Can I Make A Suggestion? Your Library's Suggestion Box as an Assessment and Marketing Tool

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Abstract

Libraries are increasingly using quantitative and qualitative research methods to assess the quality of their resources and services. This can include collecting survey data and conducting focus groups and patron interviews. While these forms of data collection are considered standard assessment tools, libraries already have a rich collection of data available to them through their suggestion boxes – one of the most longstanding methods to determine how well your library is doing. A survey of Canadian academic libraries was conducted to gain some insight into the prevalence of the suggestion box, how libraries were managing them in their day to day operations, and whether the collected data was mined for any decision-making purposes. The authors provide recommendations on how libraries can analyze their suggestion box data to improve services and engage more effectively with their users.

Keywords

library and information studies; suggestion box; complaints; service improvement; assessment

Introduction

If you work in a library, there is a very good chance that somewhere in your library is a suggestion box. Despite the fact that libraries are increasingly using more formal research methods to assess the quality of their resources and services, the suggestion box persists as a well-entrenched feedback mechanism and continues to find a place in the rapidly-evolving culture of libraries. While many libraries now collect survey data, conduct focus groups and patron interviews, the suggestion box should not be
overlooked as both a rich source of qualitative data and a longstanding method to determine how well your library is doing. In this article, the authors will argue that suggestion box data should be incorporated into a library's overall assessment plan as a valuable source of qualitative data. A survey of Canadian academic libraries was conducted to gain some insight into the prevalence of the suggestion box, how libraries were managing them in their day-to-day operations, and whether the collected data was mined for any decision-making purposes. In addition, this article will examine the suggestion box in its role as a public relations tool, recommend how best to deal with complaints, and offer recommendations on how libraries can perform a detailed analysis of their suggestion box data with the goal of incorporating this data into the library's assessment plan.

The Suggestion Box in Library Literature

An examination of the library literature for discussions on the uses of suggestion boxes produces several articles of note. While most of the literature provides accounts on how suggestion boxes are handled in specific libraries, only a few go beyond this to analyze their use and importance. Historically, the suggestion box gained prominence in the 1960s as a symbol of an organization's accountability and social responsibility (Porter 75-78). In addition to its symbolic value, the suggestion box is believed to support four major aspects of service improvement: accountability, anonymity, decision-making, and the trustworthiness of unsolicited data.

First and foremost, the primary driver for libraries maintaining a suggestion box is user feedback. There is a deeply held belief that we should create mechanisms that encourage users to tell us what they think about library resources and services. The literature emphasizes the importance of two-way communication – the suggestion box is only useful if the organization is willing to enter into a visible dialogue with its users, treat comments received seriously and implement change where appropriate (Porter 75-78; Kupersmith 90-92). This sense of having an actual conversation between the user and the library itself is what ensures a high level of accountability and what makes the suggestion box different from other more formal feedback mechanisms. Despite the emphasis on the value of the suggestion box, the literature does highlight its negative attributes as well. Both its advantages and disadvantages will be discussed in further detail in the following sections.

Advantages

The ability to make a comment without disclosing one's identity and the resulting anonymity is generally agreed to be one of the primary benefits of a suggestion box. While users may make suggestions at our service desks, through focus groups and formal surveys, these environments may produce comments that are more sanitized and less authentic (Shenton 5). For example, if users are particularly angry, making the suggestion in-person may encourage them to temper their criticisms. Furthermore, in a more structured environment, users may be asked questions in focus groups or in surveys that lead them to comment in a particular way, which could be less authentic
than comments to the suggestion box that are voluntary, and do not need to conform to any structure. Lubans observed his patrons exhibiting this pattern of behavior through the suggestion box at his Library: "They could be angry without repercussion. If they were delighted with our service they could express it without appearing to curry favor. If it was a bad hair day and they felt lousy, they could still express themselves without having to worry about how it might reflect on them" (241).

Finally, the suggestion box is important because libraries generally want to be responsive to patron needs. In turn, patrons are more likely to make continued use of a suggestion box if they feel that the organization will act on their comments. From the organization's perspective, as particular complaints or observations build over time, this creates a credible archive of patron feedback that may help obtain improvements and increased financial support from administration. Lubans noted this phenomena, stating: "there were the perennial requests for us to improve longstanding problems, such as getting books back to the shelves quickly...These frequent complaints helped us to get funds for shelf reading and reshelving...it is always easier to argue for improvements with student complaints in hand"(241).

There is general agreement that suggestion boxes give users a voice to articulate what they would like to see done differently at the library. But in terms of its use beyond this basic function, there is some debate as to how suggestions should be perceived. Shenton describes some of the pros and cons of using suggestion box data for more formal research purposes as an authentic indication of user wants and needs (5-6). The freedom and lack of restriction suggestion boxes give users allows them to express their needs on their own terms. Furthermore, the variety of forms of feedback can help ensure a good cross-section of input from a variety of users which may help representativeness; e.g., online suggestion boxes may encourage distance education users to offer input, while print forms may appeal to on-campus users (Shenton 5).

**Disadvantages**

Despite this acknowledgement of the positive attributes of suggestion box data, there are significant disadvantages. As noted by Shenton, "suggestion systems frequently elicit messages of dissatisfaction and complaint, and the picture that emerges from them is likely to be largely negative" (6). By the very nature of its name, the suggestion box may encourage comments that focus on what the library could be doing better or differently, rather than on what it is doing well.

Also, Shenton asks the ethical question as to whether there is a need to establish informed consent if there are plans to disseminate comments beyond the Library and share with a broader audience (6). There is also the issue of the representativeness of data collected through a suggestion box. Since the data is unsolicited, there is no consideration given to sample size, which could have implications for its statistical relevance. However, as Shenton notes, formal research methods can suffer from the same problem – if a questionnaire or survey has a poor response rate, it, too, may not be considered statistically relevant (7).
Regardless of its potential shortcomings, the literature reinforces the commitment libraries have to the suggestion box, and the opportunity for users to voice their opinions freely and effect change in their libraries. However, despite this ongoing commitment, the suggestion box has largely been viewed as a less formal source of anecdotal commentary in comparison to the quantitative, data-driven assessment tools libraries have used over the years. There is little evidence from the literature that any libraries have been incorporating the suggestion box into their formal assessment activities. However, a more recent cultural shift towards valuing the user's perspective has been key to changing how libraries approach assessment. The following section will explore the role of assessment in libraries and, in particular, how this shift towards valuing the user's perspective can have an impact on the use of suggestion box data.

**Libraries and Assessment**

Libraries have a long history of collecting data; academic libraries in North America have participated in formal data gathering efforts since the turn of the last century. James Gerould compiled annual statistics for university libraries starting in 1907. His efforts were taken over by the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) in 1961. Most of the data collected in both of these series consisted of statistics describing the library in terms of its collections, staff and expenditures. Transactional statistics became part of the mix as libraries counted the number of circulation transactions, reference questions, interlibrary loans and electronic resources accessed.

The emphasis of these original statistical series was on ‘totals’, with the implication that more or bigger was better. The notion of value or quality was library-centric, as excellence was defined by comparing one library to other libraries on the basis of collection size or expenditures or service transactions. Thus, the more books in the collection, the bigger the budget, the more reference questions answered, the better the library.

However, by the early 1990s, research being conducted in the business world on service quality assessment and organizational performance had a significant impact on how libraries assessed their own performance and encouraged them to refocus on the user perspective. Two tools that were subsequently modified and adopted for libraries were the ServQUAL survey instrument and the Balanced Scorecard.

The ServQUAL tool attempted to measure consumers’ perceptions of quality by comparing expectations of service with perceptions of service actually received. In 2000, this tool was further developed for use in libraries by Fred Heath, Colleen Cook, (then both at Texas A&M Libraries), and Bruce Thompson (a professor of Educational Psychology at Texas A&M University). LibQUAL+® is now used world-wide by more than 1000 libraries as a standardized, Web-based survey instrument. Libraries were starting to place a higher value on their users' ratings of their services, collections and spaces in a serious way: "All services and activities must be viewed through the eyes of the customers, letting customers determine quality by whether their needs have been satisfied" (Stoffle, Renaud, and Veldof 220).
The Balanced Scorecard encouraged organizations to look beyond the bottom line and to consider performance from four perspectives: innovation and learning (staff), internal business (process), customer and financial. Using its mission, vision and value statements as a foundation, the organization develops strategic objectives and measures and targets for each perspective. Performance is regularly reviewed to ensure that the organization is on track to meet its objectives and that lofty mission statements become a reality. As described by Kaplan and Norton, the creators of the Balanced Scorecard, "[it] demands that managers translate their general mission statement on customer service into specific measures that reflect the factors that really matter to customers" (73). The University of Virginia was an early adopter of this performance assessment tool (Self 28-29), and, more recently, four ARL libraries participated in a year-long initiative with ARL and external consultants to develop library scorecards (Kyrillidou 33 - 35).

If libraries are to give more than lip-service to being 'user-centred', they need to ensure that they are making full use of all channels of user feedback in order to better understand user needs. Surveys, focus groups, interviews and observation studies have all become part of most libraries' assessment plans. These qualitative methods provide a useful context and rich descriptions to complement the quantitative data collected as statistics. It could be argued that comments from suggestion boxes provide another valuable and easily accessed source for qualitative data on our users.

Since most libraries already have a suggestion box in place, it can be a low cost method of gathering user feedback. Surveys, by comparison, can be very expensive to administer. A suggestion box will provide current feedback information on new services and facilities. If there is a problem with the newly implemented printing system or concerns about noise in the library, you will likely read about it in the suggestion box. Since good qualitative research uses multiple methods for data collection to validate the findings, the suggestion box can serve as one of the sources for triangulation.

In addition, by addressing concerns identified in the suggestion box, libraries will most likely improve user satisfaction overall. A study by McKnight and Berrington discovered a direct correlation between irritants and values for library users or 'customers' (40). Finally, a library's users can be a source of innovative solutions and new services. In his blog, "Want to be an Innovator? Put up your Antennae!", Steven Bell encourages us to 'listen and observe' and think about why the person is complaining. Often, complaints can offer clues on ways to improve services or offer new ones.

**Survey on Suggestion Boxes and Structured Interviews**

**Methodology**

In order to acquire some baseline data on the use of suggestion boxes in academic libraries in Canada, the authors prepared a short survey. The survey could be delivered quickly, to multiple people, and the standardized set of short-answer questions would allow for easy comparison of responses. The goal of the survey was to gauge how
prevalent suggestion boxes were, how responsibility for responding to suggestions was assigned, the process for responding, how the information gathered was used and what role, if any, the information played in decision-making and in formal assessment plans. Follow-up structured interviews were planned after the survey was completed to probe more deeply with more subjective, open-ended questions that were best responded to in an interview format.

The survey consisted of nineteen questions and was delivered using SurveyMonkey. The full text of the survey is provided in Appendix I. Research Ethics Board approval was received at both of the authors’ home institutions (McMaster University, Ryerson University). In February 2010, the survey was sent to the 27 academic libraries that constitute the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) and directed to the person deemed most appropriate, i.e., responsible for the library’s suggestion box as indicated on the library’s web site. The initial email invitation, with a link to the survey, was followed by one reminder notice sent two weeks later.

Response Rate

Twenty-five responses were received, three of which were discarded because of incomplete information. This represented a response rate of 81%.

Results

Survey results showed that 96% of respondents have a suggestion box in at least one format. Libraries respond to the suggestions they receive in many formats. The most commonly used formats are web form, email and, somewhat surprisingly, print. Web forms for the suggestion box appear on the library’s home page in 54.5% of the respondents. Most libraries (76.2%) vet comments before they are made public.

Survey results indicate that overall responsibility for the suggestion box is either shared or distributed, i.e., suggestions are forwarded to the appropriate person for a response in 67% of academic libraries. Fourteen percent of survey participants responded ‘Other’ to this question, and their examples also indicate a team or decentralized approach. In 19% of the responding libraries, one individual assumes responsibility for the suggestion box. There is much variation in the assigning of this responsibility as evidenced by the very different job titles that this one individual holds: Associate University Librarian, Web Development Manager, Library Communications Officer, Department Head, and Librarian in the Reference and Research department.

In most of the libraries surveyed (82%), responsibility for responding to the suggestions received is shared by various people, depending on the nature of the suggestion. In a few libraries (4%), there is one individual who is charged with responding to all suggestions. The position titles of these people indicate that this responsibility is extended throughout several layers of the organization: Associate University Librarian, Heads, Librarians, Communications Officer. Fourteen percent of the libraries
participating in the survey chose ‘Other’ as their response and described other options such as assigned responsibility as part of a weekly schedule.

Most (76%) of the libraries respond to 75 – 100% of suggestions received. Five percent respond to 50 – 74% of suggestions; 14% respond to 25 – 49% of suggestions; and 5% respond to 0 – 24% of suggestions. Almost half (48%) of the libraries post almost all of their responses publicly; 19% post public responses to only some of the suggestions; 24% indicated that they do not post public responses and 9% chose ‘Other’ (“it depends”). The vast majority (90%) of libraries do not promise a response to suggestions within a certain time frame. Those that do (10%) promise a response within one or two days.

Most respondents could not definitively state if the information from the suggestion box was used in decision-making processes. Most indicated that the data from the suggestion box can reveal where change is needed and, if it is feasible, where change may occur. Similarly, when asked if the suggestion box was used as a gauge of user satisfaction, there were no clear answers. If a respondent answered ‘yes’, a caveat was almost always included to indicate it was only on an informal basis. The impact of Web 2.0 on the suggestion box is similarly unclear from the data. Most respondents felt it was too soon to evaluate the impact of blogs, Twitter and Facebook since they were fairly new technologies. Ninety-six percent participated in the LibQUAL+ survey at least once in the last four years, and 56% had not conducted any other user satisfaction survey other than LibQUAL+ during this same period.

**Structured Interviews**

In addition to the survey results, the authors conducted structured follow-up interviews over the telephone with six of the survey participants. Based on the survey results, the authors decided to ask some additional questions to probe more deeply on several issues. The questions used in the interviews are available in Appendix 2.

**Response Rate**

Eighteen respondents indicated that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up structured interview. Of these, nine persons were contacted and six interviews were completed. Due to time limitations, it was not feasible to contact all eighteen respondents to complete the follow-up structured interview, so nine were randomly selected. Of the nine contacted, some indicated that, due to time constraints, they would not be available for the follow-up structured interview, resulting in the six completed interviews.

**Results**

Respondents indicated that they lacked both the time and the expertise to conduct the kind of analysis of their suggestion box data they would like. Respondents tended to use their suggestion box data in several ways: when it supports triangulation, and
correlates with other assessment data, such as LibQUAL+® results. Many felt that the data allowed them to keep a ‘pulse’ on the feelings of their users, but few felt it had any impact on decision-making. A few libraries were involved in monitoring social media sites to see what was being said about their libraries, and most admitted to being fairly comfortable with negative feedback. A common theme expressed by many was a sense of frustration at not having the power within their libraries to make changes based on received feedback.

**Conclusions about the Survey and Structured Interview Results**

The survey and structured interview results indicate a number of things about the use of suggestion boxes in Canadian academic libraries. Most libraries have a suggestion box, usually in multiple formats. About half the respondents post their suggestion box on the library’s main page. Overall responsibility is usually shared, with no clear preference for management by one specific job title. The majority respond to a large proportion of their emails, and many do so publicly.

The authors also noticed the following three correlations:

- Libraries are more likely to use the suggestion box as a gauge of user satisfaction and in decision-making if the suggestion box is on their homepage.
- Libraries are more likely to use their suggestion box as a gauge of user satisfaction and in decision-making if they post suggestion responses publicly.
- If more than one person is involved in responding to suggestions, the suggestion box is more likely to be used in decision-making.

The strength of the correlations may not be statistically significant; however, they are interesting to note. Furthermore, due to the rise in user-centred metrics in libraries, the role of the suggestion box must be considered as a necessary piece of the overall assessment puzzle. The next section of the article will discuss the link between suggestion box data and public relations and marketing, and how the suggestion box can be used to enhance your library’s reputation in your community.

**The Link to Public Relations and Marketing**

Until now, the slightly euphemistic term of ‘suggestions’ has been used when referring to feedback received from library users in suggestion boxes. As discussed earlier, one of the drawbacks of suggestion boxes is that they frequently produce negative suggestions, otherwise known as complaints. As shown above, survey results indicate that an overwhelming majority of Canadian academic libraries have a suggestion box and use it as a means of two-way communication with their users.

It is clear that dealing with suggestions and complaints is of great importance in the realm of delivering excellent customer service in a library. However, the way in which complaints and suggestions are handled is also a key component of a library’s public relations and marketing strategy. How complaints and suggestions are managed directly affects the reputation of your library just as much (if not more) than the way the
library’s publications look or the news stories that appear about your library in the media.

In its *Customer Experience Impact: North America 2009 Report*, RightNow Technologies, a customer experience company, states that "86% of consumers quit doing business with a company due to a bad customer experience, up 27% from 4 years ago" (1) and that "82% of consumers that had a bad experience told others about it, up 22% since 2006" (2). Also of note, the report indicates that more people are going online, using a company’s website, Facebook or a blog to report bad experiences. Essentially, with a greater number of library suggestion boxes appearing in an online venue, by posting a comment or suggestion, "telling other people about it" is exactly what library users are doing. No longer are these suggestions delivered quietly to the desk of a senior library administrator, vetted and finally posted with a response on a bulletin board in the library lobby. Increasingly, suggestions and complaints appear in a public forum, controlled either by the organization or by library users themselves on public websites such as Facebook groups or blog posts.

Suggestion boxes can be seen as an opportunity to reinforce your brand or, in other words, define your organization in its unique light and reinforce the promises made to users regarding the services, spaces and collections libraries provide them. This is called “branded customer service”, and, as described by Barlow and Stewart, branded customer service "is more than excellent service. It is a strategic and organized way to deliver on-brand customer experiences that magnify brand promises" (1).

**The Truth About Complaints**

Barlow and Møller point out that many organizations seek to eliminate complaints (11) and view a decrease in the number of complaints arising over time as a good sign. However, they go on to encourage "all organizations to think of complaint handling as a strategic tool – an opportunity to learn something about products or services that maybe they did not already know – and as a marketing asset, rather than a nuisance, a cost, and a royal pain" (11).

According to Stauss and Seidel (2004), Goodman, O'Brien and Segal (2000) and Barlow and Møller (2008), there are certain truths about complaints that an organization should be prepared to recognize:

- Of those who experience problems, the majority of customers will not communicate this to you by complaining about it (Goodman, O'Brien and Segal 48).
- If your organization only receives a few complaints, it doesn't necessarily mean that your customers are satisfied (Stauss and Seidel 18).
- You want to decrease the number of dissatisfied customers, but you want those customers who are dissatisfied to be more vocal and you want to hear from more of them (Stauss and Seidel 18).
- You should view your customers who complain as partners and not adversaries (Stauss and Seidel 19).
• A loyal customer is one who complains (Barlow and Møller 37).
• Most customers who complain are not "grumblers or grousers" (Stauss and Seidel 19).

Stauss and Seidel go on to say that it can be difficult to identify "grousers", but some clues are: invention of problems, falsification and dramatization of facts, unreasonable demands, making serious threats (going to media, lawyers) (99). Similarly, it can be difficult to identify "grumblers", but some clues are: they complain about small things, they start by complaining about a marginal problem and then complain in general about many aspects of the organization, they make solutions difficult to find because they object to all alternatives that are presented, they clearly enjoy the conflict (99).

It is important first to acknowledge these truths before one approaches data analysis for two reasons: to be careful not to dismiss complaints and suggestions received, but also to be careful about how they are acted upon. The best way to ensure this balance is to perform some systematic analysis on suggestion box data.

**Best Practices in Suggestion Analysis**

**Data Collection**

The first step to good data analysis is to collect good quality data. The following list contains discrete pieces of information that can be collected from users when submitting a suggestion.

1) *Category of suggestion*
   If suggestions are reviewed historically, it should be relatively easy to identify a number of categories into which suggestions might fall. Rather than having end users create a category, consider having them select a category from a list of predetermined possibilities. These might include: noise, temperature, study space, hours, collections or library materials, customer service, computers, internet, wireless, printing. If your suggestion box is electronic, these categories may also serve to help route the suggestions quickly and efficiently to the most appropriate person for a response.

2) *Demographic data*
   Along with the suggestion, include fields for various demographic data most appropriate for your type of library. For example, in a university library setting, knowing if the patron is an undergraduate student, graduate student, faculty member, university staff, or alumnus would be relevant.

3) *Library information*
   Depending on the size and number of libraries at an institution, it may be prudent to collect data on the physical location and time when the suggestion originated. Sample fields could indicate the names of all campus libraries or even different physical spaces within a certain library (learning commons, silent study, group study rooms, first floor, second floor, third floor). The time of day when the event that triggered the suggestion took place is also a useful
piece of information to collect. Depending on whether an online system or a print suggestion box is used, it may be possible to register the time at which the complaint was logged automatically.

4) Importance/Annoyance ranking

Finally, always collect a ranking from users on a Likert scale indicating how important this issue is to them. This information will help prioritize which suggestions to act on first.

Questions to Guide Analysis

Data analysis can often seem an overwhelming task. It helps to determine which questions are important to have answered before starting any analysis. Below are suggested questions to pose:

- Are different groups of people complaining about different things?
- Is there a time of day/month/year when more complaints come in on a certain topic?
- How often were complaints ranked with a high level of importance or annoyance?
- How often did the suggestion get a response?
- What are the top five complaints?
- Is any action taken in response to the suggestion? If so, how often?
- Is an update provided if the action is something that might take awhile to implement?
- Are the suggestions negative or positive?
- How often would the response be rated as "warm act?"

According to Strauss (2002), how a complaint is dealt with ("warm act") is just as important as what is actually done about it ("cold fact") (181)! For example, if a student complains about the temperature in the silent study rooms, one possible response would be to cite the range of acceptable temperatures according to university policy and indicate that the current temperature of this room does indeed fall within acceptable limits. This would be an example of a cold fact response. A warm act response would likely take a sympathetic tone and might explain that between seasons, the temperature in the large library building is very difficult to control; however, the temperature problem has been passed along to the library facilities staff who will see if they can make any adjustments in order to make the space more comfortable.

Assess How You Deal With Complaints

Barlow and Møller have developed an eight-step formula for dealing with complaints, incorporating the following elements: say thank you and explain why the feedback is important to you; an apology and a promise that action will be taken immediately; once any necessary information is obtained, fix the problem quickly; finally, check to make sure the customer is satisfied and ensure that this kind of incident doesn’t happen again (125).
One less obvious component of assessment to consider is how well the current process for dealing with complaints is working. If the aim is to follow an eight-step formula such as that set out by Barlow and Møller, how well is your library adhering to said process?

Alternatively, another useful model is the four quadrants of customer behaviour and organizational response summarized by Barlow and Møller. These four quadrants are represented in Table 1, below.

Table 1: Possible Customer Behavior Combined with Organizational Response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No product or service failure</th>
<th>No product or service failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>If the customer speaks up, thank the customer for his or her praise</td>
<td>The customer complains; there’s a chance to clear up the customer’s confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Company action:</strong> Celebrate</td>
<td><strong>Company action:</strong> Thank and educate the customer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product or service failure</th>
<th>Product or service failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The customer keeps quiet – to organization</td>
<td>The customer is dissatisfied and complains to the company</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Company action:</strong> Ask for and encourage customer complaints</td>
<td><strong>Company action:</strong> Thank the customer and engage in service recovery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In three of the four quadrants, the customer is vocal. Review the suggestion box data and divide all of the suggestions received into these three quadrants. Next, rate the response by deciding whether or not the recommended action has happened. In order to encourage library users in quadrant 3 to communicate the failure, experiment with different approaches to encourage their feedback. For example, one of the libraries surveyed had implemented “Feedback Fridays”, a regular event during which customer suggestions were solicited in person by a library staff member. To encourage these interactions, library users were offered free coffee and sweets.

**Sample Data Analysis**

Given the sample data below, the following is a fictional summary of a very basic analysis of suggestion box data:

During the last semester, 100 suggestions were received and 50 of those suggestions received a response. Analysis indicates that of the 50 responses,
25 could be considered ‘warm act’ responses and 25 could be considered ‘cold fact’ responses. Out of the 50 responses, an action was promised in 25 cases, or 50% of the time. No updates were ever provided as to whether or not any action was actually taken. The highest number of suggestions fell into the customer service category and the second highest fell into the noise category. Within these categories, 85% of the customer service suggestions were evaluated as negative and 100% of the noise suggestions were negative. All of the noise complaints were logged by undergraduate students.

In this example, goals that could be set for the upcoming semester include:

- an increased response rate to 75%
- an increased percentage of responses that promise an action (75%)
- an increase in ‘warm act’ responses (75%)

This analysis could be strengthened by also collecting the importance/annoyance data. Using the sample data discussed above and including a number for the average importance ranking within each category (see Table 2) can help shed new light on the data. For example, without the importance ranking, it could be assumed that since the highest number of suggestions related to customer service and since the majority of these (85%) were negative, that this would be a prime area to focus some attention in order to improve. It could be difficult to decide whether or not it was more important to fix the customer service problem or the noise problem. However, with the extra layer of data, on average customers rate the customer service suggestions with an importance factor of 3 out of a possible 5. On average, the noise suggestions are given a 5 out of possible 5 importance factor. This clearly indicates that the noise problem has the highest priority.

Table 2: Average Annoyance Ranking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Avg. Importance/Annoyance (1 – 5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collection</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computers</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Customer Service</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noise</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temperature</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusion

As indicated in our survey results, most Canadian academic libraries continue to use a suggestion box in their libraries. This is not surprising given the secondary literature on suggestion boxes in libraries, which reinforces its importance to maintaining good relationships with library users. However, a clear and common strategy to manage day-to-day suggestion box operations and utilize the data collected remains elusive. Despite a trend in academic libraries towards assessment, improved customer service, and developing user-centred library spaces and services, the user’s comments and feedback gathered via library suggestion boxes remains largely underused. Given the emphasis on assessment, libraries should consider the importance of suggestion box data in this context. Not only is the suggestion box a valuable source of data, but in order for libraries to truly create a user-centred culture and practice good public relations, they should consider the comments of their patrons and perform a more substantive analysis on what they are saying. For that reason alone, the suggestion box must play a role in any assessment activities undertaken by your library. With the recommendations offered in this article for performing greater analysis on the data and better management of the suggestion box, libraries will more visibly demonstrate their commitment to their patrons, and take one step closer to creating a truly user-centred culture.

Recommendations

The following list of recommendations is designed to assist libraries in creating a clear and user-centred strategy for dealing with suggestion box operations and analysis:

- Encourage a suggestion box culture at your library. Encourage staff at all levels of the organization to welcome suggestions and not to see them as a nuisance. Users care about your library if they take the time to tell you what they want (or don’t want) from you.
- Share suggestion box responsibilities by having multiple people manage and respond to suggestions. Rotate responsibilities on a regular basis, both to encourage the suggestion box culture at your library and to maintain a fresh perspective on responses.
- Ensure that both the physical suggestion box and the virtual suggestion box are prominently displayed (i.e. on your library homepage) and consistently direct both staff and users to offer feedback through this channel.
- Actively promote the use of the suggestion box.
- In order to help you remain accountable to users’ comments, ensure that the organization is responding publicly to all suggestions. In order to do this, make sure that the suggestion box collection form includes a section in which permission is obtained from the person submitting the suggestion to share that information in a public forum (with personal information stripped). While users may choose to voice their comments in a public forum on their own, it is still courteous for the Library to ask for permission to post their comments on the website or in some other public venue. Consider vetting or editing suggestions that are abusive, but generally, the default should be to share all suggestions and answers.
• Promise to respond to suggestions within a certain time frame and ensure that this happens.
• Go beyond two-way communication and really encourage a dialogue with your users (comments, provide updates, not simply suggestion-response).
• Collect additional demographic data as well as an "importance ranking" along with suggestions to help provide context for the suggestions received.
• Do some analysis of the suggestions, ideally involving all of those who help maintain the suggestion box. Formalize this analysis into a report and make it part of an assessment plan.
• Get buy-in on a suggestion box strategy from library decision makers. Having a formal assessment procedure and reporting mechanism in place for the suggestion box data may help strengthen support from library management.
Works Cited


Appendix 1: Suggestion Box Survey

1. Do you have a suggestion box at your library?
   - Yes
   - No

2. In what format(s) do you receive suggestions? Check all that apply.
   - Print
   - Blog
   - Web form
   - Email
   - Other (please specify)

3. Are the suggestions moderated or unmoderated (e.g. does someone vet them before they are posted publicly)?
   - Moderated
   - Unmoderated
   - Not applicable

4. How do you respond to suggestions? Check all that apply.
   - Don’t respond
   - Print
   - Blog
   - Web form
   - Email
   - Other (please specify)

5. If you have an online suggestion box, please indicate its location.
   - Library homepage
   - Other page on library website
   - Not applicable

6. Who is responsible for the overall management of the suggestion box?
   - One individual
   - Shared responsibility
   - No overall manager. Suggestions are forwarded to appropriate person for a response.
   - Other (please specify)

7. If applicable, please enter the position(s)/job title(s) of the person/people who are responsible for the overall management of the suggestion box.
8. Who responds to the suggestions?
   - Don't respond
   - One individual
   - Various people, depending on the nature of the suggestion
   - Other (please specify)

9. If applicable, please enter the position(s)/job title(s) of the person/people who respond to suggestions.

10. Approximately what percentage of suggestions are responded to?
   - 75 – 100%
   - 50 – 74%
   - 25 – 49%
   - 0 – 24%

11. In general, are responses to suggestions posted publicly?
   - Yes, almost all suggestions receive a public response.
   - Only some of them.
   - No, we generally don't post responses.
   - Other (please specify)

12. Do you promise a response within a certain time frame?
   - No
   - Yes (please specify time frame)

13. Do you use the information from the suggestion box in decision making processes?
   - No
   - Yes (please describe)

14. Do you use the suggestion box as a gauge of user satisfaction?
   - No
   - Yes (please describe)

15. How has Web 2.0 (e.g. blogs, Facebook, Twitter, etc.) impacted your suggestion box?
16. In what years has your library participated in LibQUAL+®?

- 2007
- 2008
- 2009
- 2010
- Not participated in this time period

17. Has your library conducted a user satisfaction survey other than LibQUAL+® between 2007 and 2010?

- No
- Yes (please describe below)
Appendix 2: Follow-up Structured Interview Questions

1. Do you do any analysis of your suggestion box comments on a regular basis? If yes, please explain. Do you code? Do you use software analysis tools? Excel spreadsheets? If no, why not? If you had the time, skills etc., do you think that this would be a useful exercise and why?

2. How do you think suggestions should be used in the decision making process? Why?

3. Have you ever tried "surfing for suggestions" online by doing keyword searches in Twitter, internet, Facebook (for groups) to see if anyone is talking about your library? Why or why not? Has it been useful?

4. How comfortable are you sharing negative feedback in a public way with your users? Why or why not?

5. Overall, are you happy with how you deal with suggestions at your library? If you could change one thing about it, what would that be?