Development of Lifelong learning through libraries- use of the web pages as a marketing channel in University Libraries of Sri Lanka

Abstract

Lifelong learning is a concept that a person engages in learning process throughout the whole his/her lifetime by using acquired knowledge and skills, by experiencing in different circumstances, and critical thinking. It also means the obtaining of knowledge and know- how required for one's living.

Objective of this paper was to identify the role of libraries in Sri Lanka for the process of improving lifelong learning and identify strategies applicable from the e- marketing concept. Use of the web pages as a marketing tool among university libraries were examined by logging onto the homepages of respective libraries of government universities. Contents, strategic links, and the accessibility of these homepages were explored. However, this was not a technological exploration but a view in a marketing perspective.

Underutilization of university libraries has become a common issue and it was assumed that implementation of Lifelong learning could address this issue to a certain extent. Orientation of marketing can target the real need of users and retain users as lifelong learners.

Web pages can be utilized in university Ibraries to interact with users, conduct live communication with them, develop information skills among users, and disseminate information directly to relevant individual or group. The success of this process leads to the proliferation of Lifelong learning.

Thirteen home pages out of Fifteen were logged on. Almost all the pages have given priority to include contact details, history, general procedures of the respective library, online public access catalogue, staff details, and free electronic resources etc. Nearly 50% of libraries have made worthy attempts to link the page with other libraries and information resources available outside. Yet some of these links were not updated or associated with errors of linking. A few libraries have made satisfactory attempts to include subject gateways, Ask a Librarian facility, Live Chat corners etc which are helpful to enhance lifelong learning.

Lack of authority, limitation of know-how technology, untrained staff, and limited infrastructure facilities were seen as barrios.

Introduction

Lifelong learning is a concept that a person engages in learning throughout the whole his/her lifetime while using the acquired knowledge and skills for the success of his/her living. It is a philosophy of "newer too soon or too late for learning. The process involves the gaining of knowledge or skills by study, experience, or being taught or trained. It is also a process of being open to new ideas, decisions, skills or behaviours and providing with opportunities at all ages and numerous contexts: at work, at home, and leisure. Lifelong learning is the 'learning for living' that proceeds with formal education activities as well as informal means of acquiring knowledge and skills.

Lifelong learning has become so much important for all individuals as nobody in the modern society can live without the help of accelerating scientific and technological progress. Knowledge acquired from standard education system: primary, secondary or university is not sufficient to perform the whole requirements of one's professional or social life.

Apparatus, equipments, and techniques gifted by the innovative technology have become a part of our lifestyle and it has compelled us to use these equipments if we need to survive in the technology driven society. Knowledge or the technology of know-how is a basic requirement in all areas of our day-to-day life. Our education, culture, social behaviours, occupation, business activities, entertainment and leisure etc.- all have affiliated with the changing technology. We need to have a basic understanding of general apparatus available for us to ease our life. We need to know how to operate electrical equipment we use at home. We need to be updated with the new trends such as how to operate e-money, how to use e-tickets in our travels, how to find a suitable specialist for a particular sickness, how to educate our children to face with future challenges and so on. All these requirements are based on information which is transformed to knowledge in practice.

Although, Sri Lanka had showed a high literacy rate in pedagogical context few decades ago, the literacy level of technology and know-how is still showing low. This causes to loose opportunities in the global context and in the local context as well. The lifelong learning is the most effective mean to gain the knowledge and develop skills for living. And hence, the lifelong learning is an essential interest to be included in the area of government policies. Lifelong learning is a need to be improved under a collaborative effort of various bodies in fields of education, science and technology, and economic and cultural sector. Libraries in this case have a tremendous role to play.

Objective of this paper is to identify the role of libraries in Sri Lanka in the process of improving lifelong learning and identify marketing strategies applicable from the e-marketing concept. Use of the web pages as a marketing channel among university libraries were investigated by searching the homepages of respective libraries. Content and strategies used there were explored in a marketing view. This was not a technical exploration but a view of marketing perspective.

Library system of Sri Lanka is structured with various components such as University Libraries, School Libraries, Public Libraries and Special libraries which are functioned under government allocation of funds. These universities are maintained as nonprofit organizations. University libraries comparatively have a clear authority of administration, recruitment process, regular allocation of funds and potential of creative planning and tendency for innovation. They have a clearly defined market (user community) and potential market that can be addressed with strategic planning.

Orientation of marketing

Underutilization of university libraries has become a common issue. It is also a researchable point which needs to find out why the underutilization of libraries still exists

and how we can tackle problem. Experiences from marketing oriented organizations may provide a spotlight on addressing of this issue.

Many of business sector organizations have achieved success through a better management of the market. There are four essential factors identified in a successful marketing oriented organization.

1. Focus on customers
2. Long-run perspective
3. Full use of all the resources available
4. Tendency to innovations

It is worthwhile to consider whether we- librarians have focused our services on user requirements and consider whether we have able to identify the potential demand. We need to ascertain whether our services and programmes are potential enough to continue even in changing circumstances. We need to ascertain whether our strategies are able to draw more users and retain them with our services. It is important to verify whether our resources- man and material are used efficiently, and see whether we have innovations when required.

Market and potential market of a university library

The market of the University library consists of various segments;
- ? Academic staff members, who engage in teaching of various subject disciplines, conduct research, and maintain scholarly projects to develop their respective profession.
- ? Undergraduates, postgraduate students, and other students study in various courses conducted by the university.
- ? Nonacademic staff.
- ? Other people such as researchers, professionals, school children, and general public outside the university.

Needs, wants and demand of the library are centered on

- ? Academic and educational requirements such as bibliographic information, textbooks, full text in digital formats, reference and reading space, information consultancy, and facilities for learning environment
- ? Information related to researches and inventions
- ? Tools and facilities for entertainment, leisure and social activities
- ? Information required for day to day life such as finding opportunities, know-how technology, and community information

Strengths and opportunities of university libraries

- ? Availability of resources collections covering various disciplines practiced in the university

- ? Availability of professional staff with expertise in different subject areas and the paraprofessional staff to help with the dissemination of desired information.
- ? Possibility of obtaining funds under comprehensive project proposals.
- ? Infrastructure facilities and links with expertise.
- ? Information skills of the staff

Possible strategic applications to retain the community as lifelong learners**;**

- ? Increase the resource collection with relevancy, and quality of content to meet the demand of the focused group.
- ? Increase the access to resources through catalogue, full-text databases, and other means of technology
- ? Establish timely, active, and comprehensive reference services
- ? Facilitate with community information services focused on university community as well as out side people
- ? Enhance e-access facilities to reach the library.
- ? Create environment to make the library as a regular part of the community. Implement full time libraries open 24 hours. Extend services targeting specific segments such as disabilities.
- ? Establish outreach programme such as adult education, family education, skills development workshops, homework club, literary circle etc. in collaboration with other departments of the university
- ? Apply innovative ICT in the production, distribution and promotion process of the library.
- ? Improve awareness through various tools and means target on different segments of the community. Demonstrations, guide tours, newsletters, media, welfare programmes and other promotional activities.
- ? Extension of e-marketing

E-marketing and webpages

Web marketing is a popular practice where marketers use the internet and software to provide value to the customer. The Internet has now become a marketing tool to meet customers, to introduce products and provide individualized services. It is used as a tool for pricing, distribution and promotion of products and to send digital products directly to the customer and exchange money in e-formats. Internet assists as a two-way communication means to facilitate interaction customer and the service provider. One to one web pages, e-mail conversations, e-conferencing, live chat, news groups etc. are some examples practiced in e-marketing. This transaction is used to enhance the relationship with customers. In general, e-marketing is the integration of the virtual activities into the organizational process. Web-page is the interface of this process.

The key four important factors essential to be considered in designing a web-page for an organization are: scope, site, synergy and system.
Scope concentrates the purpose of the page which involves the analysis of the focused group, strategy and objectives of the page. 'Site' is the content of the page which

concentrates on the expectations of focused parties, layout, content design, atmosphere, aesthetic presence to customize the subject. 'Synergy' represents the integration with the process and physical marketing activities of the organization. System means the technology application of the page such as software, hardware, communication protocols, website administrations, performance analysis, hosting etc.

In the library context, web page can be used as a strategic tool to improve awareness, distribute and disseminate digital products and services, and it is a communicational channel to increase and retain relationship with users. Lifelong learning is assisted with the web page as it bridges the learner and the library.

Library Homepages of fifteen universities managed under UGC of Sri Lanka were searched in this exploration. Two libraries viz. Uva wellassa University and the University of Visual and performing Arts were not accessible due to unavailability of Homepages or due to continuous technical failures. Thirteen (13) out of fifteen libraries were logged on through Homepages of respective universities. Four libraries (04) have found published Homepages using Real IP addresses while others have used local I Ps. The search was made on February 26, 27, and 28, 2007. Verifications were made over the telephone in due circumstances when it failed to logon.

Availability of following factors in the web page was explored in this paper:

a. General information regarding the respective library such as mission, objectives, contact details, policy, procedures etc.
b. Products of the library such as e-catalogue, e-publications, bulletins, digital archives, full text papers, databases, free access facilities, downloading , registration for free services
c. Promotional strategies such as newsletters, coupons, advertisements, raffles
d. Skills development programmes and training
e. Innovations
f. Reference services and facilities to information communication through Live Chat, e-mail conversations, e-conference and other techniques
g. Referral services and links to other resources such as link to other Homepages, subject gateways, databases, e-courses, intermediatory support etc.
h. Out reach programmes and focused products viz. adult education, services for disabilities, homework club, family education, entertainment and skills development
i. Customer retention though feedback, negotiations, suggestions, etc.
j. Technical support such as software download, font, ringing tone, trouble shooting
k. Payments, price bargain, and transaction of money through the page. (e-money transfer, credit card payments)
l. Aesthetic presence of the site

Findings of main features of library web pages

1. All university libraries had included general information such as Mission, objectives, contact details, history, procedures, staff etc. in their homepage.
2. Almost of university libraries have recognized that the Online Public Access Catalogue was the main important.
3. Majority of libraries have facilitated with assess to E-journals and databases obtained through PERI programme and consortia.
4. Format of information was mainly centered on text base. Majority of pages maintained a single text file with hyperlinks to access points in the page. Radio buttons on the page were linked to the headings of the same text file.
5. Verbal terms used had no uniformity. Sometimes these terms caused to mislead users.
6. Two libraries have attempted to retain live interact with users through "Live Chat" and "Ask a Librarian".
7. Strategies to attract awareness of potential users were less presented.
8. Content of the pages seemed to be centered on the library's main role which was unavoidable. Yet, outreach services are very important to retain users as lifelong learners.
9. No facilities found made for entertainment.
10. The homepage of one library contained only the OPAC.
11. Arrangement of contents might confuse users as some duplications were found in some pages. The same resources were linked with different points. Eg. E-resources, e-journals, information gateway.

Conclusion

As a whole, web pages of university libraries have attempted to present all professional activities of the library rather than developing strategies in a user angle. Different libraries have followed different formats and software and hence the format and the facilities varied accordingly. For example there were some OPACs facilitated with minimum bibliographic details while some others showed sophistication such as reservation through online, extension of loan period through a terminal at home, auto reminders, fines calculation etc. However, a lot of them were not activated.

Lifelong learning has no place, no time and no specific means. People require information any where they need, any time, by any mean. If the library can design, arrange, and implement facilities to enrich the access to information, it is the way to proliferate lifelong learning. Website is the one of tool we can used to make this accessibility. Webpage design is a kind of art, science and a business of creativity.

Refereces

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