

Library Management and Marketing

The Price of Information in Library

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Abstract

Today, the price of information is one of the most discussed and controversial concepts in library marketing. Problems as the price of information, tax introduction or service payment are not at all simple, having more and more complex implications. They have caused even certain confusions in libraries, especially at the management level because these institutions' authority doesn't know how to deal with this one and passes sometimes from one extreme to another, from free services to entirely paid services. This article tries to bring some clarifications, concluding that the solution would actually be in between, that is, payment for some services and free provision for others.

Keywords: *Price, the Price of Information, Cost, Marketing Mix, Information, Services.*

Considering the large use of *price* as a notion in the marketing mix acceptability (a combination of four elements: products, price, promotion, placement), we think it's useful to maintain it also in the marketing jobs area (1) and implicitly, in libraries.

According to P. Kotler's definition, the price represents the amount of money prompted for a product or a service. It is the sums of values the consumers offer in exchange for the advantage to have or to use the product or the desired service (2).

For the library user the price expresses the total amount of benefits provided by a service which includes, on one side, the costs made by an

institution, and, on the another hand, the efforts made by him/her while using the service. The price doesn't mean only money but also time. From the user's point of view the costs can include any or all of these factors:

1. Time and vehicle are needed to set to the library;
2. Limited parking spaces;
3. Unfit opening hours of the institution;
4. Too much noise in the reading rooms;
5. The spaces in the library are too little and too crowded.

The price is the only element of the marketing mix that brings incomes; all the others elements represent the costs. The price is also one of the most flexible elements of the mix.

As opposed to product and placement, the price can be quickly modified. At the same time, the price or the competition through prices is the main problem many marketing experts are confronting with.

The price is one of the marketing elements the institution uses to reach its objectives and the decisions about price influence and are influenced by the decisions that consider the service, the placement and the promotion. When the marketing program is achieved, the decisions about the price must be carefully coordinated with the other elements of the mix.

The price of information

The main cause of the crisis in the information area is the long absence of a policy. Nobody contests that the transition to a market economy will inevitably lead to the appearance of the private sector in the information area in our country, too. But it is also necessary a new ideology of using the information, on which a new application is formulated.

The information field can develop chaotically, without tasks and pertinently and legally formulated aims, without serious support from the state and a skillful management. We must not wait for the market to readjust itself. Information is an important link of the economic chain. Many urgent tasks of reforming the economy can't be solved without its support (3).

We observe an interesting, but also a frustrating contradiction in the way specialists, information professionals and the "well-informed audience" report to information and to the informational services. On one hand, we realize the economic importance and the professional mutations that take place in this area; we read all-over about information as a strategic tool for the business field and industry, as a source of increasing the competition and internationalization, about "the information revolution" and "the information society". On the other hand, we notice a surprising lack of

attention about the details concerning the major aspects and their approach from different points of view which can offer alternative solutions.

Information as a merchandise has some characteristics that make it unique. We ask the question: *How can we establish in a correct and real way the prices for this merchandise?* The answer can have enormous implications for everyone one of us. If we put a tax, for instance, per unit of information contained in a document, what is the real price of the newspaper we read daily?

In general, it is an acknowledged fact that the gratuitousness of information is ephemeral, it is a delusion. It is a socially useful labor, with substantial expenses to obtain, diffuse and store it.

At large, free reception of information was taken for granted by its beneficiaries. Yet, sooner or later we understood that information must be paid for.

Currently, the economy for profit controls the world and, at a smaller scale, the enterprises and the services, and the libraries too respect the rules of this game.

The libraries must conciliate their mission of public service and its associated notion of gratuitousness with their important economic functions. But they can't pass from one extreme to another.

The idea of information as a public good still has strong supporters. As counterparts to the individual brokers, in many libraries information services with charge are established which practice differentiated tariffs or maintain the gratuitousness for certain categories of users.

There is a certain worry that the more and more popular notion of information as a merchandise will lead to the appearance of some expensive services and products because the specialized markets want and can pay for them and this is, financially, impossible for the organization of the public sector.

The public services, of an inferior quality, but also with a lower price (if not for free), can be eliminated by the expensive and more qualitative services. As opposed to different factors from the information scene, the libraries depend on the state budget and they lack the tradition of achieving added value products with or services for the open market.

The explosive development of the online information industry with the afferent philosophy of paying on the spot or by subscription launches the promise of quick and individualized information, as we enter the new stage of initiatives with the beneficiary as an objective (4).

The development of business information commerce serves to the information delivery quantification and strengthens the notion of information as strategic weapon in obtaining the economic and competitive advantage.

The current potential (libraries, information and documentation centers, documentary institutes) shouldn't and can't be exclusively replaced with profit based structures. It is without saying that we don't put the problem of passing from total gratuitousness to everything on cost.

The introduction of taxes in libraries

The current tendency of libraries is to increase their supplementary income by the introducing different taxes.

Taxes are perceived for registration in the library, but there are different tariffs depending on the categories of users: pupils, students, teaching staff, researchers etc. and on the types of services: loan, interlibrary loan, consulting the documents in the reading rooms, bibliographies on demand, bibliographies for graduation papers and for research projects, access to databases or to the web, on-line information services etc.

Libraries charge taxes for the services provided for the external customers of the university, taxes for the inside customers of the university or for other services (like photocopying).

For losing the library card, supplementary taxes are perceived, when the access is free, or the same tax as to the registration, for releasing a new card.

For not returning the borrowed documents on time, libraries perceive taxes for each document per day of delay.

There is a problem today concerning the introduction of a registration tax or of the payment for every use of the library service. As the last solution might be too expensive, the users accept much better the first one. Yet, if the users have to choose between paying a registration tax or using the services of a library, most of them accept the second variant. They appeal to the services of a library which offers free access, without making a comparison between the services offered by the two types of libraries. The only method of solving this situation is the introduction of some taxes by every library thus that charge neither of them losing their costumers in favour of the other.

In general, libraries that charge offer certain services that can't be found in free access libraries: consulting an online catalogue, access to different databases, access to the web, and yet, most users don't perceive favorably these things. They choose gratuitousness, despite the advantages offered by the payment of a tax, many times symbolic, in exchange of access to a range of various, qualitative, fast services. Variety, quality, rapidity, these are the qualities of the services an user wants in this

“informational society”, dominated by an enormous quantity of information delivered through different channels of distribution, free or with payment, qualities that, if he/she doesn’t find at the information services that he uses to go, by all means he/she will find them different structures, that is at the concurrent library.

The introduction of tax services in libraries

Currently, the activity of libraries and information services is at an explosive development stage dominated by the information technology, crashing and being confronted with it, but going “hand in hand”.

Terms as “access of the user”, “distributed processing”, “informational autonomy” signify the movement of the emphasis from institution to consumer. The library users are the main object of its activity.

The librarian must take care not only of the satisfaction degree of the users’ needs, but also of the fact that he/she influences the optimization of the scientific process of production and the user’s position in community. Today, only such an approach can assure the authority of the library and only a real authority guarantees its material possibilities and its existence.

Despite the existence of a law on library services’ gratuitousness, many countries (Great Britain, USA, Germany, Denmark, The Netherlands) introduced tax services. The French professor, Bernard Lemennicier at the University of Paris, after a study on library paid services in France and other developed European countries, reached the following conclusions:

- The academy libraries in England are searching for solutions in order to diversify the finance sources through some paid services;

- In Germany, because of the economic crises and unemployment, tax services were reintroduced in public libraries, and currently for the public is something natural to pay;

- On the other hand, in Finland where libraries are sustained by the state, the fundamental principles of cooperation, free access to information and the network development were maintained;

Many authors, especially from USA, who dealt at full with this debate, public or private, gratuitousness or cost, bring other arguments for taxes (5):

- tariffs ameliorate the access to the information sources;

- they encourage a better administration of the resources in favour of the customers;

- the desire to pay for a service is a sign of a real necessity and of the quality of services;

- payment values the perception on services and library;
- gratuitousness doesn't exist, in reality, somebody pays;
- payment provides complementary funds;
- free services favour private intermediaries who exploit in their interest the finances of the community;
- gratuitousness can be a source of disloyal competition;
- paying for a service compels the library to quality.

The causes for these paying practices for the services in libraries would be on some authors' opinion the following:

- the costs increase concerning the development of the new technologies necessary for the library automation;
- the restrictions of public subventions starting with the 70's;
- awareness concerning the information value especially in the scientific and economic field;
- the implementation of the marketing that treats the library in financial terms and introduces a research and anticipation policy of the users' needs;
- the influence of the neo-liberal current in the '80s puts the accent on the ideological factors and on the privatization movement.

It becomes more and more obvious that only with the money allocated by the state or other finance organisms it is not possible to assure the necessary level of services, to satisfy the increasing desires of the users.

Libraries don't have free access to information because they must pay for the book added to the collection, but they are not storage libraries, and they have to pay for using the on-line services and for the interlibrary loan (6).

For libraries "free access" means they are free to purchase any book or to use any service, under the condition they want and can pay for its value (7). "The free access to..." is characteristic for a democracy. The freedom of utilization is something else, especially when the complete range of on-line services implies also a final product: listing, electronic registration that enter in the possession of the event.

Information can no longer be free. Even if now it is generally free, some costs appear on the printing and distribution process, before it is offered to the users, sometimes on the indexing and abstracting process. As a matter of fact, this is the concept of added value involved in the processing and distribution of information.

The satisfaction with cost of the expressed demand and the technology potential of giving satisfaction to clients put libraries ahead the appreciable dimensions of the information thirst and the consumption of

information in a more and more diversity of methods. Through specific methods the library satisfies not only the users' demands, but also the necessities of contact and self affirmation.

Today the library is interested to sell its services to a large circle of persons and organizations; that is why it can use marketing elements. Through the presence of marketing in libraries it is accentuated the importance of the service offer, the priority of this process before everything else. Marketing supposes studying all producers of analogue services and a comparative evaluation of its efficiency and on this basis, the validation of its chances to success. The library can opt for one of these variants:

- producing and selling independent services and products;
- producing and selling services and products in cooperation with other organizations;
- refusing to sell services.

The outlet market is studied in detail; a sociological study concerning the requirements in the given services is accomplished; contracts are signed, tax subscription is introduced for a series of services, merely after all of these the optimum volume of the labor that will give an economic efficiency is determined.

In the conditions of introducing paid supplementary services, the reaction of users to this measure must be foreseen. The mercantilism of the library services can lead to losing users and not necessary brings any supplementary income. The paid services can't have a constrained character; these must be established only on the basis of a contact with the users. They have the right to choose what services they want to act for cost, even if the initiative comes from the library. At the same time, each user must be informed that what he once received for free he can receive now too, in the same conditions. With cost, he can receive the supplementary right for those services that today the society considers them free of charge. Concomitantly, the free service tradition should be improved.

Under the market conditions the delimitation of the activities of special libraries from the mass libraries will be looked at. The first are oriented on satisfying the special professional information demands, the others will release themselves of the nonspecific function of satisfying special needs. For the mass libraries will appear the possibility of concentrating their efforts on satisfying informational needs of general culture. The public libraries will organize their activity in a larger measure on the principle of covering the expenses from their own incomes or from other partial funds that come from other components of the information centers.

On the other hand, from a synthesis of many articles on the same theme, authors as Cartmill, Dupuy or Maass have extracted numerous arguments for gratuitousness (8):

-library is a public utility, therefore gratuitousness is a fundamental principle;

-taxing is discriminating; only the one who pays has access to information;

-taxing public services is a double tax;

-taxing causes libraries to focus on the qualities of tax services in the detriment of the free ones;

-taxes don't increase the financial resources of the library, but the ones of the tutelary organizations;

-the funds obtained from taxes are usually risible, insufficient;

-taxes are not proper; they aren't the result of some pertinent analyses, but of imitation and tradition.

In conclusion, we can notice the opposition free access - information as a merchandise, but also the delineation of some mid-positions which talk about a sharing between these two.

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