# UNDERSTANDING LIBRARY USERS TO IMPLEMENT AFFORDABLE BEST PRACTICE

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*Quality Improvement without Best Practices cannot be possible in today's Academic Realm. Best practices are identified by examining empirical evidence of success. At present there are many Best Practices followed in Academic Libraries to improve the quality of services and professionalism. Best practices in our library help tremendously in achieving our objective of attracting more and more users to the library. Best practice in simple term known as the practice which paves the way for enhancing the existing function and help in effective implementation or use of the process. All of the highlighted affordable best practices here are experimented in our library in optimizing the use of library and information services and satisfying the user needs.*

**Keywords : Library, Affordable Best Practices, Quality, Library services.**

## Introduction :

Understanding customers to build a strong relationship is prime focus in any successful enterprise across the globe. The concepts '*customer relationship*' and '*customer service*' are universal phenomenon which are applicable to all organizations or service systems. Library being known as the service center in any organization is not exempted from this. From its historical beginning as a place to keep the records of civilization, it is the

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designated center for information source and services. Service is a concept that is fundamental in libraries and library users are the focus point of library services (Miao, 2006). The five laws formulated by Dr. S. R. Ranganathan, the Father of Library Science, are based on users, collection and service. This emphasises the importance of customer service in library management and service delivery. Having customer service centric focused approach, library plays a pivotal role in the lifelong learning of any human being. Hence, it is necessary to introduce best practices in service delivery which is affordable to practice; and this article focuses on this aspect.



## Library as a Service Organization

From a long time we are showcasing library as a service sub-system of an organization. But fewer attempts were made to implement effective service strategies in satisfying our users or patrons. Technology has greatly supported the library and it has made information to reach their desktops and iPods. Parallel to this, it has made our life 24-hour teaching and learning. As effective libraries are expected to be available to the users because of its environment, need of human interaction, facilities and access to hardcopy; as per the users own clock. Hence, even today we have demand for 24/7 library facility, professional qualified staff and conventional services. This is true even in US and other technologically advanced countries. So, a library, as a service organization, determines to understand what its user wants and accordingly plan to deliver the information products to satisfy his requirement in the learning curve. This has made library to be considered as an essential 'Service Organization' in this digital world.

Even though libraries are measured / judged based on the facilities and their collection, they are valued based on the service they provide to an organization / institute in achieving the vision and mission statement (of the organization). The American Library Association Policy Manual, which has 'Service' as one among the Core Values of Librarianship says 'We provide

the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests' (ALA Policy Manual, 2012). Hence, a well-defined affordable service strategy can be a base for any library for its contribution to the community for lifelong learning.



Having understood this, the assessment and accreditation councils have made the libraries to evaluate themselves annually. A well-structured questionnaire or feedback form is expected to be distributed to the user community to understand the user satisfaction for the service delivered. Hence, it is important for us to understand - What are the core services we can offer in an academic library? What are the best practices in offering these services? How to evaluate the services offered? And finally based on the inputs, how to plan the future course of action?

## Affordable Best Practices in Library Services

The general assumption of the word 'Quality' is customer (user) satisfaction through product or service. In practice the quality of any service or product defines the extent to which it serves the purpose of the use or customer. If the concept of 'Quality' is adapted to library services it can be analyzed in four general ways as – Excellence, Best Practices, Standards, and Meeting User Need. If all these are achieved with cost effectiveness, user satisfaction and easy accessibility to the service, then that solution or activity can be termed as "Affordable Excellence". The difficulty in employing this approach lies in its blending of two related but distinct concepts. Quality, which is a measure of excellence, is being equated with Value (Cost to afford the service). The result is a hybrid — "**affordable excellence**".

Another important term in this article is "Best Practices". The Online

Dictionary of Library and Information Science (ODLIS) describes best practices as 'In the application of theory to real-life situations, procedures that, when properly, applied consistently yield superior results and are therefore used as reference points in evaluation of the effectiveness of alternative methods of accomplishing the same task. Best practices are identified by examining empirical evidence of success.'



A strategic focus on service delivery can act as an effective tool in helping libraries to accomplish their presence in any organization. The affordable excellence in bringing the best practices demands to focus on 3's – *Statement, System,* and *Systematic Evaluation*. Each of these dimensions should be analysed and implemented, having users or patrons requirements as focal point. The results of the effective implementation of the best practices will emerge as evidence during the assessment

## Statement

'Face is the index of Mind', this is true even for a service organization - Library also. The Vision and Mission statement of an organization acts as 'Face' which shows its commitment to its stakeholders. Library should have a written statement which puts 'Service' in prime focus. This acts as a driving force to all the stakeholders to work on a common goal in all the activities performed. The statement makes the – System to adhere to quality; Staff to understand the action and role; and Systematic Evaluation process to take focused decisions.

A part of Texas University Library mission & vision statement is shared as an example which says -

**Mission Statement:** We fuel discovery by satisfying the information needs

of the Texas A&M University Community.

**Vision Statement:** We envision the University Library as a nationally acclaimed academic library that

- Commits to excellence in quality service to meet its customers' needs,
- Promotes the use of progressive and innovative technologies to provide best access to information and resources,
- Develops steadfastly a committed staff that applies ever higher professional standards to the continuous improvement of service quality,·
- Affords a stimulating, creative, and a flexible workplace, supportive and fair, where contributions are rewarded and long-term goals are emphasized,
- Participates actively in the educational/research mission of the academy, and
- Exercises leadership for the advancement of our libraries and the library profession.
- Values Statement

The clear mission statement of a library can be a base for a well-defined procedure manual for this service organization. Hence, it is necessary to involve all the stakeholders of an organization in constructing or having the clear vision and mission statement of the library.

**System**

In this section, the 'Principles and Performance Indicators' described in *Standards for Libraries in Higher Education* by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of the American Library Association is introduced to discuss the affordable best practices in a library system. The core objective in designing the *Standards for Libraries in*

*Higher Education* by ACRL is to guide the academic libraries in advancing and sustaining their role as partners in educating students, achieving their institutions' missions, and positioning libraries as leaders in assessment and continuous improvement on their campuses (2011). This objective coincides with that of National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC). Albrecht & Zemke (2002) and Miao & Bassham (2006) have made an attempt to discuss the service aspects in public and academic libraries with the American Library Association Policy Manual 2006. Efforts in this line as a paper were not traced in Indian situation.

***Institutional Effectiveness**:* Libraries have to define, develop, and measure the outcomes that contribute to institutional effectiveness and apply findings for purposes of continuous improvement. Library should prepare the route map in alignment to the accreditation guidelines said by the designated body. The activities that demonstrate their impact in convincing way and contribute to student learning, and, academic success should be taken up.

- Observation of other library practices by institutional visits to understand the prevailing work culture and practices.
- Having defined vision and mission statement in line with the Institute's
- Library manual narrating the process, procedure and policies for administration
- Library website informing about vision, mission, privileges to the user community, collection, services, etc., will showcase the commitment of the library towards institutional effectiveness.
- Integrating components that make library use mandatory. This can be included for evaluation and award of credits. The practice can be cited as an institutional effort to motivate and support research. Institutions should make policies to ensure user satisfaction by making available privileges to regular, priority users.
- Lending services to make possible 'immersive education', the

institutions can commission the setting up of virtual environments, multimedia teaching-learning resources banks.

***Professional Values**:* Libraries advance professional values of intellectual freedom, intellectual property rights and values, user privacy and confidentiality, collaboration, and user-centred service. It should have user service as the central focus in framing all its activities in physical and virtual environments. The activities should uphold the professional values, academic integrity and advocate the balance between the interests of the information users and rights holders.



- Introduction of 'Best Library User Award' in various categories – Faculty, Student and Staff will motivate the user to visit library and to sustain the professional value of the library. (Acknowledging the frequency, the segment of resources accessed- for example the use of databases with maximum academic/ research potential.)
- Getting the user feedback and acting on the community judgement will guide the activities and services towards the user requirements.

***Educational Role** :* Libraries should partner in the educational mission of the institution to develop and support information-literate learners who can discover, access, and use information effectively for academic success, research, and lifelong learning. Libraries should collaborate with faculty to incorporate the collection and services into effective education experiences for students. The collaborative effort should be extended to Information Literacy Program, Online learning, professional development of faculty members, and to support the student learning and professional development.

- Introducing student supportive programs 'E*arn when you Learn scheme*' to the student community. This will make them responsible, understand library and provide financial support.
- Introducing Information Literacy Program (ILP) in collaboration with faculty members

- Introducing Library and Information Science as one of the Credit Course (student internships in the institutional library or other research libraries)
- Conducting hands-on workshop or demo to introduce the searching strategies, database(s) features, open access resources, information organization and reference styles handling.



***Discovery :*** Libraries should enable users to discover information in all formats through effective use of technology and organization of knowledge. Libraries should have resource guides, knowledge portals, information gateways and other resource discovery tools which help the user to reach the required information. The library website should be a starting point for the one-on-one information discovery assistance to the user.

- Providing federated search facility to search the physical and digital collection.
- Having process for collecting and organizing digital born documents like faculty articles, students project reports, institute reports and learning resources for Institutional repository.
- Web OPAC should have the features of Web 2.0 enabling the user community to participate and share information.
- Attend In-service programs, workshops, conferences and seminars to update about the current trends and technologies adoption in libraries.

***Collections :*** Libraries provide access to collections sufficient in quality, depth, diversity, format, and currency to support the research and teaching missions of the institution. This may be a book allowed to borrow temporarily or the e-content allowed to download for his research. Apart from providing right information to the right people at right time, it is important to offer in a right format too. This demands the library to possess right collection. The collection should match the program requirement, the

user group (to consider - age, interest and accessibility), ability of library staff and the financial strength of the Institute.

- Library should possess hybrid collection of conventional types and the electronic. The availability, cost and accessibility should be considered in building such collection.
- The library staff should be provided sufficient training enabling them to serve the user needs.
- Library should organize demo, workshops, training programs to its user community which is tailor made to specific group or subject. This will bring the user close to the library and librarian to have academic importance.
- Good Internet connectivity and the required IT infrastructure are essential to provide access to e-Resources.
- Posters informing collection, services, URL's to database(s), e-resources in Open Access, CD / DVD collection will help to build awareness.
- Providing access to the e-resources, digital library, institutional repository, OPAC and information gateways outside the campus.
- Providing access to CD /DVD collection through Mirroring and Streaming technology.

***Space :*** Libraries are the spaces for intellectual commons where users interact with ideas in both physical and virtual environments to expand learning and facilitate the creation of new knowledge. In this principle, the physical setting in which the users experience the library and its services is considered. The library should be easily accessible or reachable. The entrance should be inviting and informative to the user. The library service area should be made comfortable and easy for use. It should be equipped for knowledge absorption and be an extension of classroom for learning. The IT infrastructure needed to access the e-resources in Internet and Intranet should be provided.

- Library building should be a part of the academic block. It should be easy to reach from the areas identified for the teaching and learning zone.
- The library entrance should lead the users. Well-designed posters introducing the services, collection and instruction will build awareness among users. The way-guides will make them comfortable.
- The circulation desk, which is considered to be the reception desk of a library, should be placed nearer to the entrance.
- Special provision for movement of differently-abled (handicapped) users.
- Comfortable furniture and adequate seating arrangements should be taken care. The seating arrangement and capacity should be made as per the observed foot-steps or check-ins made to the library.
- Cleanliness, sufficient lighting and aeration should be taken care of for relaxed reading.
- Reading hall separated from the Stack Area and the Circulation Desk will help the users to avoid disturbances.

***Management /Administration*** : Libraries engage in continuous planning and assessment to inform resource allocation and to meet their mission effectively and efficiently. The procedure the library asks the users to follow / adhere for using the library services / facilities. The clear procedural manual churned out by strategizing the activities to achieve the organization / institutional vision and mission will act as a guideline both for the library staff and the user community. The manual should describe the privileges to different user types – faculty, researcher, staff and students. Such manuals will help the library to manage the circulation desk, acquisition especially book selection, administration and normal procedure.

- Use of library automation of software which adheres to accepted standards like MARC 21, SRU, OAI-PMH, Z39.50, etc. Use of

Open Source Software is strongly recommended to reduce the financial implications.

- Instructional boards explaining the services offered to the different category of users should be prominently displayed
- Way-guides, resource description guides, service indicative guides should be placed in appropriate positions.
- A well structure Information literacy program (ILP) to inform the services offered, resource available, and educating - how to access information, how to use the information, how to organize the information; will enhance the effective use of library.
- The statistics for library footfalls, circulation of documents, downloaded articles from database, visit to library website, financial utilization, documents procured, etc., will help the decision makers for planning the strategy for future.



***Personnel*** : Libraries provide sufficient number and quality of personnel to ensure excellence and to function successfully in an environment of continuous change. The library staff should be courteous and helpful to the users. The involvement of user community in library activities and program will make them responsible towards library. Library should have different means of communication with which it can reach or address the user query.

- Library committee should be constituted having representations from Faculty, Students, Administration and the Librarian. The Principal should be made the Chairman of the library committee and Librarian as Coordinator.
- Library should have book club or library club involving student and researcher. Involving the senior faculty member as Chairman or to lead the club.
- Should provide online support like - Ask the librarian or mobile SMS support to reach the users will make the user to get quick response.

- Conventionally have we can have boxes for – Drop your Request, Drop your query, Suggestion Box, etc., to make the user to submit their requirements and suggestions.
- The institute website should have the facility to interact with the library staff through chat, instant messaging system, etc. Use of social media tools like Facebook will be the feasible solution too.



***External Relations**:* Libraries should engage themselves in the campus activities and with the broader community through multiple strategies in order to advocate, educate, and promote their value. Libraries should contribute to the external communication of an institute by involving in Public Relation activities, publications, events and social responsibility initiatives. Librarians should play the role as ambassador in order to expand user awareness of resources, services and expertise.

- Open the library to the outside users for research and reference. This will enhance the visibility and generates revenue to the institute.
- Collecting the with-drawn books from different libraries & personal collection and identifying & donate the same where it has its usage.
- Organizing events, invited talks, lectures for public and academic community on promoting library use, information retrieval, proper use information, etc.( the library should make interventions to check the loss of interest in reading through various initiatives like reading lists, bestseller lists, MOOCs, reading of excerpts of books by influential, eminent writers and others)

***Systematic Evaluation :*** Libraries should periodically review their service system for improvement and development through customer feedback mechanism. Results of the statistical analysis of library usage (Circulation, database use, articles download, web hits, etc.) and the opinion made by the observation method about user behaviour will be the great source for decision makers. However, the data from suggestion box, email suggestions,

suggestions indicated in the visitor books and the feedback collected through a structure questionnaire will be more authentic.

In order to have effective library service and best practices in place, we need to understand how well the library is serving our users and adheres to the policies or procedures laid by the Institute/ organization. It is necessary to do a thorough analysis of the services, facilities and the process to find out - What is really important? What is that we have to provide? Where is the lacuna? Apart from the systematic evaluation of the data available from Library Management System, Institutional Repository, Digital Library, Database(s), etc., may yield some quantitative results which can be analyzed and understood for decision making, but a well structure, simple and clear feedback form can convey more messages.



**Conclusion**

The affordable excellence in bringing the best practices focused on 3's – *Statement, System,* and *Systematic Evaluation*. The best practices indicated are just a few, and there might be many more such examples of different libraries experienced by our library professionals. Even a prompt reply to an email within 24hours is termed as best practice. Best practice in simple term known as the practice which paves the way for enhancing the existing function and help in effective implementation or use of the process. The concept of affordable excellence cautions us about blind imitation of services, unhealthy competition, creation of Non-Performing Assets (NPAs), unutilized service if any, and make us more practical and take decisions with due-diligence. The results of the effective implementation of the best practices will emerge as evidence during the assessment. Some of the practices mentioned in this article are feasible for libraries to adopt in enhancing the quality of the services.

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