

Taking Our Pulse: Using Electronic Polling to Gauge Customer Opinion

By Ruth Maddox Swan

priceless *adj.*

1. Of inestimable worth; beyond valuation; invaluable.
2. Highly amusing, absurd, or odd.¹

Librarians, library managers and library boards would delight to have customers describe their libraries as “priceless,” using the term according to the first Webster definition, of course, rather than the second! We think of our rare collections, perhaps, as priceless, but are pleased, as well, when our assessments suggest that customers are satisfied with library service quality and that we are meeting our stated missions.

Gauging Customer Satisfaction

Like its peers, Florida A&M University Libraries (<http://www.famu.edu/library>) staff keeps prescribed statistics and conducts various assessments of library services during the year. They are designed to guide planning, gauge organizational performance, and measure performance outcomes. Along with these formal and informal assessments, libraries should have efficient tools for gaining a realistic picture of how well customers are being served, focusing, of course, on satisfaction factors important to the customer.² Swan’s research modified the SERVQUAL³ instrument for use in libraries and reports some of the factors customers rate critical to satisfaction with library services.⁴ Customers basically want reliable access to adequate materials collections. In addition, customers want assistance with accessing information resources, quality collections, comfortable and convenient study environments, friendly courteous staff, and empowered front-line staff. Customer priorities change, however, as their academic classifications change,⁵ indicating the need for continuous and diverse assessment. The results of the assessments are most valuable when used to make decisions about serving the customers. In the marketing world, this might describe the goals of marketing research.



Caption: FAMU Library staffer Carissa Johnson invites student to take a poll at Coleman Library. Photo by Roland Pompey.

Conducting Marketing Research

Marketing research is defined by Kotler as “the planned acquisition and analysis of data measuring some aspect or aspects of the marketing systems for the purpose of improving an organization’s marketing decisions.”⁶ Library and information agencies are now becoming more comfortable with the concept of engaging in marketing activities. Our users are customers who have other options for information service delivery. Kotler debunks “myths” that marketing should be reserved for major decision making, that only elaborate and costly surveys are useful, that marketers must have a high level of research sophistication, and that marketing research sometimes ends up unread or not utilized.⁷

One survey approach is opinion polling which is often used in commercial and political organizations. Polling can reveal customer perceptions regarding current operations, and, along with other assessment tools, can guide decision-making.

Using Electronic Polling

Florida A&M University Libraries invested in electronic polling software⁸ and a touchscreen portfolio computer to conduct electronic opinion polling as part of its assessment program. Surveys are constructed and written with logic, based on identified information needs. Using electronic polling software (electronic comment cards) participants “touch” their answer onto the



Caption: Portable touchscreen device facilitates polling. Photo courtesy of Florida A&M University Libraries.

actual computer monitor, or key them in using a regular keyboard. Data can be viewed immediately after conducting the poll or portions of the poll. A few keystrokes yield descriptive statistics including cross tabulations.

One of the simplest polls illustrates how Florida A&M Library staff primarily expects to use polling software. The poll consisted of only three questions and focused on customer access to information. A student worker asked persons (mainly students) leaving the main library to please participate in an exit survey of their library experience for that day. The three questions were as follows:

- Q1: Did you find what you came for today?
- Q2: What library resource did you need?
- Q3: Are you satisfied with the service you received today?

Of those surveyed, 94.92% (59) reported that they found what they came for that day. Over half of the respondents came to the library that day to use a computer. Reference assistance and use of books tied for second place; journals and newspapers followed in that order. A very large percentage of respondents (89.83%) were satisfied with library services on the day they were polled.

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Polling Faculty

The Faculty Planning Conference poll was conducted August 14-16, 2002 and was much lengthier. The 32-question survey was adapted from a print survey created earlier. Questions were constructed to learn faculty perceptions of the adequacy of specific library services. The electronic survey took respondents approximately four minutes to complete, less than the completion time for the original print survey. Unlike the print version, each page presented only one question, which simplified reading. Surveys were administered in two ways: Printed surveys were included in information folders distributed from the library conference exhibit table, while staff manned the electronic polling station inviting passersby to participate. Out of sixty-four usable surveys, only three were print surveys.

A copy of the survey can be obtained from the library.

Poll Results

Broad questions that were asked are listed along with some of the more frequent answers:

Q.1 How do faculty rate the services of the Florida A&M University Libraries?

Survey results indicate that faculty generally perceives Florida A&M University Library services to be adequate, especially the online catalog (WebLuis), library hours, and circulation services. Library services to be least adequate to poor were copy services, printing and facilities.⁹

Q.2. What library services do faculty use most frequently?

Faculty most frequently use library computers, the book collection, electronic databases, and the online library catalog, in that order.

Q.3. Along with resources at FAMU Libraries, what other collections do faculty primarily use?

Faculty report making wide primary use of Internet resources, followed in equal numbers by primary use of personal collections and collections in the libraries of Florida State University, the nearest research library.

Q 4. How might promotional resources be targeted?

Resources should be used to promote those services rated adequate. Generous resources must be allocated to improve and publicize those services rated inadequate to poor. Special promotions can be made to faculty groups in Schools and Colleges that report not using certain collections. Underutilized library collections were microforms, special collections, and government documents.

Q.5. Are faculty generally satisfied with FAMU Library services?

One indicator of satisfaction is willingness to recommend a service to others. Out of sixty-four respondents, fifty-one reported encouraging students to make use of Coleman Library. This one indicator alone cannot determine levels of satisfaction, but it does suggest general satisfaction.

Uses of Polling

Software constraints limited responses to ten categories. This was restrictive for some questions in the demographic section of the survey. Also, this version of the TouchPoll software does not have the capability to receive comments.¹⁰ An upcoming version will remedy this shortcoming.

The libraries will continue to conduct electronic polling and see it as an efficient method for gathering opinion data about specific services or specific customers. Experience has shown that each poll raises new questions and drives the content of the next poll. For instance, all customer groups report high use of library computers and the Internet, seemingly over other library resources. In light of that finding, do faculty draw distinctions between the Internet and library-provided electronic collections and databases? What uses do students make of library computers and what use do faculty make of the Internet? What does the word “library” mean in this electronic environment?

Constructing new polls and reconstructing others should not be intimidating. Flexibility is a benefit of electronic polling. Though it could be moderately difficult to program the first poll, successive polls should be fairly easy to construct or revise.

Polling is very easy to conduct, customers are more apt to participate in an electronic

poll over a print survey, and the results are easily and immediately accessible. Though the data is immediately available, sufficient time must still be devoted to making proper analysis of the data, distributing results, and making decisions. We are presently using results to guide some decisions such as where to allocate marketing dollars.

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Notes

- 1 “priceless”, Webster’s New College Dictionary, 1999 ed.
- 2 P. Herson, Service Quality in Academic Libraries, Ablex (Norwood, N. J.:1996) 92.
- 3 A. Parasuraman, L. Berry & V. Zeithaml. SERVQUAL: A Multiple-Item scale for measuring consumer perceptions of service quality. Journal of Retailing, 64 (Spring 1988) 12-37.
- 4 Swan, Ruth M. Perceived Performance and Disconfirmation of Expectations as Measures of Customer Satisfaction with Information Services in the Academic Library. Dissertation. Florida State University. Tallahassee, FL, 1998.
- 5 Ibid, 133.
- 6 P. Kotler, Strategic Marketing for NonProfit Organizations, 5th ed, Prentice Hall (Upper Saddle River, N. J. :1996) 212.
- 7 Ibid. 215.
- 8 The libraries purchased two licenses of TouchPoll software version 3.12.0000, (<http://www.touchpoll.com/>), and a PaceBook PaceBlade PB56 computer. One license is used on a laptop and provides similar portability to the PaceBlade. Other systems to consider might be the Survey System (<http://www.surveysystem.com/bro.htm>) and Infopoll (<http://www.infopoll.com/company/>).
- 9 As is common with academic libraries, the library does not control these services.
- 10 We were aware of this at the point of purchase, but concluded that the value in using the existing polls outweighed the benefit of waiting for a new software release.