Partnership between Librarians and Faculty at a Malaysian University Library: A Focus Group Survey

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Introduction

One of the approaches taken by academic libraries to market their services is a service dedicated to the academic programmes offered by the university. Academic libraries in Malaysia have done this as well, deploying reference librarians as liaison librarians. The International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM) has a newly-established liaison program, which began in 2000. Prior to that, the interactions between librarians and faculty were through the reference help desk services handled by the Reference and Information Services Department. With the establishment of the liaison programme, liaison librarians work directly with faculty (Rodwell and Fairbairn, 2008).

One reason why liaison librarians must interact directly with faculty is digital technologies and channels of communication. Faculty and students can easily obtain information from other providers than libraries. It is imperative, therefore, for academic libraries to develop marketing strategies that are relevant to faculty needs. Liaison librarians are an important part of this. A study of the issue of effectiveness and relevancy of the liaison programme is pertinent. Under the liaison programme the librarians have a reciprocal partnership with the faculty. The partnership can be sustained if the services are effectively marketed.

The partnership can also be affected by the academic level, discipline, and attitude of individual faculty (Dale, 2006). The literature shows that librarians have been using marketing techniques without realizing it. Smith (1995) states that many academic librarians assess users and their needs, segment intended users, and target services to certain populations. This is in line with the definition of marketing as "individual and organizational activities designed to sense and serve the client's needs and to facilitate and expedite exchange with a view to achieving the goals of the individuals or organizations through the satisfaction of the client's needs" (Agbonifoh, 1998). For profit-oriented organizations, success is measured ultimately on "return on investment" (ROI) or profitability. A library must take certain marketing principles into account to ensure a good return on its effort. ROI is not particularly useful for libraries, because measuring success in library marketing is difficult. For non-profit organizations such as libraries, measuring success is not easy. Some libraries have adopted the level of satisfaction of their clients as way of measuring success. Services cannot be marketed unless they are able to satisfy the needs of users. The importance of marketing in libraries is aptly described by De Saez (2002), who says that, "marketing concepts and techniques can contribute a dynamic approach to total strategy development for libraries and information professionals that will ensure effective management, the achievement of goals and the creation of a confident blueprint for the future."

The establishment of liaison programmes has opened a dialogue between faculty and librarians. With this dialogue comes issues affecting the relationship. Ducas (1987) reveals that when librarians interact with faculty, the faculty members become more aware of librarian's skills and abilities. Roberts (1995) found that the level of awareness of library services increases. Yang (2000) concluded that librarians must be proactive in making faculty aware of library services to ensure that there is continued input from faculty on their needs.

For a successful liaison programme, the librarians must be capable of communicating about the library's collection, policies, regulations, and special services. Liaison librarians must be able to do training, library instruction, collection development, and curriculum development, including curriculum proposals and accreditation reports (Mozenter, 2000). A recent study looked at academic faculty perceptions of liaison librarians at the IIUM library (Nor, 2005). The focus of this study is therefore directed at the liaison librarians.

Methodology

This study used the survey method, with a questionnaire as the instrument for data gathering. Seven respondents participated in the study. The population for this study was librarians who serve as liaisons for the respective Kulliyyah or faculty at the IIUM Gombak campus. These liaison librarians are responsible for information needs of their particular Kulliyyah. The Kulliyyahs involved are listed below:

1. Ahmad Ibrahim Kulliyyah of Law
2. Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design
3. Kulliyyah of Economics and Management Sciences
4. Kulliyyah of Engineering
5. Kulliyyah of Information and Communication Technology
6. Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human Sciences.
7. Kulliyyah of Science

All seven liaison librarians responded and their responses are documented for analysis as shown below

Data Analysis

Data from the following categories were analyzed: task performance, skill requirement, interaction with faculty members, satisfaction in rendering services, and marketing mode of delivery. Additionally, data on success factors and major impediments were also analyzed.

As shown in Table 1, liaison librarians identified the "notification of new arrivals and latest library developments" as the most important task. This is followed closely by "providing personalized assistance in collection development."

Table 1. Task Ranking

Task	Percent
Providing personalized assistance in collection development	86%
Providing specialized reference services for faculty	43%
Providing information alert services	58%
Notification of new arrivals and latest library developments	100%
Develop guide to resources and services related to Kulliyyah	72%
Giving advice to faculty pertaining to library policy	58%

Table 2 shows required skills of the liaison librarian. The respondents agreed unanimously that liaison librarians must be proficient in information literacy and communication. A large majority also considered the ability to assess academic information needs essential. Other skills that are considered useful for the liaison librarian to possess are ability to teach, analyse, present information products and services effectively, and to be aware of developments in ICT. They need such skills to have an impact on the information requirements and information-seeking behaviour of the faculty members.

Table 2. Skill Ranking

Skills	Percent
Teaching	58%
Assess academic information needs	86%
Proficiency in communication	100%
Problem-solving	43%
Information literacy	100%
Subject expertise	29%
Analytical ability	58%
Research ability	29%
Presentation skills	55%
Technology developments	58%

The extent of interaction among key players has a strong influence on the success of the liaison programme. Liaison librarians must consistently interact with faculty members. It is imperative to determine the most important types of interaction. Table 3 reveals those interactions. Information on library developments with a bearing on the teaching and learning process is essential and must be given to faculty. Respondents indicated that attending faculty meetings was useful for this purpose.

Table 3. Ranking of Interaction with Faculty Members

Type of Interaction and Information	Percent
Budget information	43%
Faculty meeting	58%
Information about library developments	100%
Kulliyyah exhibition	43%
Curriculum committee	29%
Personal library instruction	29%
Research partnership	29%
Kulliyyah social committee	14%
Provide opinions in meetings	29%

Concerning the level of satisfaction with liaison services, the most important category was the "notification of new arrivals." In order to achieve this goal, the liaison librarian may send messages about additions to the collection by email to all faculty members. Also of importance is "gathering reading list items."

Table 4. Satisfaction Ranking

Type/Nature of Services	Percent
Participate in Kulliyyah decision making	29%
Visit faculty members individually	43%
Provide library orientation for students at Kulliyyah level	58%
Involvement in accreditation process of the Kulliyyah	43%
Notification of new arrivals and latest library developments	100%
Information alert services	72%
Gather reading list items	86%
Serve on academic committees concerned with library services	58%
Develop guide to resources and services related to Kulliyyah	43%
Organize library instruction for faculty members	72%
Provide interlibrary loan and document delivery	72%
Provide specialised reference services	29%
Attend Kulliyyah meeting	58%

There are several modes of delivery for marketing. Table 5 shows email and Kulliyyah meeting to be the preferred channels.

Table 5. Ranking of Marketing Library Activities

Mode of Marketing	Percent
Email	86%
Formal written communication (e.g., letters)	29%
Informal written communication (e.g., memos)	15%
Kulliyyah meeting	72%
Individual meeting with faculty	15%
Telephone	72%
Bulletin board	58%

Conclusion

This focus group survey of liaison librarians shows their awareness of the need for marketing. They must promote, collaborate, and maintain good rapport with the faculty. To do this, they must acquire the competencies they lack. Respondents recognized that their primary purpose is to see that the information needs of faculty are met coherently and effectively.

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