Customer needs: The engines of change for Government Libraries and Information Centres

Meeting the silent customers' needs - examples of two simple evaluation methods in the Welsh Assembly Government Library and Publications Service.

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Abstract

The National Assembly for Wales is the democratic body created in 1999 to take over the powers of the Welsh Office bringing real political power to Wales from Westminster, London.

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> *(Wales: a better country, Welsh Assembly Government, 2004).*

The National Assembly meeting in Plenary is the highest political decision-making body. It has delegated most of its "government" functions to the First Minister (who in turn has made delegations to other Ministers). The Cabinet

are supported by the devolved administration, the Welsh Assembly Government.

The Assembly Library and Publications Service within the Welsh Assembly Government provides:

- *an internal service to support the decision-making, policy development, service delivery and compliance processes of the Assembly Government by making available a extensive range of information resources and providing a high quality advisory service on information and research matters; and*
- *an external service to provide and promote public access to Assembly publications and information assets in electronic and hard copy formats.*

We serve approximately 7,500 members of staff and dispatch over 2,000 publications per month to external customer requests (in paper and electronic formats).

During 2005-2006 we decided to tackle 2 areas where to improve our understanding of our customer needs and the impact we have:

1. *Get feedback from our disparate external customers*
2. *Get evidence of impact from users who had been passive recipients of information and*

This presentation will cover our journey in finding more out about our customers in these three areas. For each area examples of the simple survey/feedback tools (such as the postcard we have piloted and are now using with all external customers) will be included and details provided of the lessons we have learned along the way.

Introduction

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The Assembly Library and Publications Service provides a service to the officials working in the Welsh Assembly Government and to external customers who require Welsh Assembly Government publications or information.

Our aims are to provide:
- an internal service to support the decision-making, policy development, service delivery and compliance processes of the Assembly Government by making available a extensive range of information resources and providing a high quality advisory service on information and research matters; and
- an external service to provide and promote public access to Assembly publications and information assets in electronic and hard copy formats.

We serve approximately 7,500 members of staff and dispatch over 2,000 publications per month to external customer requests (in paper and electronic formats).

During 2005-2006 we decided to start a process to explore 2 areas to improve our understanding of our customer needs and the impact we have:

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2. Get evidence of impact from users who had been passive recipients of information and

This paper will cover our simple, service-focused journey to find out more about our customers' needs in these two areas.

Get feedback from our disparate external customers

The Publications team in the Library service has the central responsibility for the Welsh Assembly Government "Publication Scheme" and as such maintains the archive of our organisation's publications. We receive enquires

via a phone enquiry line, email enquiries and orders from our online catalogue. Approximately 500 individuals contact us each month, with 45% of enquiries requiring more than one publication and 25% of all enquiries classed as "complex" as enquirers are unsure of the range, name or even if a publication on their area of interest exists. We dispatch over 2,000 publications each month, in paper, electronic or alternative accessible formats depending on the customer requirements.

When emailing an electronic version of a publication we routinely ask for feedback on the service we deliver, and it is relatively easy for customers to respond to let us know whether our service is meeting their needs. We were conscious that customers who received paper copies via the postal system did not have an easy way to let us know if we met their requirements. The senior library team decided to ask our Library Assistants, who provide the frontline publications enquiry service and have valuable qualitative insights on how we meet customer needs, to think of innovative ways for us to gather feedback.

The team of Library Assistant staff looked at how commercial distributors of paper publications sought feedback from customers who didn't use electronic media and suggested a regular mailshot to previous customers to ask about our service quality. They disregarded this approach once they considered the additional administrative strain that this would place on the service and the potential errors involved in posting out to individuals who were no longer at the address we held. They then came up with the idea of a postcard, with an attractive cover that could be used as a promotional tool, with our contact details and some simple questions with a space for comments. In order to maximise returns we asked for a "freepost" service, so that our library pays postage on the postcards that are returned.

Using the postcards to both gather feedback from customers and as a tool for promotion maximised our ability to communicate with the customers who didn't use electronic means to communicate with us. Postcards are one of the marketing tools to capture the attention of customer who needs information from traditional media sources, "beyond the confines of the library" (Ashcroft and Hoey 2001).

As administrators of the Publication Scheme we are aware of our organisations responsibilities regarding the Welsh Language. As our postcard set out to gain feedback from customers who interacted with us in English and Welsh the team of library assistants designed the questions to enable both languages to have equal prominence. The team contacted our internal graphical design unit who came up with an attractive design. The designers suggested that the side of the postcard which had our contact details and images of publications could be re-used and printed as large scale poster for distribution to the network public libraries in Wales.

Postcard cover:

Manylion cyswllt/Contact details:-

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
Canolfan Cyhoeddiadau
Parc Cathays
Caerdydd
CF10 3NQ

Publication Centre
The National Assembly for Wales
Cathays Park
Cardiff
CF10 3NQ

Ffon/Tel: 029 2082 3683

Ffacs/Fax: 029 2082 5239

E-bost/E-mail:
assembly-publications@wales.gsi.gov.uk

Gwefan/Website:
http://www.cyhoeddiadau.cymru.gov.uk
http://www.publications.wales.gov.uk

The team of library assistants brought a range of questions to the senior team for us to consider which should be included on the back of the card. We discussed the options, piloted some on email customers and selected:

1.   Publications Staff were courteous and helpful
        Roedd staff y Canolfan Cyhoeddiadau yn gwrtais ac yn wasanaethgar

2.   The Publications sent were the ones I requested
        Derbyniais y cyhoeddiadau cywir a ddymunais

3.   I have used the Publications Service on previous occasions and will use it again
        Defnyddiais y Gwasanaeth Cyhoeddiadau o'r blaen, a byddwn yn defnyddio eto

Respondents are asked either to agree or disagree with each statement and there is a space for comments.

The questions were selected specifically to ascertain, in a simple way, whether the service met their needs and also if they are likely to use our service again.

The effect of gathering this information has been significant in 5 main ways:

1. Our "silent" customers are now able to respond directly to us, and let us know if we're meeting their needs. Some have used the postcards to ask further questions about Assembly information sources, or make

suggestions for our service. For example a postcard comment suggested we made our contact details more visible on the website (we took this on board and were able to influence the web team so we now have a "tab" straight to our details on every page of the Welsh Assembly Government website).

2. We can see the impact of our service as "knowledgeable experts" in Assembly information, not just pushing out exactly what the customer asks for recommending further relevant publications.

3. The Library Assistants involved have each been able to identify how working on this project has been one of the areas of work they enjoyed during their performance reviews.

4. Each day staff are eager to look through the postcards we've received – the only issue has been that though only 2% of returns have been negative the team have taken them very seriously.

5. The senior management team in our Department have been very impressed with the responses we see. Our Director asks to see our postcards and thanks staff directly.

Using the postcards has been a simple way for us to start to measure customer needs. We are now exploring how we could use the same/similar questions on our new internet OPAC for online ordering which is due to be released in the Autumn 2006. It will be interesting to find out how the electronic customer compares to our postal customers.

Get evidence of impact from users who had been passive recipients of information

The Procurement Team within the Library are responsible for circulating journals on distribution lists, tendering and disseminating newspapers across the organisation to internal customers and tendering and purchasing standing orders for annual/regular publications such as yearbooks.

These items are requested by staff in departments who make an initial business case on their request form. They then receive the items on a regular basis with little option for us to discuss with them if the items meet their ongoing information needs.

The senior management team decided that we needed to assess the impact and ongoing requirement for these items on an annual basis. The Procurement team with the senior management team decided that we needed details of what aspects of work were supported by the resource and what the consequences would be if they weren't receiving the item. The following 2 questions were agreed as providing us with the information we needed to continue our investment in their information resource:

This item supports these areas of my work (please tick all/any which apply)
Policy
Programme
Legal/Legislation
Professional Development
None (Cancel my subscription)
Other - Please Specify

Please finish this sentence:
"If I didn't receive this item the consequences would be..."
NB " Would not be able to do my job" is not sufficient, we need specific examples.

The Library Assistant who administers the newspaper, journal and standing order dissemination emailed the questions to all 1,886 recipients (in smaller segments, blind copying recipients so that individuals couldn't inadvertently "reply to all") of these resources. He included brief details of the online sources we subscribe to, and could subscribe to if savings were made, as potential alternatives to the paper copies. We indicated that non-response would result in the cancellation of their resource, so we achieved a refreshingly high response rate over 80%.

Results

As a result of the survey we were able to cancel 5% of newspaper, journal and standing orders. Respondents made a number of suggestions – including their desire for increased electronic access to resources, so we were able to use this saving to purchase additional electronic journals and an electronic reference book collection.

The responses to our question that asked staff to finish the sentence "If I didn't receive this item the consequences would be..." have been particularly useful revealing the high importance and impact that most customers report on the resources they receive from us. Culturally it's also had a refreshing impact as individuals had to consider that the item that they value so highly would not get to them with out our services.

Lessons learned included that we were simply too ambitious in our original email to 1,886 staff, as we had anticipated a return of 50% maximum. We were simply unable to cope with the high return rate quickly and efficiently and chase non respondents in a timely manner. Therefore this year we are intending to stagger the survey over the year, sending out a batch of emails each month which will be more easily analysed.

We had no unfavourable comments to the email – even though we are aware that many staff feel overwhelmed by the number of emails they receive (from our organisation wide staff surveys). One member of the senior management team commented that "this is an excellent way of finding out why you send me (the newspaper's name) each day and what I do with it".

A further benefit has been for the library assistant involved as he is now able to see the organisational benefits and importance of his work – 25% of staff rely on him for resources that are of direct benefit to their daily work. We have used the statistics we gathered to estimate how much the information would cost if we weren't delivering it centrally as a demonstration of the library as a central "shared service" providing real benefits in terms of cost and efficiency.

Conclusion and forward look

In conclusion these surveys have allowed us to explore how previously "soundless" services' meet the needs our customers. We have seen practical direct benefits, including:

- increased job satisfaction of our staff working on these surveys because they are getting feedback on the services they provide – before this they had no way of knowing the impact, and

- learning from our customers on how to improve services to meet their needs and recognising that "silent services" can have significant impacts on meeting our customers requirements.

Our business plan for this year has been shaped by this experience and we will continue on our journey to explore improving and measuring how our service meets customer needs.

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