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Relieving Library Anxiety: The Application of Relationship Marketing to Libraries

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Relieving Library Anxiety

The Application of Relationship Marketing to Libraries

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What is Library Anxiety?

Library anxiety is a research-based phenomenon that addresses undergraduate (Mellon, 1986) and graduate (Onwegbuzie & Jiao, 2000) students' perceived barriers to effectively using library resources. McAfee (2018) notes the affectual response from students to their first exposure of the academic library is one of debilitating shame. It involves students' overwhelming fear of being viewed as uneducated about using the library, which they assume is unique to them. It also assumes a possible perception of librarians as being unapproachable rather than customer-service driven.

What is Relationship Marketing?

"Marketing is the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large" (American Marketing Association, 2013). Relationship marketing (RM) is a marketing concept defined as the "... process of meeting customers' needs on a continuous and repeating basis by developing a long-term, one to one relationship with individual customers" ("Relationship marketing," 2016). This approach has traditionally been embraced in for-profit service businesses but is also applicable to libraries and other nonprofits. Libraries that engage in RM seek to identify the wants and needs of customers and to design services, programs, and resources to meet those needs while also involving customers in the process. This instills in them a feeling of ownership of and participation in all aspects of the library program.

What Does the Literature Say?

Library marketing has traditionally been transactionally focused, primarily using only one element of the marketing mix, promotion (Booth, 1993). Our library has chosen to embrace a RM approach by focusing on long-term relationships rather than isolated interactions ("Relationship marketing," 2016). With the prevalence of library anxiety (Mellon, 1986), there seems to be a need to look beyond library literature for best practices from the business world that might help to address this problem. While libraries and businesses define success differently, the approaches used to achieve success can be based on the same theoretical framework. RM has been documented to positively impact a business's profits (Sin, Tse, Chan, Heung, & Yim, 2006), and similarly, librarians can potentially adopt these approaches to achieve organizational goals. While the manner in which this approach can be adopted will vary, the concept remains equally applicable regardless of the size or culture of the library.

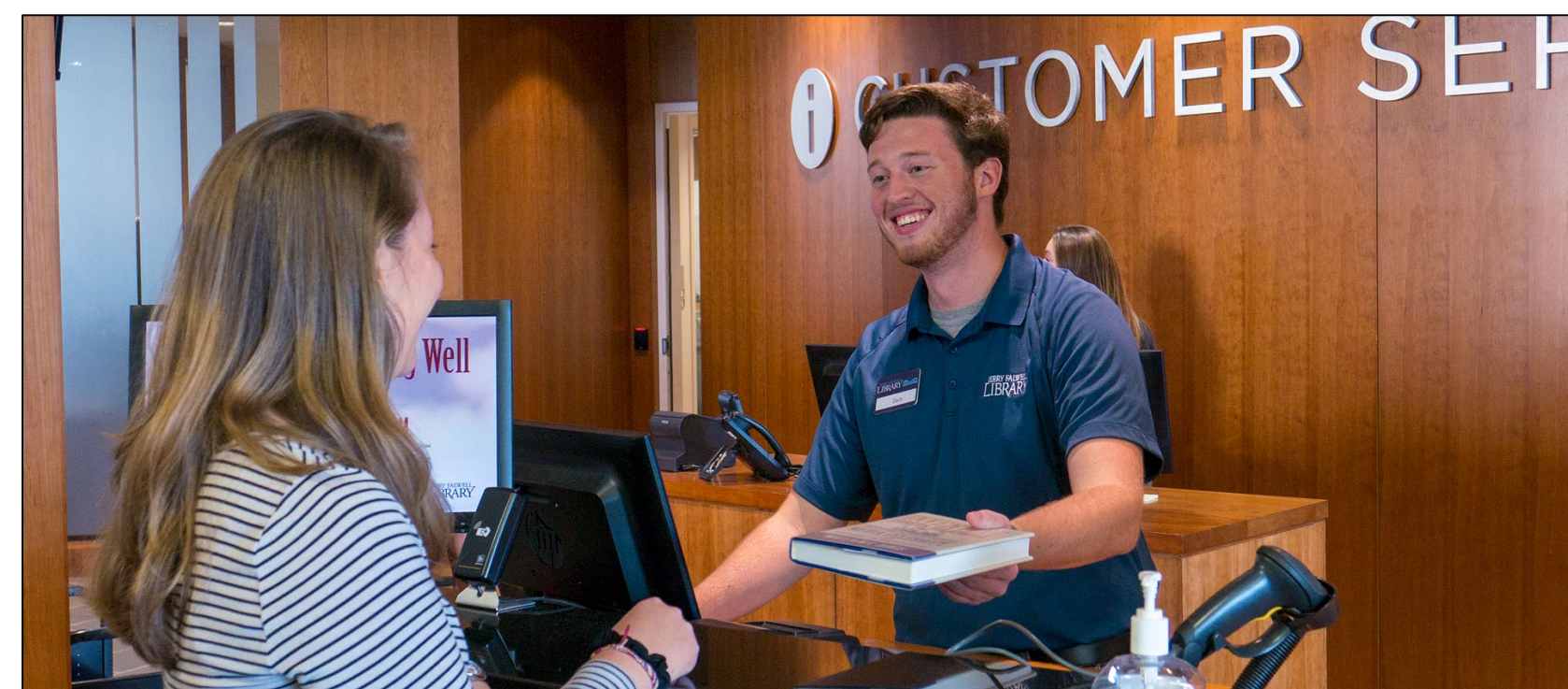
What Sources Did We Use?

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How Did We Implement This Concept?

WIFI Customer Service

RM has been integrated into our customer service philosophy, which entails an intentional emphasis on approachability, professionalism, and hospitality. A Customer Service Taskforce was established in the spring of 2012 to address an organizational desire to improve customer service and reduce potential library anxiety among users. The resulting customer service philosophy used the acronym WIFI and was rolled out in a series of training events over the next several years.



WIFI Customer Service & YOU



Library Services Fair

The RM approach was further ensconced in the creation of a Library Services Fair. The fair was developed as a means to market library resources, services, and spaces while also facilitating interpersonal connections with students, faculty, and staff. The end goal was to not only share information about the library but to also help customers feel comfortable with approaching librarians for future questions and research assistance. This was accomplished through a fun carnival-style interactive event centered around an annual theme.



Social Media

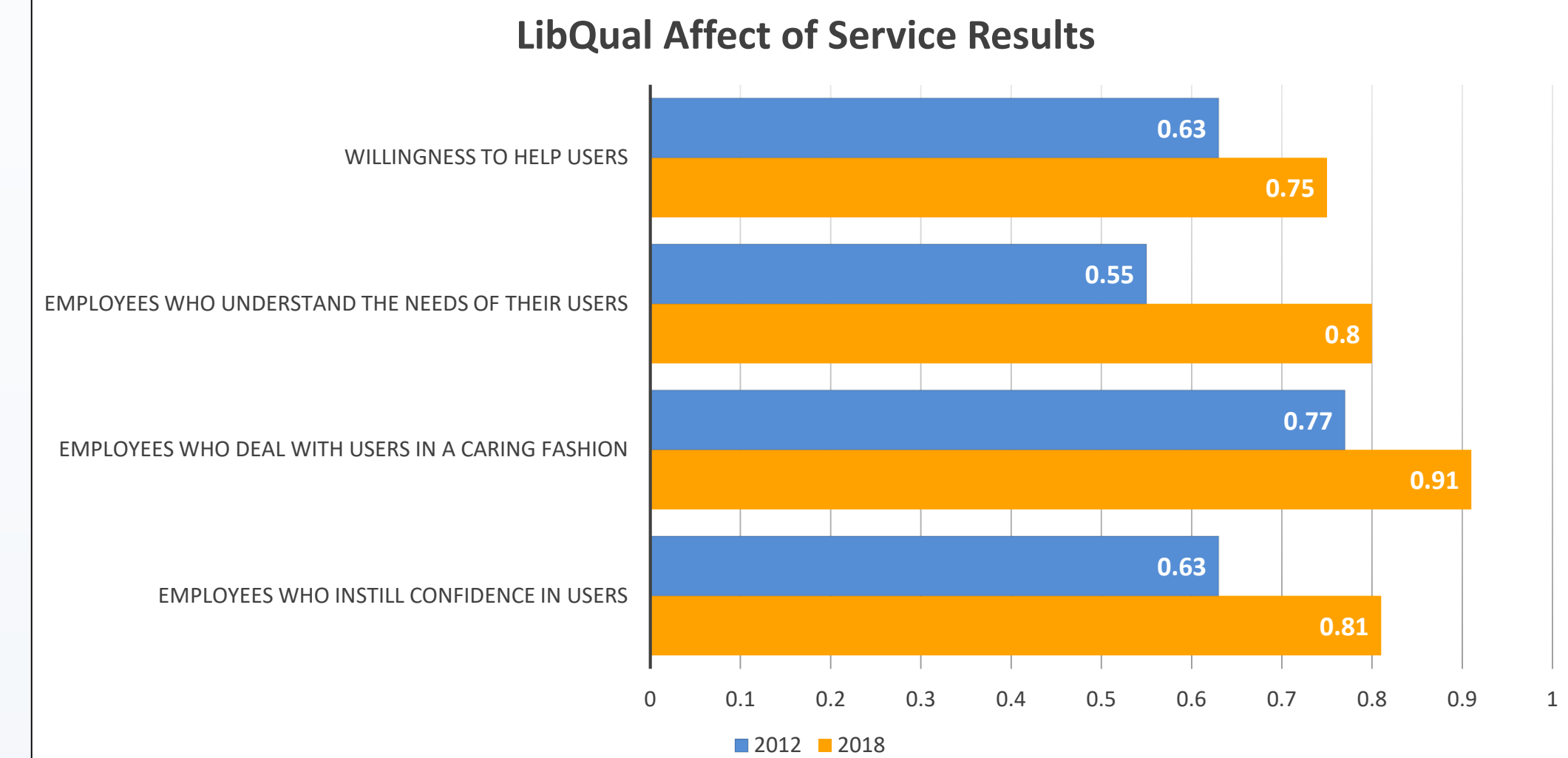
RM is also the ruling paradigm of our social media strategy. While the library already had a social media presence on Twitter and Facebook, it was a fledgling effort without any real direction or consistent marketing plan. As a result, a Social Media Committee was formed in the summer of 2013 and a relationship marketing approach was developed. Information shared through our platforms seeks to encourage reciprocal dialog, regardless of whether or not it relates to library resources and services. Content is created with an eye toward establishing a reputation of relevance. By taking this approach, the library social media presence can be seen as a source of interesting and useful information without saturating the audience with overt library messaging. Instead, library information is sandwiched within other content several days a week.



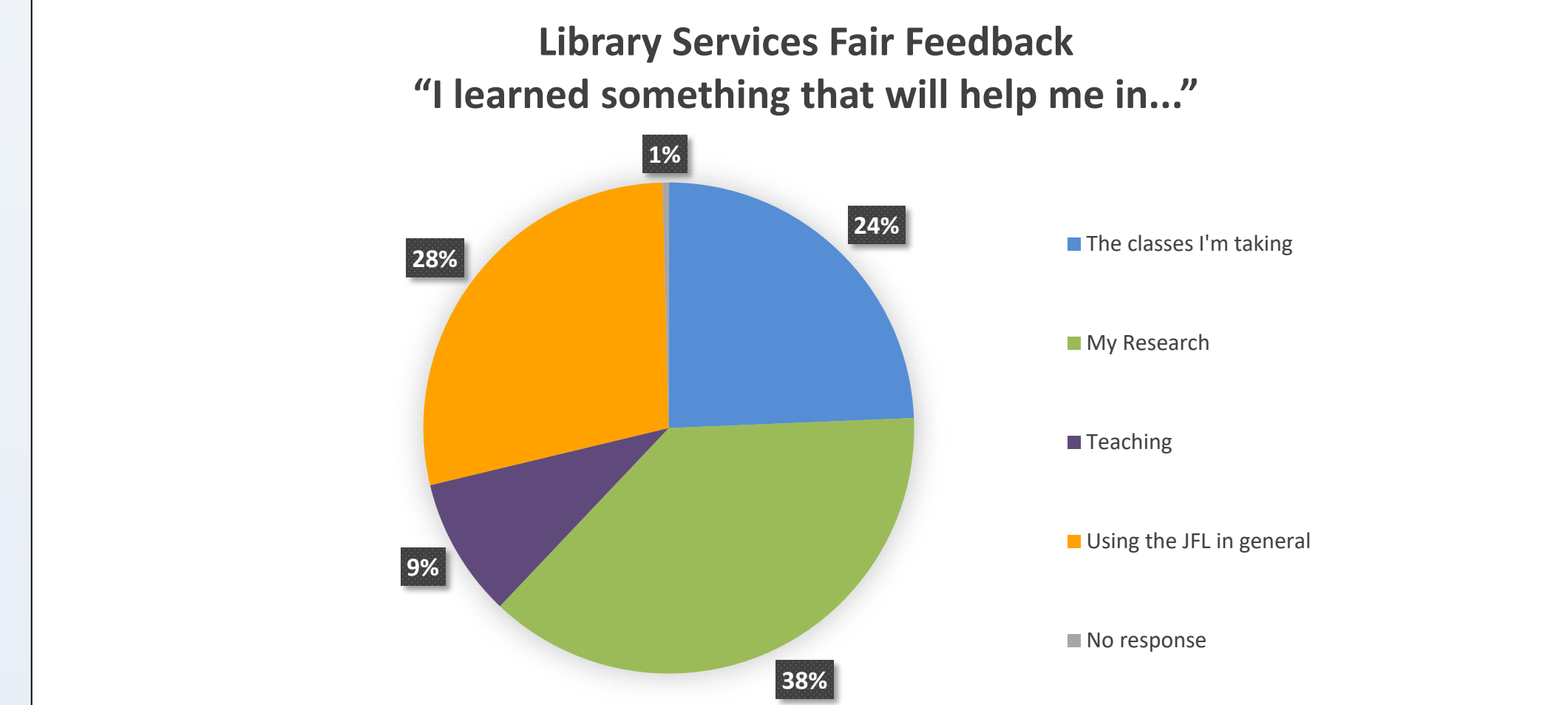
HUMANS OF JFL The Series



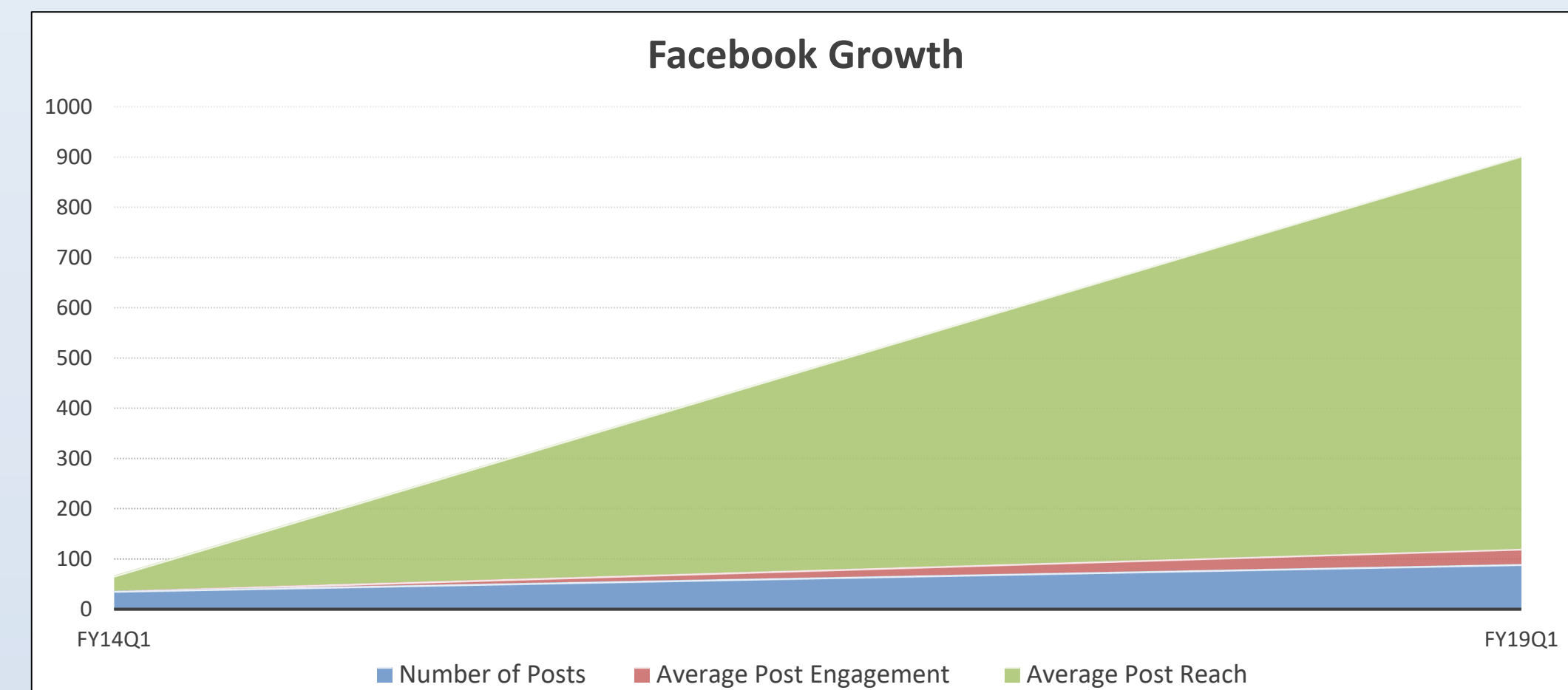
What Was the Result?



A comparison of LibQUAL+® Survey results from 2012 and 2018 show an increase in perceived service levels on the Affect of Service questions. These questions specifically address aspects of service that impact customers' levels of comfort in using library resources and asking for help, in effect combating library anxiety. A 0 rating indicates that the library is meeting basic expectations, and anything above a 0 is the degree to which our library exceeds expectations. A 0.35 was our organizational target.



A feedback survey following the 2018 Library Services Fair revealed that participants' learned information at the fair related to their coursework, research, teaching, and general library use. Presumably, this knowledge will help to reduce library anxiety by increasing confidence in abilities in these areas.



After adopting an RM approach, our Facebook statistics regarding the number of posts, post engagement, and post reach has increased steadily even in the midst of new algorithms instituted by Facebook.

What Is Our Conclusion?

This focus on a defined, collectively-adopted model of RM has helped create a culture in which library staff and faculty recognize the value of fostering relationship with customers, and the perception thereof. Marketing in libraries is a topic for which there is little empirical research. This exploratory analysis of our library's implementation of RM serves to further the discourse by applying empirical research related to marketing in the business context to a library environment. Employing RM is one approach to the alleviation of library anxiety. Empirical research related to RM in libraries is a next step in a research agenda on this topic.