better delineated.

See Appendix 1 for an example of how their findings were presented.

The qualitative information gleaned from the focus groups nicely complemented the results of the LibQual+® survey, and presented valuable market research data to the Marketing Work Team. The library was so impressed with the quality of research acquired from the marketing students that a request was made to continue the service learning relationship for an additional semester with another group of students.

The Library as Client: Part 2

In the fall of 2009, the library began working with a second advanced marketing research class. The goal was to build on the foundation that the first class had established and to obtain additional feedback regarding user needs and areas of improvement for the library.

To familiarize this second MKT 492 class and professor with the library's most recent market research, the Marketing Work Team forwarded both the 2009 LibQual+® results and the focus group reports from the first class. Three student groups in this class were assigned to the library (one for undergraduate market research, one for graduate market research, and one for faculty market research), while two other groups in the class were assigned to other campus clients. Each of the three library student groups were paired with a librarian from the Marketing Work Team. The groups began meeting with their designated librarian to obtain background information for their survey. Each group of marketing students created a survey for their constituent area and presented the draft to the Marketing Work Team for approval. Three separate library surveys targeting undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty were distributed electronically across campus and were later analyzed by the individual class groups.

The librarians who had worked with each group were invited to hear the students report their findings--their final exam--and the library was given copies of each report. The reports included the survey and all responses, as well as analyses and recommendations (see Appendix 2 for examples of the analyses and a sample email invitation sent to survey participants). The undergraduate group acquired completed surveys from 246 students (3,834 were sent) and provided charts that summarized data from the main survey and the open-ended questions. Key findings from the undergraduate group revealed that students prefer a low contact approach when learning about library services; they find overall navigation of library services difficult, and those that live in the dorms use the library less. The group that surveyed the graduate students received 258 completed surveys (1,606 were sent) and found that while graduate students were reasonably satisfied with the services of the library, they would like more library orientation workshops targeting them, longer hours of operation, access to additional electronic

journals, and more opportunities for quiet study. The faculty group received 162 completed surveys (1,314 were sent) and found that faculty desired additional electronic journals spanning more disciplines, an easier-to-navigate web page, and more resources to assist them in teaching information literacy in their classrooms, as well as better customer service from students staffing the library's public service desks. Final reports from the marketing classes were forwarded to the Marketing Work Team, which plans to use the findings to frame the library's future marketing efforts. Because the survey distribution and analysis was conducted as part of the service learning experience of the marketing students, there was no financial cost to the library. The Chair of the Marketing Department indicated that comparable market research in the "real world" would have cost between \$10,000 and \$20,000.

Lessons Learned From This Win/Win Partnership

The service learning partnership between the W. Frank Steely Library and advanced marketing research classes provided insightful market research data at a very low cost to the library, as well as a valuable experiential learning opportunity for the students in the two classes. As a result of the experience, both parties gained a greater appreciation and awareness for the work of the other, and the benefits were plentiful.

The library's Marketing Work Team greatly benefited from the student's expertise in creating and analyzing focus groups and surveys. Additionally, the marketing students were able to approach issues with a fresh, unbiased viewpoint because they were not affiliated with the library. Because marketing students administered the focus groups and surveys, participants were able to provide honest, unfiltered responses, removing any bias that could have been present had library staff administered the research.

The service learning experience simulated real-life as the students attempted to coordinate impromptu meetings between their student groups and Marketing Work Team members to meet class deadlines. The students also learned the valuable lesson that they sometimes had to compromise on their group vision to meet the needs of their clients. The library was very pleased with both the focus group audio recordings and the surveys administered by the students. The professionalism of the marketing students and the support and cooperation of the two professors during both semesters contributed to the overall success of the program.

Next Steps

In the late spring of 2010, The Marketing Work Team met to compile data obtained from the focus groups conducted by the first marketing class, analyze survey data from the second marketing class, and evaluate the LibQual+ ® survey and a SWOT Analysis recently conducted with the faculty and staff of the library. From this combined data, the Work Team identified recurrent themes and formulated a list of recommendations for the Associate Provost of Library Services. This document was later shared with all faculty and staff members of the library (See Appendix 3).

As a result, changes have already been implemented to address some of the issues throughout the library:

- a fact sheet has been created for the Admission Department's student tour guides to ensure more factual information about the library is presented to prospective students,
- a customer service video is being developed for student employees in the Public Services area of the library, and
- the software on library computers has been investigated for standardization with the computers in labs.

To address some of the larger issues identified by the marketing research, four task forces were established to investigate possible solutions: a Signage Task Force, a Social Media Task Force, a Graduate Task Force and a Customer Service Task Force. These task forces all report to the Marketing Work Team and will make recommendations for improvement.

Conclusion

By partnering with two advanced marketing research classes at Northern Kentucky University, the W. Frank Steely Library was able to obtain meaningful market research data at a very low financial cost to the library. The experience also afforded the library an opportunity to contribute to the service learning experiences of two senior level marketing classes. This academic partnership proved to be well worth the time and money expended. Taking advantage of service learning opportunities at the university level can enrich the quality of library market research.

Library Marketing Work Team Members: Laura Sullivan (Chair), Mary Todd Chesnut, Marcia Johnson, Michael Providenti, Debbie Reichler, and John Schlipp

Special thanks to:

- Mike Brintzenhoff's Advanced Marketing Research (MKT 492) class, spring 2008
- Dr. Gregory Martin's Advanced Marketing Research (MKT 492) class, fall 2009

Appendix 1: An Example of Recommendations From the Marketing Class

Recommendations for Going Forward:

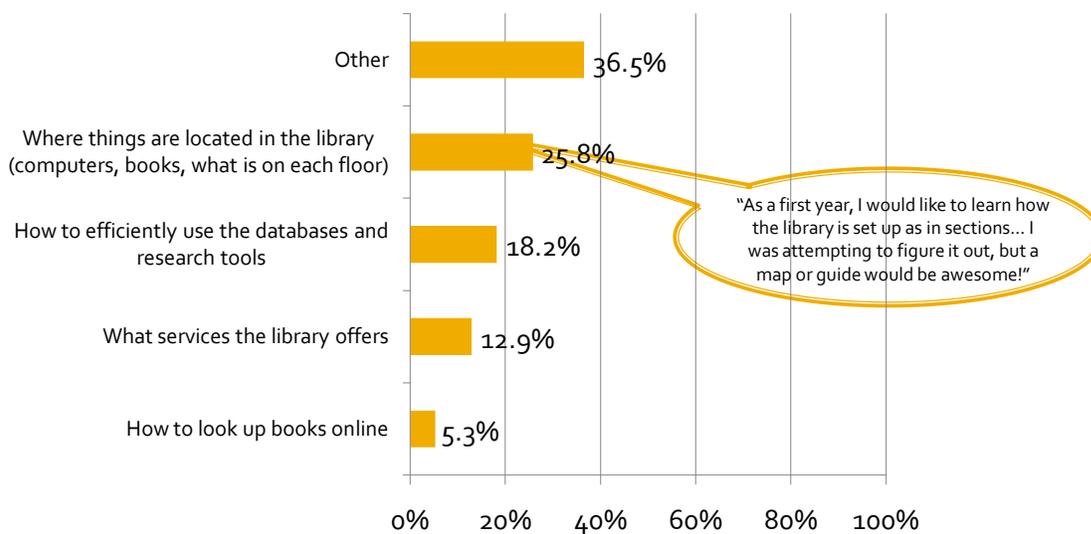
- Based on the insights gathered, we recommend focusing efforts in two primary areas
 - **User Touch Points**- most in the groups felt their library experience could be significantly enhanced with improved information about services. Suggestions included adding directories on every floor (with interactive screens), better training for internal staff (students) to make them “Solutions Managers,” standardization of computers and software at a higher level and increasing the amount of available digital information and learning tools
 - **Environment**- many recommended a clearer, environmental delineation between desired “social areas” and designated study areas. Study areas should be quiet rooms more geared towards individual or group work

Steely Library Research Project

Appendix 2: Examples of Marketing Class Data Analysis and an Example of an Email Soliciting Survey Participants--Faculty Group

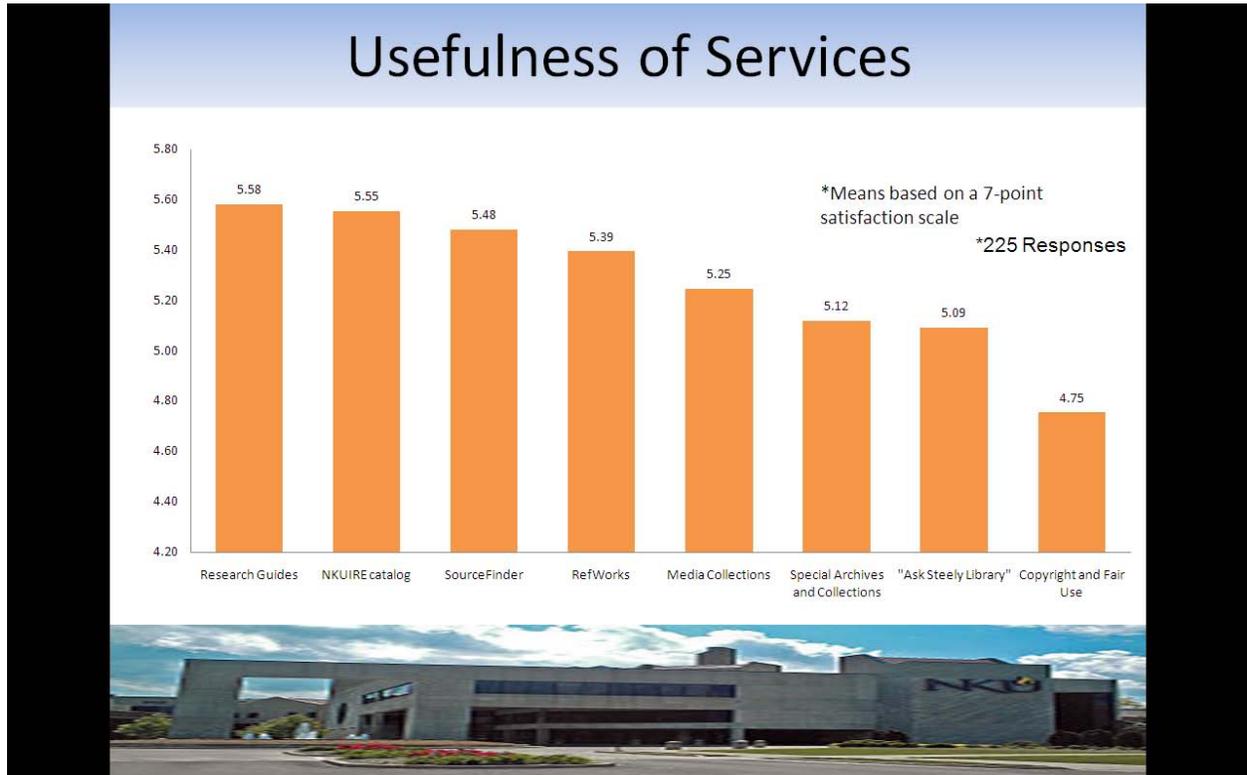
Example of Analysis From the Undergraduate Group

Open Ended Response - What is one thing you would like to learn most?



Base size = 93

Example of Analysis From the Graduate Group

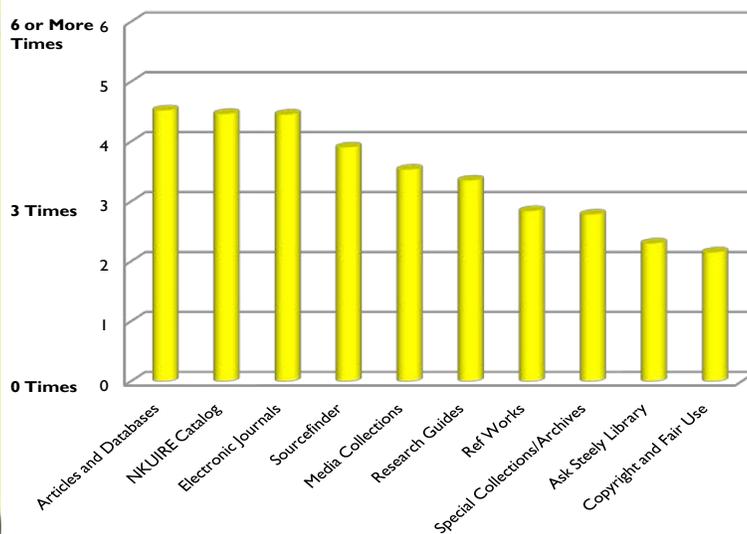


Example of Analysis From the Faculty Group



Faculty Personal Use

Personal Use in a Typical Semester



% of Respondents who DO NOT Use Resources at all in a typical semester	
Articles and Databases	23.6
NKUIRE Catalog	36.7
Electronic Journals	32.7
Sourcefinder	69.2
Media Collections	50.6
Research Guides	66.0
RefWorks	76.7
Special Collections/ Archives	85.5
Ask Steely Library	68.4
Copyright and Fair Use	78.6

Base=162

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Example of Email Soliciting Survey Participants for the Faculty Group

Dear NKU Faculty Member,

Hello, we are Advanced Market Research students at NKU conducting a research survey and we need your help because completion of this study is a requirement for us to graduate.

We are asking you to help by giving us 7 minutes of your time because you are an NKU faculty member who is very knowledgeable about the subject of our research. Our research client is NKU's Steely Library, which will be making changes in its operations in the near future to better serve faculty and students. Your participation in a short, anonymous survey will help determine what changes take place. Your comments, suggestions, and honest opinions are extremely important in making sure Steely Library is maximizing its full service potential.

When you click on the link below, you will be transferred to the survey site. This survey will be available for you to complete for only a limited time, so please help us out by responding today!

Link to survey:

Thank you!!

Appendix 3: Marketing Work Team Recommendations

Recommendations
Marketing Work Team
Summer 2010

The following recommendations are based on feedback from surveys (undergraduate, graduate, faculty/staff), LibQUAL+ data), and the most recent SWOT analysis:

1. Improve signage and directory.
2. Provide accurate Fact Sheet for student tour groups.
3. Improve customer service (see attached comments from library users).
4. Appoint committee to work with a Marketing Work Team representative related to library “identity”/branding.
5. Increase number of computers and examine differences in software (library computers vs. lab computers).
6. Clearly designate quiet and social areas.
7. Make graduate student audience a priority and address their concerns.

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