

FROM THE INSIDE

Building your value story and business case ***Observations from a marketing faculty and (former) librarian perspective***

by Leslie Simmel

Over the past 20 years, the continual deployment of new information technologies (IT) has wreaked havoc with library services. Fortunately, enterprising academic librarians have embraced the virtual services that deliver information to users' desktops in ever more convenient ways. Many also are addressing the changing needs of their users by renovating their library facilities. Resources not previously thought to be part of a library are being brought together to support not only individual inquiry, but also communities of practice. Libraries now have high-tech conference rooms where team members can gather to collaborate on term projects; new information commons that bundle research advice with just-in-time technical support; and, of course, the much debated cyber cafés for the weary needing a lift.

I confess I have more than a passing interest in these changes. Having begun my professional life as a librarian at Bentley College in Waltham, Massachusetts, my career had shifted as opportunities unfolded and interests evolved—first into marketing management in the IT industry and then into teaching at the university level. Disheartened at first by technology's disruption of traditional information services, it is now exciting to see how libraries are reinventing themselves and engaging techniques from marketing to do so. Creating a “one-stop shopping” experience has been particularly effective in drawing the largest group of users—the students—back into the library. Not only are these libraries reclaiming their role as intellectual centers on campus, they are competing with student centers to provide access to social and cultural events. Happily, students are flocking back.

One size does not fit all

Despite occasional grumbling from disaffected traditionalists, most faculty and administrators also seem to appreciate the makeover. With coffee in hand, we sink gratefully into a lounge chair in the library to check out the latest news headlines on the Web. Using one of the subscription databases to read an article at home or in the office streamlines the delivery of research materials to our point of need. And scanning books through the self-checkout station saves precious minutes before the dash to class. These capabilities—and many more—have enriched our consumer experience.

But the library affects us in other ways, too. Regrettably, many academic libraries have been slow to recognize the value of their services to faculty and administrators as we go about the work of managing the business of an educational enterprise. Services help professors working on curriculum design to improve product quality (enhance course offerings), directors of admissions to increase revenue (boost enrollment), and department chairs to make their programs more competitive (recruit instructors). The value of services to users operating in a “business context” is quite different—and usually much more objective—than it is to users operating in a “consumer context.” Business users want products and services that help them work in more effective and

less costly ways. Delivering value to business users affects not only how services are created, but also how their benefits and worth are communicated.

Case in point

Early in 2005, it seemed that information literacy (IL) instruction would come into its own after Geoffrey Nunberg, a Stanford linguist, announced in the New York Times that “. . . information literacy will have to pervade every level of education and every course in the curriculum.” A flood of papers and presentations have exhorted faculty and librarians to collaborate on course-integrated IL instruction. However, many programs are still struggling to gain traction on campus. Focusing on the benefits to students, proponents of IL instruction have tended to neglect the upside for faculty and staff. Pressures on instructors to improve productivity continue to escalate. Often seen as “still more work,” proposals to partner with librarians can fall on deaf ears. At the same time, competitive and funding woes have forced college and university administrators to take a hard look at spending, sometimes making it difficult for them to budget for these programs.

I started thinking about this disconnect a few years ago. In 1999, I had joined the Bentley teaching faculty, specializing in business-to-business marketing. As a full-time instructor, I was especially interested in how the library might help me with a new core undergraduate offering. Integrating marketing, finance, and operations modules, the course required students to develop a business plan for a client’s product or service. The learning curve was intense for students and faculty alike.

Along with other instructors, I used the course-integrated research and IL instruction services provided by the reference librarians. Of course, students benefited enormously from these services. Not only did they learn how to pull together the resources appropriate to prepare an opportunity analysis, they also enhanced their skills for evaluating the data on which their sales forecasts and business plans would rest. I also benefited from these services—but in very different ways. IL instruction, briefing books (research guides), and consultations with the librarians helped me structure student assignments, come up to speed on industries, and identify relevant electronic resources. As a result, I became more productive and, I would argue, more effective as an instructor.

Assess value-in-use

Indeed, by incorporating library services in their own course offerings, as described above, faculty do act more like business users than consumers. We, too, seek out products and services to help us work more effectively and efficiently. Cast in this light, it is not a stretch to see how some of the value estimation methods used in business marketing might help libraries understand the needs of their business users and create more compelling cases for the adoption and financial support of their services. A technique known as value-in-use assessment seems particularly promising because it uses in-depth interviews to gather data from customers about the benefits and costs of using a product or service.



What better way to develop an understanding of the impact your services have on faculty (for instance) than to sit down and talk with them about it? Interviews give them the opportunity to open up about the good, the bad, and the ugly. Interviews give you the opportunity to probe for detailed information about how and why they employ your access, reference, and instructional offerings (e.g., e-reserves, chat, IL classes). What benefits, if any, do faculty enjoy from a specific service? How do those benefits impact their teaching, research, and own service activities? For example, does an instructor's sense of "being more productive" using course-integrated IL instruction translate into any time savings? If so, how much? In what types of activities? Finally, what are the costs associated with using a service? How much time do instructors invest in discussing assignments with librarians? Do they have to re-work any materials provided?

Assessing value-in-use can also shed light on any variations users experience with your service because of differences in their applications and situations. Turning again to course-integrated IL instruction, it stands to reason that the benefits and costs associated with a service might well differ depending on such things as discipline (e.g., sociology vs. marketing), course design (e.g., structured assignments dependent primarily on secondary research vs. interdisciplinary field-based projects), and teaching status (e.g., full-time vs. part-time). A value model can emerge from this type of analysis that provides deep insight into the experiences of different users. Such a model also can provide estimates of the financial impact a service has on the institution overall.

Learn from your business users

During the past year and a half, Colleen Anderson (head of reference services, Bryant University, Smithfield, Rhode Island) and I have put value-in-use assessment to the test on our own campuses. With the support of faculty and librarians,¹ we built a simple value model for course-integrated IL instruction from a faculty perspective. To date, we have interviewed 16 full-time and part-time faculty members across the humanities, social and behavioral sciences, natural sciences, and business disciplines. Not surprisingly, the benefits reported by faculty using this service far outweigh the costs. Indeed, the only cost faculty identified was the time spent with librarians to determine how best to integrate the instruction into their classes. While estimates ranged from 15 minutes to two hours, depending on project and course, every faculty member interviewed considered the time spent on this activity a negligible price to pay in light of the benefits they realized.

Chief among those benefits was that integrating IL instruction helped improve the quality of courses because "expert" librarians provided a higher caliber of discipline-based research instruction than instructors could and offered knowledgeable counsel as instructors developed assignments. Faculty also reported benefits in three other areas. Course-integrated IL instruction helps them 1) develop and implement new curricula by targeting and customizing access to relevant information resources, 2) improve their own research productivity since they learn new techniques and become familiar with new resources, and 3) save time in preparing research classes, interacting with students about information resources, and grading both individual assignments and group projects. Time estimates again varied according to specific situations and applications. Instructors teaching an expository writing class might save 15 minutes evaluating an individual's paper, while instructors teaching a cross-disciplinary course might save an hour or more evaluating a team's research project. In all instances, instructors felt these savings were substantial and enhanced their own productivity.

As valuable as these time savings are to faculty, they are also worth something to institutions. Based on the information we collected, Colleen and I were able to develop a simple model for estimating the financial worth of course-integrated IL at an institutional level. While some benefit and cost elements remain difficult to quantify, many others were easily monetized. Among those were the time savings recognized by faculty and the costs associated with the library's development and delivery of the service. Assigning monetary amounts to these elements is a critical step in the process of estimating, albeit conservatively, the positive financial impact a course-integrated IL instruction program can have on the institution overall.

Shape messages that resonate

As I hope this illustrates, assessing value-in-use can help you develop a deeper understanding of the needs of your "business" users. Just as important, it provides the fodder for more meaningful advocacy of your services.

Win hearts with your value story

This type of assessment can help you craft a value story that speaks directly to user needs and offers help with their problems. For example, traditionally the pitch to faculty regarding course-integrated IL instruction has tended to rely solely on the benefits it delivers to students—particularly the development of students' research skills and critical thinking capabilities. Important as these are, we now can also talk to how IL instruction helps faculty:

- improve the quality of their courses,
- increase their research productivity,
- develop innovative curricula, and
- save time on teaching-related activities.

Since time is one of their more precious resources, this last point alone is a compelling one to faculty.

Open wallets with your business case

Value-in-use assessment also can help you move beyond traditional statistics and program outputs in your budget discussions with administrators. A value model allows you to make the business case for a service by documenting in dollars and cents how resources are being used more effectively at your institution. In some instances, that can quickly run into thousands of dollars over the course of a semester. That's not bad for an operation characterized on occasion as a black hole in college and university budgets. Of course, it may be harder to translate benefits and costs into economic terms for some types of services. But the business case you can make reassures administrators about the value your services deliver in terms that speak more directly to the kinds of financial pressures they face.

Note

1. Special thanks to Lisa Curtin (reference librarian/coordinator of user education, Bentley College), Sheila Ekman (manager of reference services, Bentley College), Phil Knutel (director of academic technology, library and research services, Bentley College), and Mary Moroney (director of library services, Bryant University).

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