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. McKee (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 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, Tae, 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?**


**What Was the Result?**

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.

**What Is Our Conclusion?**

This is based on a defined, collectively-adopted model of RM that helps create a culture in which library staff and faculty recognize the value of fostering relationships 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. Empirical research related to RM in libraries is a next step in a research agenda on this topic.