

Influence of Public Relations and Reference Services on Academic Library Services

Rose Ojohwoh

Delta State Polytechnic Library, Ozoro, Nigeria

Abstract

This paper analyzed the influence of public relations and reference services on academic library services. Libraries and Librarians in any academic institutions are made to serve users, services in academic institutions includes among others: reference services, public relation services, lending services, user education services etc. The paper revealed the following as public relations activities in academic libraries: agency for the conservation of knowledge, information agency, educational agency, agency for research and development, agency for recreation. Reference materials are intellectual work that is designed to be read through and has an array of disjoined entries which are generally alphabetically arranged e.g. Dictionaries, directories, encyclopedias etc. the following were identified as factors militating against reference services. Inadequate funding, shortage of experience manpower, underdeveloped infrastructure

Keywords: Academic Library, library services, Public relations, Reference Services

Introduction

In academic institutions the library occupies a central position and the services offered are inextricably tied to the academic programmes, goals and objectives of such institutions, i.e. the objectives of teaching, learning, research, recreation and academic excellence. The services offered cut across faculties, schools and departments. Olusanya (2005) believes that libraries and librarians in any academic institution are to serve users so as to improve their research and academic activities in the new knowledge age. A library will achieve its objectives if the services rendered meet the needs, aspiration and expectations of its users. These services includes: reference services, public relation services, lending services, user education services, indexing and abstracting services, current awareness services (SDI) and compilation of bibliographies, computer/reprographic services. All the services mention above can be classified broadly under reference services and public relation services. Aniebo (2004) defined reference services as the direct personal help given by librarian to a reader who is in need of information for whatever purpose, he further stressed that it involves helping readers to improve their reading skills, advising students on selection of research project topics and recommending suitable books and journal articles for writing them and doing class assignment. On the other hand, public relations refers to a well arranged programme of action for daily operations to the direction in which a library is moving and will move, including the aim and quality of services and the manner in which it co-operates with opinion forming groups. Ntoka (2001) defined public relations as the promotion of rapport and goodwill between a person, firm or institution, special public or the community at large through the distribution of

interpretative materials and the assessment of public reaction. The basic purpose of public relations is to create and maintain sound relationships with individuals and groups both inside and outside the library. Generally speaking, it is the hub of the overall activity of the library since it is the source of feedback from clientele (Anie, 2005). It is clear that, public relations go beyond publicity and press relations. In addition to expediting communication, it helps make management aware of public opinion and responsive to it. It help shape staff conduct, it assists management in coping with problems relating to clientele, employee etc. in essence public relations in libraries should be given the necessary attention in terms of provision of human and material resources.

Literature Review

According to Bannetts (2012), the term public relations connote:

- i. Information given to the public
- ii. Persuasion directed to modify attitudes and actions
- iii. Efforts to integrate attitudes and actions of an institution with its public

Public relations counsel the practitioner in the field, advises his library boss on his attitudes and conduct needed to achieve social objectives. It also advices on how to receive and interact with customers in order to achieve results (Kenneth, 2009).Public relations in essence, is a point of view with an ultimate goal. It is not a department, not a person, and not publicity campaign, although it may include any or all of these. In effect, it is a state of mind and an attitude toward anyone who comes in contact with the library. It is fundamentally the function of the human element that exists in the library. No wonder emphasis is often placed

on the aspect of training and retraining of the human resources that exist in the library with a view of equipping them with modern skills in dealing with the complex needs of the job.

Public relation Activities in Academic Libraries

Academic libraries are service oriented which serves the needs of its varied clientele. It is a repository of print and non-print materials. The primary aim of any library is to satisfy its users by providing materials to satisfy their educational needs. The library should also ensure that stock is well organized and made easily accessible to the clientele since availability and utilization of library resources is one of the factors that promotes good public relations in the library. Oyeniya (2009) identified the following as public relation activities in academic libraries:

- a) Library as an agency for the conservation of knowledge
- b) Library as an information agency
- c) Library as an educational agency
- d) Library as an agency for research and development
- e) Library as an agency for recreation and aesthetics.

Through its activities, the library impacts on the life of the people, people's opinion will greatly affect the well being of the library. Oyeniya (2009) wrote on public relations in university libraries that public relations for libraries today involve complete analysis and understanding of all the factors that influence people's attitude towards the library. He went further to stress that high quality books, supplemented by personal contact between staff and readers is a necessary requirement. Public relation activity in the library includes supplying books and information to users, though it is

done in various ways in providing their services for different groups of people. i.e. circulation desk, special collections etc. One of the activities of library public relations is by organizing library weeks or annual conference. Guided tour of the library is another form of library public relation activity. According to Henriette (2004), some very large libraries like the British library have for years been receiving groups of visitors and have found it necessary to employ a corps and specialist guides to show people around and to explain the functions of the various department. It is a public relation job to attract more people to their premises; the library may use a number of techniques to make their surrounding more inviting. Some libraries include display space and exhibition areas in their planning. Henriette (2004) opined that library displays could be a good promotional device in collection development. Good promotional devices have a living effect on users, as these seem to draw readers almost irresistibly to the different dimensions of services offered by the library.

Public Relations and Library Service

Library public relations influences and create confidence for library services, it makes the public aware, appreciate and observe the policies of the library, keep the public informed about the projects and progress of the projects initiated for the benefits of the public by the library (Anie, 2005), public relation in libraries established better patrons relations, make patrons service better known and improve patron relation, make known the library contributions to the conservation, preservation and dissemination of information for national development, establish good relations between the library and all important social and preserve groups (Howard, 2008). Public relations should

begin to operate as soon as the users step inside the front door of the library. A public information desk is a necessary for questions such as “where do I find such and such information resources? Printed guides could be made available for the clientele. The services of the library may be divided into general and specific. General services are those ongoing services that are available all the time, while specific library services are special programs, one-time event or series of events. Newspapers, radio and television, newsletters and other publications are all means of informing the public.

Evaluation of Public Relation Effectiveness in Libraries

Library public relations effectiveness is determined by the service they provide, how well the library is able to satisfy the information need of the library users. Library is said to be effective not when it is filled with books, make money but rather how they are meeting the needs of users. Davis (2003) believed that every library exist chiefly to serve the need of its community of users. As such he is of the opinion that the overall evaluation of a library should be based on how well it serves the needs of its clientele. He also stressed that in evaluating library, the readers satisfaction should be the ultimate aim or goal of library services. Horward (2008) identified the following as factors to consider in evaluating public relations effectiveness in libraries:

- a) Staffing arrangement
- b) Building arrangement
- c) Bibliographic arrangement
- d) Social and educational characteristics of readers.

He stressed that the investigation of these factors would show patron’s success or failure in library use. His remarks notably

bring in another important dimension into the evaluation of library public relation. His reference to building arrangement, bibliographic arrangement and social/educational characteristics of readers clearly shows that there are other factors worth considering in public relation evaluation in libraries.

From the aforementioned literature, it could be summarized that public relations function is a pre requisite for academic libraries. Management of library should therefore take reasonable care to ensure the observance and practice of good public relation with their clientele in order to enhance effective utilization of the library resources.

Reference Services and its Influence on Academic Library Services

References services are a crucial component in librarianship, and since its principal development has taken place in the United States, it has been termed the “Chief American contribution to librarianship (Rothstein 2009). He defined reference service as the reference assistance given by librarians to individual readers who are in pursuit of information. According to control between reader and the book by personal services is the establishment of control between reader and the book by personal service, it is only by establishing such as contact that accurate and effective method of discharging the function of converting users into habitual users can be achieved.

The importance of reference services in academic libraries cannot be over stressed, it is in reference services that librarian come in close contact with library patrons. One of the best means of making a library popular is to mingle freely with its users and help them in every way possible. Wyer (2009)

identified three ways in which reference service is important to librarianship.

- i. Assistance and instructions (formal or informal) in the use of the library, including the location of materials, use of catalogue and use of basic reference tools and sources such as indexes, dictionaries etc.
- ii. Assistance in the identification and selection of books, journal and other materials relevant to a particular information need. This may be limited to assistance in the location of pertinent materials or it may extend to the selection and evaluation of materials on a given topic.
- iii. Provision of brief, factual information of the ready reference services particularly such information as names, address, statistics etc that can be located quickly in a limited group of general reference sources.

Evaluation of Reference materials

Reference materials are intellectual work that is designed to be read through and has an array of disjointed entries which are generally alphabetically arranged (Ifidon, 2007). He stressed further that reference materials may also include formulas, statistics, diagrams, tables or maps with or without abstract, annotation, bibliographies and other features. These books are not borrowable but are rather meant to be used within the library, they are arranged according to a given scheme of classification to enable the reference librarian perform optimally.

Evaluation of References Personnel (Qualities)

On various occasions Wyers (2009) has defined reference services as the promotion of free inquiry. To encourage that idea the librarian must assume an initiatory role of motivating library users to search for truth through explanation of the total communication possibilities that relate to the individual inquiry. He further compiled personal traits deemed desirable for reference personnel as follows: intelligence, accuracy, professional and subject knowledge, courtesy, fact, memory, mental curiosity, interest in people perseverance, system, speed and patience. In explaining these traits he stressed that librarians must love books, folk etc, his love for books should be contagious, making him quick to see and eager to embrace every opportunity to encourage and promote their use. The reference librarian must have interest and the desire to assist users, flair for organizing documents, ability to search literatures and adequate knowledge of the resources of the library in order to provide direct and indirect reference services. The function of the reference staff is to interpret the library resources to the users. He established contact between a right reader and a right book. Reference staffs are expected to use the total resources of the library and also the resources available outside the library. The outside resources may include an individual or an institution, documentation centre, information centre. If local resources are not found helpful, then national or international resources can be made use of.

Wyer (2009) advised that since the job involves direct contact within people, a reference librarians must first and foremost be an emotionally stable person, widely read and willing at all times to help his clientele, they must constantly search for more effective means of providing the information needs of their users. It is not for nothing the reference, librarians is required to have a

wide range of professional knowledge and genuine desire to help readers maximize their use of information resources. Reference librarians guide users through an often overwhelming myriad of information resources in both print and electronic format; he plays a major instructional role, teaching users to be better and able to navigate through the maze of information resources. Reference librarians also offer value added services, producing instructional materials and written guides to information resources. According to Ifidon (2007), certain qualities and competencies must be demanded of the people that man reference desks. He further explained that it is generally assumed that anyone can be a reference librarian; often non-librarians with subject knowledge are made to man the reference desks, who naturally finds it difficult both to cope with challenges of the job and to carve out a good image for the library.

Factors Militating Against Reference Services

A number of factors limit effective reference work in a developing nation. Prominent on this list according to Rothstein (2009) are; inadequate funding, shortage of experienced manpower, underdeveloped infrastructure i.e. lack of functional telephones inhabits the link-up with reference librarians. The end result of setting up a library of any kind is to provide efficient services to the clientele. These services can only be performed if the vital ingredients are available; this means that the library reference sections can meet up to expectation only when there are adequate information resources available to assist the library patrons. Also stressed that the present economic situation in the country is having adverse effect on the development of library collection, which make it difficult for Nigerian libraries to continue to grow

and give adequate services in order to equip enlightened citizens to combat the stresses of the present economic situation in the country. Aniebo (2004) affirm that most academic libraries, serving a large and heterogeneous clientele perceives itself as lacking sufficient resources to provide information services in-depth to all or majority of its users; he noted that few libraries limit their services to any of these levels of reference services. One user may receive minimal help, another maximum, the librarian may believe in one type of service, another in another type, the result is that layman have no exact concept of what it could mean for them if the library did offer total maximum reference service. The view of Aniebo above shows that in some libraries, the services rendered are not satisfactory or rather uniform attention are given by librarians. One patron may receive minimum help while the other maximum, which in turn limit reference services in the libraries.

Conclusion

The study highlighted some of the influence of public relations and reference services on academic libraries services. Library public relations and reference services influences and create confidence for library services, it makes the public and patrons aware, appreciate and observe the policies of the library. Public relation activities in academic libraries are identified as: information agency, educational agency, agency for research and development, agency for recreation and aesthetics. Factors to be considered in evaluating public relation effectiveness in libraries are: staffing arrangement, building arrangement, bibliographic arrangement, social and educational characteristics of readers. Dictionaries encyclopedias, handbooks, directories etc are reference materials mostly

used in academic libraries. The qualities most applied by librarians in reference service are: intelligence, curiosity and patience, the following were indicated as barriers to reference services.

In conclusion, all librarians in higher institution of learning should embrace public relation and reference services whereby information resources stored in academic libraries can be easily accessed by patrons. In light of the above, the paper recommends: that librarians should provide value-added services by carrying out robust information services, analyze and repackage information to suit user's needs. There should be an outlined policy which could be in form of guide to make librarians and library users aware of their relationship in reference and public relation process, more fund and adequate facilities should be provided to accommodate large volumes of reference work.

References

- Anie, S.O (2005). *The Role of Public Relations in Library Services*. Benin City: Zigma Educational resource centre
- Aniebo , M.U (2004). *The use of Library and Information Technology for Higher Education in Nigeria*: Springfield ltd
- Bannetts J (2012). *Public Relation: its Origin and Development*. Westport Connecticut: greenwood press
- Davies, A.S (2003). Reference Service for the profession: the case of legal profession in Nigeria. *Lagos Librarians*. Vol 10(4)
- Henriret, H (2004) .Public Relations in Information Centres. *Nigebiblios*, vol 13(6) 28-40
- Horward, O (2008). Integrating Information Literacy into the curriculum. *Research Strategies* Vol 15 (2) 80-88
- Ifidon, S.E (2009). *A guide to Reference Services*. Lagos. St. Michaels books
- Kenneth, S (2009). The Structure of Library Science. Retrieved Dec 12 2009 from <http://www.mnyak.com/research/resume/papers/varzmk.html>
- Ntoka, C (2001). Public Relation versus Marketing: the Information professionals role as mediator. *Special libraries* vol 82 (3) 154-157
- Olusanya, E.A (2005). Meeting Researchers Information Needs in Nigerian academic Libraries. *Owena journal of Library and Information Science* Vol 2(2) 40-49
- Oyeniya, W (2009) Evaluation of an academic libraries stock effectiveness. *Journal of Librarianship* Vol 2(7) 207-227
- Rothstein, S (2009) Services to Users. *Encyclopaedia Americana*. Vol 17(5) 368
- Wyer J.J (2009) Administration functions and evaluation of reference books. *Encyclopedia of library and Information Science*. Vol 8(4): 146