

# Marketing Products and Services of Academic Libraries in Ghana

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This paper discusses the important variables involved in marketing the products and services of academic libraries. The importance of the quality of service and a focus on the customer is emphasised. Though inadequate funding may affect delivery of services, the academic librarian should be

motivated by this challenge to plan and implement a marketing strategy to ensure heavy patronage. Heavy use determines the worth and survival of the library in the face of stiff competition from new and aggressive entrants into the information marketplace.

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## Introduction

Marketing is an important functional area in business. Products and services that are not marketed effectively may not be heavily patronised. Revenue may be lost and the business will face problems of survival.

There are very good reasons why marketing principles should be applied to the running of a service organisation like the library. In the first place, those who fund libraries want to know how well funds allocated to the library are being utilised to meet the information needs of its clientele. For continuing financial support, they must be informed. Information in annual reports such as statistics on how many books were added to stock and the number of appointments and resignations during the year may not make much of an impact on those who administer the funds for the management of the library.

Second, use of the library by the academic community must be encouraged especially at a time when there is competition from other information providers. An effective marketing strategy directed at all segments of the market may encourage heavy use of the service.

Third, there is now more than ever the need for professional librarians to run libraries like busi-

ness organisations. Nolan (1998) advises professional librarians to become entrepreneurs. According to her, many libraries whether special, corporate, private or public are facing a similar scenario: "Do more with less and less."

Librarians, according to Nolan, must not wait for people who have no idea how libraries are managed and who do not care about their work to change their situations for them. Libraries must be run like commercial firms and professional librarians must be the managers. This is because:

By the time we educate the finance and management people so that they understand the methodology and theory of why libraries function the way they do, we may be closed.

Libraries must survive and thrive because they still have a role to play in the community. Librarians like all other professionals have to adapt to and cope with the changes taking place in the environment in which they operate.

The library is obviously not a profit-making organisation and so its worth and survival cannot be determined by profit. Continued financial support for the operation of the library may, as already pointed out, depend on the demonstrated use of the services it provides. A service that is

not used does not need financial support. Libraries therefore have the responsibility of encouraging the use of the services they provide. Effective marketing provides the means by which users are made aware of the services of the library and their value. Heavy patronage determines the worth of the library. Heavy patronage, however, depends on several other factors. Effective marketing is only one of the factors that determines library use.

The role and importance of the library in the academic community must not be taken for granted. Manufacturing industries sometimes market products that they know are of the highest quality and beneficial to society. They do not assume that users of the products themselves know or will eventually find out all about the apparent and inherent good qualities of the products before patronising them. There are competitors in the market place and so nothing can be left to chance. There is a continuous struggle by all manufacturers to capture sizeable shares of the market. Manufacturers therefore vigorously pursue marketing activities such as the following to obtain the desired results:

1. Find information about the market;
2. Determine the needs of users;
3. Identify and focus on potential users;
4. Design the most suitable product for the market;
5. Provide consumers with information about the product;
6. Make consumers aware of the existence of the product;
7. Price the product taking into consideration all the factors that influence pricing in the market place;
8. Introduce the product to potential consumers;
9. Put the product into the hands of the consumer;
10. Convince consumers to buy the product;
11. Persuade consumers to continue patronising the product;
12. Create and enhance the image of the business; and
13. Gain advantage over competitors.

This paper discusses how and which marketing principles can be applied to the running of the academic library. The objective is to show that it is only when the library is run like a profit-making organisation that the objectives of the academic

library can be met. So many things go into the management of a service but the emphasis will be on the effective marketing of the services and products of the academic library.

In Ghana the government is the major source of funds for all academic libraries. The appropriate authorities in the universities administer the money on behalf of the government. Funding is now a big problem and those who administer the funds must be assured that the library is not in the academic institution for decorative purposes. It is not just a good thing, but also a very useful source of information for the academic community.

The use of computers in the information world appears to be eroding gradually the role of the library as the sole source of information. The library still has a role to play in the face of the information explosion and the emergence of a technology that is making information available to anyone who has an Internet connection. It is the contention of this paper that in the face of stiff competition from numerous information providers, the library more than ever needs a marketing strategy to survive, thrive and to remain relevant.

### *Competition*

Information is a marketable commodity and there are numerous providers in the information industry. The library's monopoly has been broken and it has to compete to survive and stay in circulation. Library staff cannot therefore afford to concentrate only on internal library operations that make information accessible to the user and continue to convince themselves that users already know or must know about the services and the importance of the library. It sounds funny to suggest that the services of the library must be advertised extensively to university dons to make them active users. In developing a marketing strategy nothing must be taken for granted. Lecturers know that there are libraries scattered all over the campus but they may not know the new services that the libraries are providing. If for some time, as is the case of many academic libraries in Ghana, the libraries have not been adequately meeting the information needs of users, the chances are that, users may have already established their own information channels independent of the libraries on campus.

These are similar to the distribution channels in commercial marketing and constitute dangerous competition and can be extremely difficult to compete against once established. The sources include invisible colleges, professional grapevine, word-of-mouth, correspondence and conference. (Blunden-Ellis 1992, 154)

Self-service, user-friendly software and remote access have been introduced into the information market. There is, for instance a software component called the GUI (Graphical User Interface). This is an easy-to-use graphical interface that can be used directly by end-users to identify the information they are seeking and order documents without specialist information skills. The intermediary role of the librarian is thereby under threat. It is for librarians to prove that they can still be in business. Piontek and Garlock (1996) and Cornish (1998) argue that librarians still have a role to play in the information industry. The former propose the creation of World Wide Web subject collections for the academic audience and they believe that it is librarians who can best do this. Librarians have experience in the areas of collection, organisation, evaluation and presentation. These are the skills needed in creating a subject catalogue that will put some order into the confusing mass of information on the web. The latter also maintains that:

Libraries are still major sources of information provision. Users will need them. There will always be the need for intermediaries because users cannot have access to every source of supply and need guidance on what is best and most appropriate source for their needs.

If the library is a “good thing” then this must be made obvious to potential users. It is equally important for librarians to know how the academic library can gain competitive edge over their more aggressive and wealthy competitors. It is not enough for librarians to be aware of the competition in the information market place. They have to equip themselves with skills that will enable them compete effectively with the new custodians, organisers and disseminators of information.

### *Marketing strategies*

#### *Informing and cultivating policymakers*

Those who make library policies and hold the purse strings but know precious little about li-

braries must be informed and cultivated. Smith (1992) reports that for twenty years his library informed Council by relaying three or four press releases a week to members. Details of the successes of the library were written-up in the Council newsletter. The information needs of Councillors received high priority. He did not think he was playing favourites. His defence is that since they hold the purse strings, they must know everything about the activities of the library. The efforts of his staff in this direction were ultimately rewarded with a new library building. The market target in this case was Council members. They were given information about the services of the library. They were given priority treatment. They were encouraged to use the services of the library. There was an appreciation of the role and importance of the library in high places, and the library was the winner.

#### *Creating and enhancing the image of the library*

A basic decision in marketing products is branding, in which an organisation uses a name, phrase, design, symbols or combination of both to identify its products and identify them from those of competitors (Berkowitz et al. 1997).

Although service sector industries may on occasions seek to brand their products, in general there is significant emphasis on branding the company, or, in other terms, creating a corporate identity and seeking to influence the corporate image.” (Rowley, 1997)

The two concepts, corporate identity and corporate image are very important for academic libraries. Corporate identity is the way the organisation sees itself and corporate image is the way the customer perceives the organisation. Griffith (1992) maintains that the library has an image whether or not one wants to admit it and this image must not be allowed to develop haphazardly. It has to be controlled. Gummesson (1979) and Gronroos (1979) consider image extremely important in service firms.

The service customer will, in part, judge the quality and nature of the service he is receiving by its outward appearance; he is affected and influenced by his immediate environment, and his first impressions become fixed. (Blunden-Ellis 1992, 58)

Impressions once formed may be difficult to erase. Dirty walls, tattered and dusty books, stinking washrooms and toilets, bad lighting, poor ventilation, inconvenient opening hours, noise, badly dressed and unhelpful staff, and bad telephone manners create undesirable impressions that influence the use of the service. A library building that looks like a warehouse in filthy surroundings does not help the image that library staff will want to create and enhance. Positive activities influence the image of the library positively and negative factors affect the image of the library negatively. Since the library is now operating in a competitive environment, activities that are likely to dent its image and turn potential users away from the service must be avoided.

### *Personal selling*

This is a marketing strategy that commercial firms use to boost sales. This involves the personal presentation of products and services to potential customers. Notices and information about the library pasted on notice boards are sometimes not read by the people for whom these are meant. Personal selling is an expensive promotional activity. Salesmen are heavily paid for this difficult job. The academic library does not have to employ sales representatives. All professional librarians must become salesmen for the library. Librarians have got to interact and socialise with the academic community. They must talk about the services of the library in the coffee and the senior common rooms to their lecturer colleagues in the university. Although this is a tedious task, the impact on the use of services may be great. Exchanges between the service agent (librarian) and the customer (library user) can

elicit information about customer requirements, and also permit the service agent to explain the organization's products and how these can meet the customer needs. (Rowley 1998)

### *Publicity and public relations*

Many service organisations rely on publicity to promote their services. This is the cheapest promotion strategy. It is a form of promotion that is not paid for directly. Librarians have, over the years, used this strategy to promote themselves,

their libraries and the services that the libraries provide. Librarians write articles about specific projects in their libraries. They discuss their problems and successes at International conferences and they grant interviews to newsmen and television stations. Librarians will for a long time use this strategy to promote and/or protect the library's image, or those of its products. Librarians in Ghana should continue to exploit this strategy to the full by writing more articles and producing in-house newsletters about the services in the libraries.

### *Sales promotion*

It is difficult to determine what the academic library can immediately give to the academic community as an incentive to continue using the library. Once in a while, the academic library may have the rare opportunity to bait users. For instance when the Balme Library, University of Ghana had Internet connectivity through the help of IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) and DANIDA (Danish International Development Agency), users were allowed to access the Internet free-of-charge for three months. They also did not pay for the articles they selected for ordering for the same limited period. The idea was to get them to make an initial free use of the service so that they find out that it is a service of immense benefit to them and will use it without any push from anyone. They will also pay for the service because they know it is good and it meets their needs. By this simple marketing strategy, continued use of the service was ensured. It is expensive in the short run but the objective of the promotion has been achieved.

### *Pricing*

Pricing is an extremely important marketing activity. It is a major determinant of the profit on which the very survival of the firm depends. Pricing is also used as a means of gaining an edge over competitors. According to Rowley (1997) it can be used as a means of creating illusions of high product quality. This may be counter-productive in the long run. Pricing has not been the Ghanaian academic librarian's major pre-occupation for a long time. The government pays

for library services in the universities. Libraries do not therefore see the need to charge users for information that has already been paid for. Librarians accept the fact that:

the successful library is the library that provides a range of expensive resources that most individuals cannot afford and provide a well-established mechanism of information acquisition and dissemination that is accessible to most people. (Neal 1997)

Libraries are centres where information is stored and shared and the service is for the good of society. There are pros and cons for fee-based library services. Commenting on the debate for and against fee-based library services, Ekoja (1996) points out that those who are arguing for fee-based library services are winning the debate because of the following obvious reasons.

Many compounding variables have made it expedient for libraries around the world to look outside their traditional sources of funding in order to raise additional funds to be able to sustain the level of services which hitherto, normal funding was able to take care of.

Ghanaian academic libraries are yet to strike a convenient balance between the traditional principles of the public use ethos and the compelling need to pay for services consumed. Funding has now become problematic. Books, periodicals and equipment that will facilitate access and retrieval of information are expensive and out of reach of many academic libraries in Ghana. Libraries have become clients of commercial databases on the Internet. The services are not getting any cheaper for libraries in Ghana. The academic library has to meet the information needs of users. If it cannot do this, then users will look elsewhere for the needed information. For efficient service delivery users must be asked to pay. Utility organisations like the Water Company and the Electricity Company of Ghana recently raised their tariffs because they argued that they could no longer operate on the existing tariffs. The regulatory body that the government had established approved the new charges. Ghanaian academic librarians have to price their products and be able to defend the charges at Board meetings.

Pricing a product from a manufacturing firm may not be as difficult as pricing a service that for a long time has been completely free and regarded as a public good. There are pricing con-

straints that librarians are expected to be aware of. The one great obstacle to pricing is the ability of the users to pay. The charges per article from Uncover, a commercial database, range between \$15 and \$35. This is a lot of money for the Ghanaian lecturer and his student. The library will have problems asking users to pay the economic cost of these articles. Price must encourage the use of the item. The price must be reasonable if customers are to be retained. Unfortunately, what can be considered a reasonable price for an article may not meet the pockets of most of the users of academic libraries in Ghana. The cost of producing the item cannot be ignored when pricing decisions are taken. Ghanaian libraries will easily price themselves out of their own market if they pass on the charges of the commercial databases to their users. It is important to point out that the experience in the Balme Library, University of Ghana is that those who are ready to pay any amount for articles are a few desperate post-graduate students who have already spent several months without success looking for information for their theses and dissertations.

There are in the marketing literature several pricing methods that the librarian can choose from if he decides to market the library's services effectively and efficiently. There is *penetration pricing*. The price set is initially low. The objective is to appeal to the mass market. The five Universities involved in the IFLA/DANIDA sponsored Interlibrary Loans and Document Delivery Project in Ghana are currently using this method to market the service. For a period, users are paying only a third of the cost for an ordered article. This is possible because as at now four libraries in Denmark are bearing the cost of photocopies and postage for the articles. Later in the year, users will be asked to pay half the cost of the articles. It is hoped that after the year 2000 users of the service will be able to pay the full cost of the articles.

The opposite of this pricing method is *skimming pricing*, setting the highest initial price that customers, really desiring the product, are willing to pay. There are, as already pointed out, users who are willing to pay any price for the service. This method was not used because of the limited numbers involved.

There is *prestige pricing*, which as the name suggests is a pricing method that involves setting

a high price that will attract status conscious consumers to the product to buy it. Perhaps the commercial information providers are using this method. By pricing its product at GBP 8,995 for a five-year annual subscription to its database, a database is using a pricing method known as *odd-even pricing*. This involves setting prices at a few cedis, dollars or cents under an even number.

The pricing methods that have been mentioned above are only some of the available pricing methods that the academic librarian may decide to use to market the services of the library. The price that the user will pay for information will depend on the benefit that he hopes to get from the service. The price and the other marketing activities already mentioned may indicate real or perceived benefits of the service. The librarian will not want to make promises that he cannot fulfil. The librarian will want to take a hard look at the quality of the service being provided.

### *Product/service*

Product/service is the other element of the marketing mix that should engage the attention of the service provider. The academic librarian, or any other businessman for that matter, can only market what is available. Anything short of this may be suicidal. Users may rush into the library because the marketing strategies have made an impact. If their needs are not met, they will go away and return no more. Customer retention is as important as customer attraction, and the service or the product has a role to play in this. The emphasis of marketers is on the quality of the product and the service. The library's success depends upon the quality and excellence of its products (Bushing 1995). Products, she continues, includes all the goods and services available through the library. These products might include materials owned by the library, (books, periodicals, videos and films) and services (circulation, interlibrary and document delivery, online searches reference service and contracted services from other providers, bibliographic instruction) provided by staff of the library.

Quality may mean different things to different people, but to the information provider it may be the benefit that the user of the information derives from the information that he has been provided with or, better still, the value that he places

on it. Librarians have, over the years, tried to provide information that users ought to have. They are now being asked to do more than anticipating what users are likely to need and to concentrate more on satisfying the specific requests of users. Users need information that is current, relevant and timely. When the needs and expectations of users are known, information that meets those needs would, hopefully, be provided and that can safely be described as quality service.

Gronroos (1998) distinguishes between the pre-produced physical product that is ready to be exchanged and service which is "a process that cannot begin until the user enters it". He admits that in some service firms, physical product elements with specific features are present as integral parts of the service process. Books, periodical, films, video and audiocassettes are pre-produced products in the library. The user is involved in the online service that the library provides for him. He is part of the process. He judges the quality of the service by what he expects of the process as well as what in fact is experienced. In doing an online search the process works better when the librarian and the user work together. A competent librarian makes it a worthwhile process. The user is likely to be retained. He will recommend the service to other people. The point that is being made here is that different market strategies need to be devised for physical products and services.

### *Customer/user*

Weingard (1995) views "marketing as a process of exchange and a way to foster the partnership between the library and the community". The customer has become the centre of attraction. There appears to be an unending and ever-increasing number of variables that need to be examined and analysed in the planning and implementation of marketing plans. Kotler and Andreasen (1991) assert that:

A customer orientation toward marketing will come to that organization that best determines the perceptions, needs and wants of target markets and satisfies them through the design, communication, pricing and delivery of appropriate and competitively viable offerings.

The most important point that they make that applies to the library is that non-profit organisa-

tions that are focussed on themselves rather than on their customers will see their services as inherently desirable, blame customer ignorance or lack of motivation when their services are not used. They relegate research about customers to a minor role, tend to define marketing as promotion and assume that they have no generic competition.

Johnson (1995) maintains that there is a strong relationship between orientation toward marketing and organisational objectives. It is important for the academic librarian in a highly competitive environment to take a hard look at the objectives of the library. He is of the view that once the organisation's objectives are clear, management and staff will adopt an orientation toward marketing that defines what part consumers will play in service design and improvement. Rowley (1997) on the other hand examines some personal, psychological and social factors that determine consumer behaviour and concludes that these concepts are useful in any critical analysis of the relationship between the library and the user.

### Conclusion

Ghanaian academic librarians have now no option but to get seriously involved in planning and implementing marketing strategies in their libraries. There are very good reasons why they should do this.

- Marketing is an important weapon for handling competition.
- Users who have stopped using the library must be won back.
- Continuing financial support for the library may depend on proven use of the library.
- There is the need to retain existing users.
- An understanding of the marketing concept will make librarians aware of the fact that marketing is not only the promotion of services but also a management philosophy that must permeate all sections of the library if it is to achieve its pre-set objectives.
- The academic library must remain relevant to the academic community.

At this point in the discussion, it is only fair to comment on the realities of the library situation in Ghana. Ghanaian academic libraries obviously cannot market what is not available. There was a time in the history of academic libraries that

academic librarians in Ghana would have enthusiastically embraced marketing. If there is feet dragging on the issue, then it is because the librarians do not want to bite off more than they can chew. Promises given must be fulfilled. They may not be in a position to provide quality service to users because there are serious problems of funding and retraining that Ghanaian librarians are struggling to solve. Having made this point, it is important to suggest that, however small the service is, there is a lot to be gained by embracing the marketing concept.

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