



Mesh Library and Firm Strategies to Create a Top Service Department

by Cindy Spohr

It is a foregone conclusion that librarians are in a service industry. Libraries themselves are an excellent example — often the best example — of superior customer service within an institution. What is not always apparent are the steps required to ensure that the library continues to provide exceptional service to meet the changing needs of today's law firm. The creation of a top service department is a three-pronged process:

developing and then implementing a strategic plan for the library, building relationships within the firm, and communicating the value of the library to all firm members.

Strategic Planning

The library must understand and integrate itself within the firm's overall future plans in order for the library to be recognized as an integral and valued department within the firm: It cannot operate in a vacuum regarding goals and objectives. Once the library director and staff are familiar with and understand the firm's plans, they can create the strategic plan for the library. The library's strategic plan should incorporate core competencies, staffing, collection development, technology and financial considerations. The staff will need to examine the current state of the library and where they want it to be in the future. Informal focus groups with firm members and/or a written survey can help determine the needs and expectations of firm members about library services and help plan development.

All members of the library staff should participate in the development of the library's mission and strategic plan to assure buy-in and appropriate implementation. Several sessions are usually needed to create the plan and to make sure that it fits with the overall firm goals. Before finalizing the plan, library staff should coordinate with firm administration and other departments to integrate the library's plan with the firm's goals and objectives.

Once the library's strategic plan has been created, staff can establish the steps

needed to carry it out. Implementation requires identifying day-by-day, project-by-project actions so that the library provides the type of service spelled out in its strategic plan. Periodically reviewing the plan will help improve implementation procedures and ensure that the plan still meets the firm's goals and objectives.

For more information on strategic planning for libraries, read M.E.L. Jacob's *Strategic Planning: A How-To-Do-It Manual For Librarians* (Neal-Schuman, 1990).

Building Relationships and Customer Service

Building relationships is key to creating a top service department. The library's plan should outline the degrees of customer service that the library staff will provide to various firm members. All interactions between library staff and firm members should reflect the library's customer-service plan. By doing so, the library optimizes the effectiveness and efficiency of its scarce human resources.

Researchers at Texas A&M University concluded that a customer's experience of service quality embraces five dimensions: reliability, assurance, tangibility, empathy and responsiveness. Include these elements when executing the library's strategic plan. It will assure an excellent customer-service orientation for all staff members.

A number of factors can enhance the development of a strong customer-service orientation:

- an emphasis on customer service first, regardless of what other pressures and demands are present;
- an environment that makes staff members want to excel;
- adequate staff training, including familiarizing the staff with the library's plan and what is expected of them to fulfill this plan;
- appropriate training to perform their jobs effectively;
- cross-training so that staff members can pinch hit in other areas; and
- communicating effectively — alerting all staff members of plan changes, organizational modifications and the library's performance as measured against the plan.

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Practical suggestions for building relationships between library staff and firm members include:

- On a monthly basis, invite a partner or senior associate to lunch.
- Join firm-wide committees or teams.
- Attend all firm-wide functions.
- Participate in department meetings.
- Follow up on reference responses to find out whether the requester is satisfied with the result or needs additional information.
- Seek out firm members who are not strong library users and offer the library's services for a project.
- At least annually (perhaps in conjunction with National Library Week), host a library "open house" to showcase new resources and remind firm members of the services the library can provide.
- Periodically remind firm members of the library staff's qualifications to provide research assistance. Profile a librarian staff member in the company newsletter or on the company's intranet, highlighting his or her educational and professional

achievements. Write an article about a recent project the library completed.

People have distinct styles and preferences for communicating — e.g., someone may be a "numbers person" and another a "people person." To develop relationship-building skills, encourage staff to attend professional development courses that focus on understanding behavioral styles.

If formal training on building effective relationships with others is not an option, read Tony Alessandra and Michael J. O'Conner's *People Smarts: Bending the Golden Rule to Give Others What They Want* (Pfeiffer & Company, 1994).

Communicating Value

Attitudes about library service continually evolve based on factors such as quality, image, support and leadership. Information services must be positioned so that firm management acknowledges its validity and value. In addition to demonstrating quality products and services through daily, individual interactions, the library can communicate the value of its services through annual reports, newsletters, announcements and training classes.

Library services can be considered a "product" that is "purchased" by members of the firm. The library's products and

promotional materials should reflect and promote their value to the requester and/or the firm. They should be formatted for immediate use and easily and instantly identifiable as products of the library. A cover memo should accompany all finished products, indicating who conducted the research along with contact information if additional information is needed. Promotional materials should focus on the benefits of the library's services, not features of the collection.

For books on relationship marketing, see the Association for the Advancement of Relationship Marketing Bookstore at <http://www.aarm.org>.

Customer Service Is Everything

Ensuring that the library continues to provide superior customer service is of utmost importance in these economically challenging times. By coordinating the library's strategic plan with the firm's overall mission, building relationships with a broad base of users within the institution, and clearly communicating the return on investment that the library provides, the library and its staff can thrive in the ever-changing law firm environment.

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