References in the Digital Age: Marketing and Services in Virtual Worlds

Dr. Octavia-Luciana Porumbeanu
Library and Information Science Department,
Faculty of Letters, University of Bucharest
E-mail: octavialuciana@yahoo.com

Dr. Octavia-Luciana Porumbeanu is a lecturer at the Library and Information Science Department of the Faculty of Letters at the University of Bucharest. She teaches courses on knowledge management, reference services, information users and documentation. Her current research interests are knowledge generation in organizations, reference services, users' activities and behaviour in the information seeking process.

Abstract

The digital age has brought major changes at the level of the reference services offered by libraries. The emergence of competition, represented by numerous organizations that also provide information services, has necessitated the reorganization of reference services so that they function according to the market laws. In this context marketing has become an essential tool for libraries. They must develop strategies to make sure that users will continue to ask for their services. The number of those attracted to online information services is growing and many traditional users of libraries may be encountered at present in virtual environments where the possibilities for communication and interaction, for sharing information and generating knowledge are clearly better. Many libraries have already taken the step towards the virtual world and offer now assistance and information services in environments such as Second Life where there are possible both games and educational activities.

Keywords: reference services, marketing, virtual worlds, Second Life

Introduction

More and more information services have been available lately through the Internet. This does not mean that libraries, traditional providers of such

services, must cease to respond to the information requests they are addressed. On the contrary they should try to adapt permanently to the conditions in the knowledge and information society, reorganize their activity and reconsider and renew their services.

In the digital age, libraries are faced with a series of threats and some of them have already become reality, like the loss of the information monopoly, the loss of visibility, the loss of face-to-face (direct) interaction, which led to the loss of user relationships (1).

The reference services represent the most dynamic area of libraries. Along the years they experienced major transformations, and recently it has been necessary even their reorganization so that they can function according to the market laws, in their strategies being included a series of elements specific to the profit based organizations.

The market of digital reference services

From 1876 until the mid-1980s when digital references emerged, the development of these information services was triggered mainly by the evolution of the users' information requests and the desire to better meet their needs and expectations. But the digital age has meant a radical transformation for libraries and reference services: the emergence of competition which led to the setting up of the current market of reference services.

Thus libraries have ceased to represent the main source of information. A number of new suppliers and a series of new places where users can have access to information appeared: cyber cafes, mega bookshops, online information providers, companies and non-profit organizations that offer digital information services. They appeared on the market, their services developed rapidly and began to attract more and more customers.

There could be noted a redistribution of the users of traditional library services. Some of them turned to the digital services offered by libraries, and another part to other information providers. The market of digital reference services has a large potential for development, so it is important that libraries offer attractive and convenient services for users.

Some examples and figures concerning the new suppliers of information services, the library competitors, are as follows: Ask Jeeves received 20 million questions each day; Webhelp even received 3.4 million requests in a single morning; Askme.com had by the end of 2000 10 million users; Exp.com had a hundred thousand experts and 1.6 million users a month; Eduref received 7 million requests in a single month. (2)

Marketing in the reference services

In this context, marketing becomes extremely important for libraries. Especially now, when many voices wonder if libraries are still necessary. If they want to survive on this competitive market, marketing must become an essential tool for librarians. From a marketing perspective, librarians should focus on satisfying the needs of consumers, considers S. Kaane. (3) Therefore, there must be identified the means to attract people to the library and develop strategies to make sure that users will continue to come with requests for assistance and information. Consequently, it is very important to know the community that a library serves, and also to anticipate users' needs. J. Rowley (4) states that librarians must be able permanently to answer a series of questions such as who the users are and what they need, in what way they need information, why they choose a designated service and not the competitors', what components of the service are important to them, which factors influence the evaluation of services by users etc.

The emergence of marketing may be placed at the beginning of the 20th century. Promotion of market economy has had an important role in the development of this science. At present, in the literature there can be found a lot of definitions of marketing. Thus, the American Marketing Association defines it as follows: "Marketing is a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want through creating, offering and exchanging products of value with others "(5) and the UK Chartered Institute of Marketing offers the following definition: "the management process responsible for identifying, anticipating and satisfying customer requirements profitably". (6)

Service marketing is an area which began to develop in the 1970s, and in the last decades it has started to become important also for non-profit service providers. Marketing is applied to make profit, but libraries are social non-profit organizations. Thus, the application of marketing in the reference services, considers L. Yanru (7), doesn't aim to make profit, but satisfy the needs of society and users and obtain social and economic benefits.

Marketing is not just promotion, it is a complex process of creating successful products. O. Obst states that marketing in library means "to analyze the demands and satisfaction of the users, analyze the performance of the library, analyze the library's strengths and weaknesses, opportunities and threats." (8)

Marketing can help libraries operate on this competitive market, but for this the market of the reference services must be cultivated, that is the

library services, the role of the information resources and the methods for their utilization must be made known. Another action to be undertaken is to segment the reference services market. (9) According to B. Snoj and Z. Petermanec (10), marketing can also help libraries to create a competitive advantage by developing new services or changes to the existing ones to satisfy their users better, by improving their organizational status and image and by improving their performance in general.

In the competition with other information providers, the reference services offered by libraries should have some advantages in order to reach a new segment of the market, to extend or to keep their position. Thus, the advantage of information resources, the knowledge, skills and experience advantage of the reference librarians and the advantage of offering the users the services which meet their needs and preferences can help libraries. (11)

So, what strategy should be adopted by libraries in order to survive on the information market? Libraries should try to change users and their habits? To find new ways to attract users to library services? Or the library should change its approach?

We consider the best solution in the digital age is that librarians go to the place/environment where the users are and try to provide services and assistance there. The number of those who are attracted to online information services is increasing, but their level of knowledge concerning the new technologies, their experience in the field of digital resources, of the search for information online etc. are very different. There are many people who use the computer and who are active in the virtual environment from a very young age, but in addition there is a large number of users that are beginners with a not very advanced level in what concerns online services. In their case, librarians can use their skills and knowledge and can train them for an effective use of the new technologies and of the digital information services.

Virtual environments. Second Life
People's need to communicate, to be constantly in contact with other people makes them use intensively various tools that can help in this regard. As these tools are more advanced and provide a better medium for communication and interaction, users will quickly turn to them. And the more technology progresses, the more users will have a lot of opportunities to intervene, change, and contribute to the new media format. Web 2.0 technologies give users the opportunity to connect with virtually everyone,

112

to share information and knowledge with others, and to generate information and knowledge. Therefore, libraries should make their services visible and accessible also in virtual environments which are frequented by more and more users.

There are many examples of virtual environments: Active Worlds, Kaneva, the Sims Online, There, Second Life, etc. According to Wikipedia (12), a virtual world is a computer simulated environment where its users inhabit and interact through avatars. Often the world is like the real one with rules such as topography and gravity, locomotion, real-time actions and communication. Initially communication was only in the form of text, but now it is possible real time voice communication.

In virtual environments, the reference librarians will respond not to requests received from traditional users of the library or library users in the real life, but to requests from information seekers.

Virtual environments like Second Life offer libraries a chance to experience and provide ways to access information that users prefer, based more on visual and audio elements than on textual elements, innovative methods of service delivery, new opportunities to interact with users, the opportunity to experiment and explore new models of services impossible or difficult to offer in the real world.

Second Life is a 3D online virtual world based on the Internet, created by its users. Linden Research Inc. launched it in 2003 and it came into public attention in 2006-2007. Currently it has over 13 million registered users. There is a computer program, Second Life Viewer, which can be downloaded and it provides access to this world and then users connect to the virtual environment through the Internet. Users called "Residents" can interact and navigate in this virtual world using an avatar which they customize as they wish in terms of appearance and behavior. They communicate through chat, but now voice communication is also possible. Residents can socialize, participate in individual or group activities, create and market various goods – virtual properties – and services from each other and they have intellectual property rights over their creations, so there is a functioning economy in Second Life which includes exchange services to convert local currency, Linden dollars, in U.S. dollars. (13, 14)

Second Life is a virtual environment where there are possible games, information services, and educational activities, and at present many librarians from different countries establish library and information services in this virtual world and provide specialized assistance for Second Life residents.

One of the advantages of this environment for the reference services concerns the avatar which is defined by K.L. Nowak (15) as "a physical or graphic image that allows the user to be embodied in a virtual environment in real time." A. K. Buckland and Godfrey (16) have found that it improves the relations between librarians and the information seekers and it helps to eliminate some of the disadvantages of traditional and chat reference services.

Reference services in virtual worlds

Many libraries have taken the step towards the virtual world and now they offer information services in this environment. An example is given by the Alliance Library System in Illinois who created Info Islands Archipelago, a group of islands centered on library activities in Second Life. There have been over 5,000 visits daily. Residents are attracted by the opportunity to do things that are impossible in real life, they prefer to visit Second Life libraries than to search for information on Google.

In 2006 the Alliance Library System launched a reference service and according to the 2007 Report (17) the service had nearly 6500 visitors and received over 2200 Second Life reference questions, and 200 real reference questions.

Another example is McMaster University Library in Canada which acquired a virtual space in Second Life on Cybrary City Island in December 2006 in order to provide reference services. The objectives were to explore the potential of providing a virtual reference service in this environment and to discover what resources and what training are necessary to provide such a service. (18)

In Second Life, there are also provided medical information services through a project initiated in 2006 and based on collaboration between libraries in the U.S. and the Netherlands. The types of information requests to which librarians had to answer are very diverse so quickly the objective of the Medical Library in this virtual world, Consumer Health Library, was to provide reference services 24/7. The types of questions received by the library are grouped by G. van den Brekel as follows: "basic or more advanced information about a disease or condition; information about surgical procedures; drugs and their side effects or interactions; how to find a support forum where people are dealing with the same issues you are facing; new research about diseases or therapies." (19) In order to answer these questions, there have been established collaborations with specialists in epidemiology, internal medicine, pharmacists etc.

With regard to educational activities in Second Life there are many tools that can assist users. Thus, *Ann Myers Medical Center* can assist medical students in acquiring advanced skills for the analysis of X-rays, CTs and MRIs. Another example of educational possibility in Second Life is *Heart Murmurs* where you can listen to cardiac murmurs. Or *Virtual Center for Neurological Education*, a virtual environment for training and demonstrating a virtual experience of a neurological disorder.

Second Life offers a new way of access to information; also the possibility to connect with other people and share knowledge and information. G. van den Brekel considers that "librarians have an opportunity to examine existing practices while exploring potential new paradigms beyond the restrictions and limitations that affect libraries in the real world." (20)

Reference services in Second Life does not appear to differ greatly from those in the real world. The conclusions which two Canadian specialists, A. Buckland and K. Godfrey (21), reached are that in this virtual world conversation flows easily, and the anonymous interaction allows individuals the freedom to ask questions without fear or embarrassment.

Any library wishing to provide information services in Second Life should not forget though they may encounter some difficulties. These concern the technical requirements, the high costs involved in owning a building or an island in Second Life, the numerous updates, the mastery of the interface etc.

Conclusions

Libraries must be prepared to assist the users and provide information services in the real world, but also in virtual worlds. The number of those who visit these environments is increasing, and the need for information services is also growing. A. Buckland and K. Godfrey notes that "People are coming to virtual worlds for fun, entertainment or socialization, but often find they have information needs once they are involved and are actively seeking assistance from the library community." (22)

Thus availability will be an important feature in the future. If they are ready and respond promptly to the users' requests for information and assistance, librarians can be sure they will not lose them as customers; they will always come back with new requests if they are satisfied with the services provided. So, whether we talk about requests addressed directly by users at the headquarters of the library or online through the new technologies, librarians must be prepared to respond.

We believe that the reference services in virtual worlds will develop even more in the next years, but the question about how they will look like remains and future research will certainly come with solutions for an increased involvement and a greater co-operation between libraries, for a more intense activity of libraries in the virtual world.

References

(1) OBST, Oliver. Marketing Virtual Services. In: *Journal of the European Association for Health Information and Libraries*, 2008, vol. 4, no. 3, pp. 9-13.

(2) YANRU, Li. Marketing Reference Service of Public Libraries in Developing Regions. In: *World Library and Information Congress: 72nd IFLA General Conference and Council, 20-24 August 2006, Seoul, Korea,* http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla72/index.htm

(3) KAANE, Sophia. Marketing reference and information services in libraries: a staff competencies framework. In: *World Library and Information Congress: 72nd IFLA General Conference and Council, 20-24 August 2006, Seoul, Korea,* http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla72/index.htm

(4) ROWLEY, J. Quality management in the public sector: some perspective from the service quality literature. In: *Total Quality Management*, 1998, vol. 9, no. 2-3, pp. 321-325. Apud KAANE, Sophia. *Op. cit.*

(5) American Marketing Association. Apud KAANE, Sophia. *Op. cit.*

(6) The UK Chartered Institute of Marketing. Apud KAANE, Sophia. *Op. cit.*

(7) YANRU, Li. *Op. cit.*

(8) OBST, Oliver. *Op. cit.*

(9) YANRU, Li. *Op. cit.*

(10) SNOJ, Boris; PETERMANEC, Zdenka. Let users judge the quality of faculty library services. In: *New Library World*, 2001, vol. 102, no. 1168, pp. 314-324. Apud KAANE, Sophia. *Op. cit.*

(11) YANRU, Li. *Op. cit.*

(12) *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virtual_world

(13) *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Second_life

(14) *Second Life*, http://secondlife.com7whatis/economy_stats.php

(15) NOWAK, K. L. The Influence of Anthropomorphism and Agency on Social Judgment in Virtual Environments. In: *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 2004, vol. 9, no.2. Apud BUCKLAND, Amy; GODFREY, Krista. Gimmick or groundbreaking? Canadian academic libraries using chat reference in multi-user virtual environments. In: *World Library and Information Congress: 74th IFLA General Conference and Council, 10-14 August 2008, Quebec, Canada,* http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla74/index.htm

(16) BUCKLAND, Amy; GODFREY, Krista. Gimmick or groundbreaking? Canadian academic libraries using chat reference in multi-user virtual environments. In: *World Library and Information Congress: 74th IFLA General Conference and Council, 10-14 August 2008, Quebec, Canada,* http://www.ifla.org/iv/ifla74/index.htm

 (17) PETERS, T.; BELL, L.; GALLAWAY, B. *A Report on the First Year of Operation of the Alliance Second Life Library 2.0 Project also known as the Alliance Information Archipelago, April 11, 2006 through April 18, 2007,* http://www.alliancelibrarysystem.com/pdf/07sllreport.pdf

(18) BUCKLAND, Amy; GODFREY, Krista. *Op. cit.*

(19) Van den BREKEL, A. J.P. Get Your Consumer Health Information from an Avatar!: Health and Medical Related Activities in a Virtual Environment. In: *Proceedings of EAHIL Workshop Krakow, Poland 12th-15th of September 2007*, http://www.eahil.net/conferences/krakow_2007/www.bm.cm-uj.krakow.pl/eahil/proceedingsOral.html

(20) *Ibidem.*

(21) BUCKLAND, Amy; GODFREY, Krista. *Op. cit.*

(22) *Ibidem.*