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The re-invention of the reference enquiry service : a case study of the National Library Board, Singapore

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Abstract :

This short paper tells the story of how the National Library Board tries to figure out different ways to allow the customer to reach the reference librarian to make his enquiry. The ideas presented here are being prototyped during the period May to Nov 05, and I am hoping that by the Oslo IFLA conference in Aug 05, we will have some results of the prototype to share with the IFLA community.

Background

1 The National Library Board (NLB) was formed in Sep 1995, as a result of a major review of publicly funded libraries undertaken by the Ministry of Information and the Arts from 1992 to 1994. This resulted in a report called the Library 2000 which became the blue-print for the NLB's last 9 years.

2 The major thrust of the NLB's first 9 years of revamp of its services took place at the public libraries, where self-service was aggressively prototyped and implemented as a way to overcome the tremendous problems faced by staff in attempts to shorten queuing time when customers came to the libraries to borrow and return books.

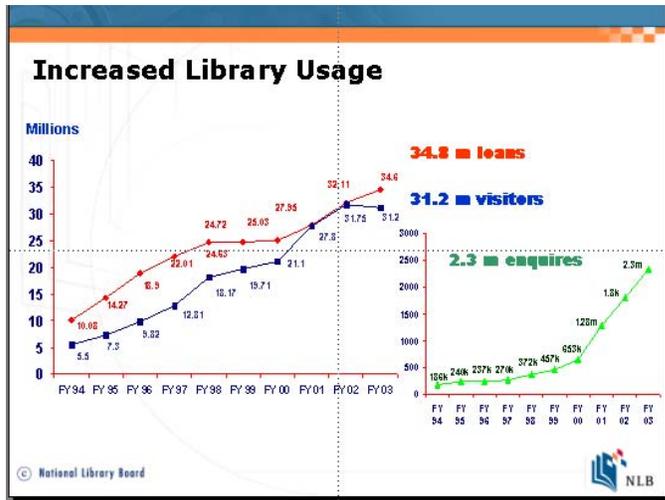
3 The situation was so bad that on weekends, the queue could be 100 people long and it could take more than one hour for a customer to borrow a book and another hour to return the book.

4 All these have changed now, with the implementation of the radio-frequency tagging system, which now allows customers to borrow a book within less than a minute 95% of the time and zero seconds to return a book via a book-drop that is equipped with a radio-frequency sensor. When the books are dropped into the book-drop, the loan of the books is automatically cancelled.



5 Several other innovative services were also prototyped and implemented to improve the level of service. As a result of these efforts, annual loans at public libraries grew three-fold from 10 mil to 31 mil over the nine years, and annual visitors grew five-

fold, from 6 mil to 31 mil over the same period, without a corresponding increase in space nor staff.



6 Now that the service quality and level have improved significantly at the public libraries, the NLB is focusing its efforts to improve on the way we are offering our reference enquiry service, and we would like to find ways to serve our customers better.

The challenge

7 The interesting situation in Singapore’s public and national libraries is that we are finding it hard to get our customers to ask us interesting and challenging questions, even though we know that many of them have an information need. We know that users have information needs because when we go around the library seeking them out, we will always find customers who are lost but who are not willing to go to the librarian to ask the questions. It is an intriguing situation that we still do not understand very well.

8 Over the past few years, the NLB teams had been working hard to find new ways to reach our customers, to let them know how they can use our reference enquiry service to help them in their personal or work lives. However, the results are not as encouraging as desired.

The strategy

9 The new strategy that we are now thinking of prototyping for our reference enquiry service is to explore different ways for the public to reach us, whether via a reference information desk, via phone, email, chat, a cybrarian service, or a handheld gadget.

10 Currently, we provide the following channels to facilitate an enquiry from a customer :

- face-to-face service via the information desk,
- telephone
- fax
- email
- website links
- cybrarian service



11 We feel that although there are quite a number of channels, the access to the channels may not be as convenient as it appears, and we want to improve on the way we can enable the customer to reach us more easily from wherever they are. We want to make our enquiry and information service hassle-free from the perspective of our valued customer.

12 One idea that we are exploring is to place more cybrarian kiosks at the library so that the user is reminded of the fact that they can ask the librarian for help from wherever they are in the library.

13 The other way is to have a simplified cybrarian kiosk in the form of a telephone enquiry service, with the telephone located in several places in the reading room, to allow the customer to speak with the librarian from anywhere in the library,

14 We are also thinking about the use of the mobile phone and the palm-tops which many more young people own and use today, and they seem more comfortable using these rather than going to a kiosk to ask their question.

15 We ask ourselves questions such as these :

- can we allow the customer to use the sms on their mobile phone to send us questions, and we respond to them using sms?
- can we let the customer use their palm-top or any other gadget that they are comfortable using, to send us their questions and for us to send our response to them via their gadget?

16 We also want to make sure that if the customer makes an enquiry, we are able to help the customer get the exact information that he needs, whether the information is in digital or physical form.

17 We therefore are also looking at the NLB's document delivery service, which we feel has to be more effective to complement the enquiry service, ie. if we want to make it very easy for the customer to get the information or document that he needs for whatever purpose.

The prototype

18 The question that we ask ourselves is this :

With these proposed improvements to allow the customer to reach the librarian much more easily, will our customer actually come forward to use the service, or is this a futile exercise, trying hard to reach the customer who may not have or feel a need to want to consult the librarian, in whatever way we feel may be more convenient to him?

19 We do not know, and we will only know after we have prototyped the services in the next few months, and after we have done the promotions for the services that we plan to have for our customers.

20 I look forward to sharing the results of our prototype at the 2005 Oslo IFLA Conference.