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Assessing the service needs and expectations of customers – no longer a mystery

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Assessing the service needs and expectations of customers – no longer a mystery

Abstract
Over the past decade, UWL has made extensive use of customer surveys and customer feedback systems as a means of evaluating satisfaction with services and resources. These approaches have provided critical data and information on how clients rate their perceptions of the importance and performance of various service and resource elements. They have been an important mechanism for planned change and an improvement agenda. While surveys and feedback systems provide data and information on a range of service elements, they are limited in their capacity to provide information and insight into the perceived value gained by engaging with the library or the 'total customer experience' of a service transaction. Statistics, averages and trend data are useful indicators of areas that are in need of improvement strategies. However, without more detailed, qualitative information, improvements may be misdirected and fail to target the real cause of customer discontent.

The adoption of a 'mystery shopper' style evaluation of service delivery offered a new dimension for the assessment of the quality and perceived value of services provided by library staff. The evaluation of services through mystery shopper methodology was first introduced in the UWL in 2004. This approach was selected to complement and expand on existing customer satisfaction surveys and other feedback systems by providing insight into the total customer experience, in particular the influence of staff attitudes, attributes and behaviours on overall customer satisfaction and sense of value. Repeated in 2005, the mystery shopper assessment methodology was modified to target areas identified as requiring improvement from the previous year, and to ensure that mutually beneficial outcomes were likely to be achieved by the mystery shoppers and UWL.

Keywords
mystery shopper, service quality

Disciplines
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Assessing the service needs and expectations of customers – no longer a mystery

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Introduction

The University of Wollongong Library (UWL) adopted the Australian Business Excellence Framework (ABEF) in 1994 as a change management model. The ABEF provides descriptions of the essential features, characteristics and approaches of organisational systems that promote sustainable and excellent performance, with emphasis on determining and evaluating customer needs, expectations and perceptions of excellent service. The 'customer focus' category of the ABEF encourages organisations to assess their ability to understand the needs and expectations of its customers, how customer relationships are managed, and customer perception of value.

Over the past decade, UWL has made extensive use of customer surveys and customer feedback systems as a means of evaluating satisfaction with services and resources. These approaches have provided critical data and information on how clients rate their perceptions of the importance and performance of various service and resource elements. They have been an important mechanism for planned change and an improvement agenda. While surveys and feedback systems provide data and information on a range of service elements, they are limited in their capacity to provide information and insight into the perceived value gained by engaging with the library or the 'total customer experience' of a service transaction. Statistics, averages and trend data are useful indicators of areas that are in need of improvement strategies. However, without more detailed, qualitative information, improvements may be misdirected and fail to target the real cause of customer discontent.

The introduction of a new element within the ABEF revealed an area addressed less rigorously by UWL was *customer perception of value*, that is, how customers perceived UWL's competency in meeting customer value goals or whether customers believed they received fair value for the 'investment' or cost of engaging with a service.

The adoption of a 'mystery shopper' style evaluation of service delivery offered a new dimension for the assessment of the quality and perceived value of services provided by library staff. The evaluation of services through mystery shopper methodology was first introduced in the UWL in 2004. This approach was selected to complement and expand on existing customer satisfaction surveys and other feedback systems by providing insight into the total customer experience, in particular the influence of staff attitudes, attributes and behaviours on overall customer satisfaction and sense of value. Repeated in 2005, the mystery shopper assessment methodology was modified to target areas identified as requiring improvement from the previous year, and to ensure that mutually beneficial outcomes were likely to be achieved by the mystery shoppers and UWL.

Measuring service quality through this approach can take the mystery out of what library customers value which is often difficult to identify from broad satisfaction ratings. Findings from the University of Wollongong experience revealed the importance and value placed on how staff acknowledge, respond and interact with customers; the knowledge, experience and skill utilised; and the personalisation and customisation of services to meet the individual and unique needs of a diverse range of customers.

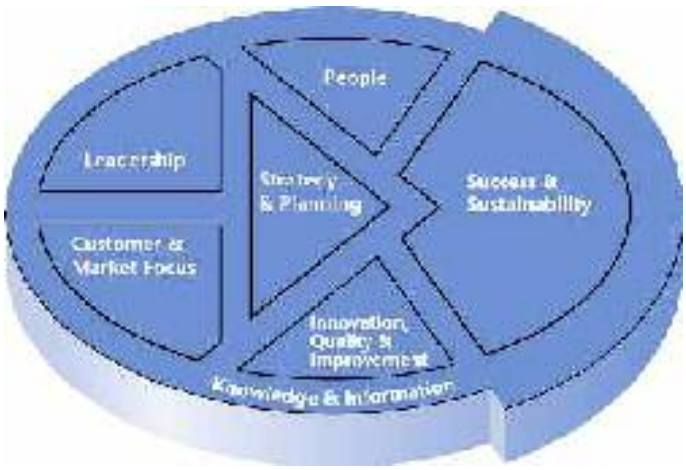
The ABEF in summary

The Australian Business Excellence Framework (ABEF) provides a structured and integrated management system enabling the Library to build on its earlier successes as well as identifying areas that had been addressed less rigorously. The framework provides descriptions of the essential features, characteristics and approaches of organisational systems that promote

sustainable and excellent performance (2004). In describing the ABEF (see figure 1), SAI-Global (2004) states:

> *'Business Excellence provides organisations with a systematic and structured approach to assess and improve the performance of its leadership and management systems in the key areas of organisational capability, namely: Leadership; Strategy and Planning; Data, Information and Knowledge; People; Customer and Market Focus; Innovation, Quality and Improvement; Success and Sustainability'.*

Figure 1 - Australian Business Excellence Framework



For the successful integration of the principles of excellence, it was necessary for the Library to: develop and support increased responsiveness and flexibility in meeting customers' needs; train and empower its staff to deliver consistently high standards of service; and review process capability and the quality of delivered services and resources. The assessment dimension integrated within the ABEF encourages the critical examination of systems, processes and practices and is used to determine the Library's capacity for fulfilling its promise of *quality, service and excellence*.

Evaluating Client Satisfaction.

The principles and descriptive items contained within the ABEF are *'designed to enable any organisation to … choose how it can best pursue business improvement, recognising the unique nature of each enterprise'* (2004). The ABEF, through its underlying principles encourages organisations to: *understand what customers value, now and in the future* and; *improve outcomes, by improving systems and associated processes* (2004). These principles are explored in more detail in category 5 of the ABEF: Customer and Market Focus.

5.1 Knowledge of customers and markets *How the organisation ensures it has an ongoing understanding of the needs and expectations of current and potential customers*	• identifying the customers • understanding customer requirements • predicting future requirements • communicating customer requirements within the organisation
5.2 Customer relationship management *How the organisation manages and evaluates its relationships with customers*	• establishing customer value indicators and targets • ease of access • selecting and training customer contact staff • relationship management processes • establishing systems for collecting and responding to unsolicited feedback
5.3 Customer perception of value *How the organisation measures*	• measuring whether customers believe they received fair value

customers' perception of the value it provides	• competitor comparisons • meeting customer value targets

At the heart of this assessment category is the need to determine what customers want, and how organisations can go about providing valued services. It challenged UWL to think about the promises made to its customers and what these customers could expect in return for their investment of time, effort and money, e.g. student fees, tax dollars (Deane 2003). Many libraries are interested in gaining a more comprehensive understanding of their customers' perceptions and attitudes to assess the quality of services and one way to collect and measure customers' attitudes to a library is through questionnaires (Hayes, 1998).

Internal and external benchmarking of mission critical activities is a major driver of the Library's *quality, service, excellence* program. Since 1995, the Library has utilised client satisfaction surveys as a key tool to better understand customer perceptions of services and resource provision. Since 2002, UWL has used a customer survey negotiated by the Council of Australian University Libraries (CAUL), enabling benchmarking with Australian and New Zealand university libraries. The major assessment categories to evaluate customer perceptions are: *communication, service quality, service delivery, facilities and equipment, library staff*. A key aim of the survey is to identify service and resource gaps. Data and information collected from the survey are used to inform planning and improvement initiatives across all levels of the Library.

A significant benefit from adopting this approach to evaluating customer satisfaction is the ability to monitor internal benchmarks of performance as well as to determining how the Library is positioned against its peers. Results of the survey are an important indicator of the success of the Library's *Quality, Service, Excellence* program and this has been demonstrated through UWL's consistent positioning in the top quartile of performance across each assessment item and its position in the top 10[1] performing libraries across the major assessment categories.

Customer Feedback Systems

Customer satisfaction measures with service quality, while extremely important, often ask customers to reflect on their service experience over a period of time. It is, therefore, not unusual that customer satisfaction is often considered to be a *lag* indicator of performance. The capacity to gather more immediate and timely information on customers' perceptions can provide further insights to service quality (Hernon and Altman 1996).

At UWL, continuous customer feedback has been actively sought since 1995 with the implementation of a paper-based, *Compliments, Comments, Complaints* scheme. Forms are made available at all service points and, when contact details are provided, a response is guaranteed within five days. All customer feedback incidents and responses are documented, collated and made available to all staff to generate awareness of customer needs and expectations. Feedback incidents are reviewed regularly to ensure minor issues are addressed immediately. A more formal review is undertaken twice yearly to monitor trends and to inform planning and resourcing strategies.

A review of the feedback process in 2004 drove the development of an innovative new system for the fully automated lodgement of feedback and responses. The Client Feedback Database[2] provides an intuitive online interface for customers to communicate with the Library. Expeditious responses are supported by automatically directing comments to appropriate staff. As a result response times have improved significantly from five days with the previous system to a guaranteed two days.

Finding what affects customers' perception of service

Customer satisfaction surveys and other feedback systems provide data and information on a range of service elements, however, they are limited in the insight they can provide into the total

[1] Based on results achieved in 2004
[2] See the UOW Library website www.library.uow.edu.au/feedback/index.html

service experience, in particular the effect of staff attitudes, attributes and behaviours on overall satisfaction (McGregor 2005). Feedback from surveys does of course offer clues to guide further investigation.

Sector comparisons of customer satisfaction revealed that UWL could improve its position in some of the areas surveyed. In order to thoroughly investigate services, it was considered important to use a more in-depth survey strategy than those previously used. Another advantage of implementing an additional approach is that the use of multiple datasets provides an opportunity for triangulation of data and information by helping to ensure the efficacy and reliability of available data for interpretation and analysis (Berry and Parasuraman 1997; Douglas and Douglas 2006).

Drawing on benchmarking experience with the private sector, it was decided to trial a different evaluation strategy using a tool known as *mystery shopping*. Mystery shopping has the potential to assess how well the agreed values of a library, as well as their associated behaviours are being practised and the influence of behaviours on customer satisfaction (Calvert, 2004). This approach allows the investigation of the total customer experience, from first impressions, through to the use of resources and services, the reliability, consistency and accuracy of promised services, the responsiveness of staff and the capacity to inspire confidence and trust (Deane 2003).

The concept of mystery shopping is founded on the use of researchers to act as customers to evaluate and report on the quality of the processes and procedures used in the delivery of a service (Wilson 1998). The 'shoppers' evaluate the service using predetermined criteria and document performance through the completion of a survey or questionnaire after each service transaction (Guzman 1992).

Mystery shopping within the higher education sector is a relatively new and little explored concept (Calvert 2005; Douglas and Douglas 2006). Literature reveals that public libraries have been quicker to implement this type of methodology to evaluate service provision as compared to other libraries (Calvert 2005). Personal research through surveys with members of CAUL during 2005, revealed that only UWL had adopted this type of service evaluation in Australian academic libraries. This may be due to the ongoing debate as to whether students can be considered as customers, exchanging some form of investment in return for a service; yet it cannot be denied that students are actively involved in services provided by universities (Douglas and Douglas 2006). The introduction of full-fee paying student places and rising HECS[3] fees in Australia has resulted in students engaging with university services with a 'customer mind-set' and increasingly demanding 'value for money' for their investment in education (McNamara 2006).

Through the long-standing application of best practice standards and business excellence models which focus on the fulfilling the needs of customers and stakeholders, UWL was comfortable viewing students as customers (along with other users of the Library). The mystery shopper methodology had a positive alignment with Library Values[4] and the principles of business excellence that inform the Library's approach to managing and improving service such as:

- Understanding what clients value, now and in the future, influences organizational direction, strategy and action
- The potential of an organisation is realised through its people's enthusiasm, resourcefulness and participation
- All systems and processes exhibit variability, which impacts on predictability and performance

[3] Higher Education Contribution Scheme - Applicable to Australian citizens, Australian permanent residents and New Zealand citizens. The Commonwealth pays the major part of the costs involved, and students pay the remaining part of the cost.
[4] Library Values and Ideal Culture – see http://www.library.uow.edu.au/about/planning/vision.html

The aim of adopting mystery shopping, therefore, was to take the mystery out of what Library customers' value, how the behaviours and attitudes of staff influence perceptions of value and quality; and the performance of processes underpinning service quality.

Prior to implementing this type of assessment, extensive consultation took place with staff to discuss what data and information was to be gathered and how results would be used. A key theme in the chosen communication strategies was the alignment of the exercise with the well established Library Values, against which staff performance is regularly evaluated, and the desire to reinvigorate a systematic and customer-focussed approach to evaluation.

In the initial mystery shopper assessment in 2004, all services in different formats were evaluated over a period of one month by students trained as mystery shoppers. Evaluation was based on the delivery of services using established criteria identified through advertised standards, by staff as important to measure, as well as integrating the shoppers' personal views of best practice in service.

Feedback provided by the shoppers focused on compliance, whether the evaluation criteria were met, as well as qualifying reasons for improvement, e.g. *generally friendly and approachable, prompt and thorough responses, appreciated the concern shown by staff, staff are sometimes rushed … gives the impression of lack of interest, name badges obscured by scarves, hair, collars etc, acknowledging people who are waiting, show genuine interest in student needs.* These findings revealed the importance placed on the human dimension in excellent service, that is: how staff acknowledge, respond and interact with customers, the knowledge, experience and skill demonstrated and the personalisation and customisation of services to meet the individual needs of a diverse range of customers and stakeholders (McGregor 2005).

Why use mystery shopping?

As mentioned earlier, UWL has been using customer satisfaction surveys for over a decade, and this form of evaluation continues to provide valuable trend data to inform decision making. Over recent years, while results have been high, they have remained relatively static. Surveys of other libraries that were placed higher than UWL in satisfaction rankings, provided limited information in terms of service differentiation. Mystery shopping provided a catalyst to revitalise the Library's approach to internal benchmarking by adding a new dimension for measuring the various elements within a process designed to deliver excellent service against predetermined quality standards (Wilson 1998; Calvert 2005).

The Library has had in place for a number of years a series of advertised service standards, now contained within a Client Service Charter [5]. These standards have been developed to reflect process capability and staff responsiveness aligned with customers' needs. The standards are measured and monitored by staff, through agreed performance indicators and measures. The beneficiaries of these standards, the customers, have played a more passive role in measuring Library performance.

Mystery shopping, therefore, offers customers the opportunity to actively assess library performance against an agreed set of standards and criteria; it is an objective process of collecting facts rather than perceptions based on past transactions (Wilson 1998). Importantly, data is being gathered in a real-time format, examining each transaction as a separate service incident made up of several elements, as opposed to a more homogenous approach in the interpretation of Library services that is offered through most customer surveys (Douglas and Douglas 2006).

The Process

To evaluate the impact of implementing the recommendations from the evaluation conducted in 2004, three services were selected for re-testing in 2005: Telephone services, Email a Librarian and Chat to a Librarian.

[5] See Library Client Service Charter http://www.library.uow.edu.au/about/planning/charter.html

Staff were informed of the intent to repeat mystery shopping through all staff and team meetings and Library Communication bulletins, and were invited to provide input to the selection of evaluation criteria. Many of the teams provided examples of the elements of service provision that they would like examined for example:

- Are we meeting the service standard?
- Are we effective when referring clients to others?
- Are we friendly, courteous and helpful?
- Do we go the extra mile?
- Do we invite clients to use the service again?
- Is the language we use appropriate (especially for Chat and Email a Librarian)?
- Do we provide extra value in hints and tips or do we just provide the answer?

These requests were largely met through the design of the evaluation instrument and questions used in a follow-up focus group. While staff were aware of the evaluation period, they could not anticipate when mystery shopping would occur.

Student shoppers were recruited from the School of Marketing and Management within the Commerce Faculty with the assistance of a lecturer. The student cohort represented mostly final year students with an interest in organisational management. Students were selected from expressions of interest submitted via email. Nine final year students were recruited to act as mystery shoppers, representing the faculties of: Commerce, Education and Health & Behavioural Sciences. Of interest, none had used Chat to a Librarian or Email a Librarian prior to their mystery shopping role.

Students, during a face to face meeting, were briefed on the aims of the evaluation, Library expectations of their involvement, and were invited to identify research topics they wanted to explore that would support their current assignment workload. This was identified as a recommendation for improvement from the initial mystery shopper project. Students in the first exercise found it challenging to ask for help in unfamiliar subject areas. In addition, staff expressed concerns about the time and resources required to answer questions that were unlikely to be used by students in their chosen educational fields, possibly at the expense of students with legitimate information needs.

Students were employed as casual staff of the Library while undertaking the evaluation. They received compensation for the time spent in meetings with the mystery shopper coordinator, time spent conducting the evaluations and an additional hour to cover telephone and internet expenses.

The evaluation methodology was closely modelled on the approach chosen in 2004 to allow for comparisons of results where appropriate. The Mystery Shoppers evaluated the services up to three times over a period of two weeks during October 2005. Evaluation scenarios were prepared for each student outlining requisite evaluation criteria, while incorporating information needs for their selected assignments.

At the conclusion of the evaluation period, the mystery shoppers submitted their evaluation forms via email. They were also invited to participate in a focus group or an interview at the conclusion of the project to offer their reflections on the experience of participating in the project, overall assessment of the services evaluated and to provide clarification where needed on their notes.

Results

In a number of instances, the students noted high levels of performance against the evaluation criteria and a high degree of satisfaction with the services they assessed; many stated that their expectations of the service and responses received exceeded their expectations. The students, felt that the services used in the project offered value for the investment of time in making an enquiry or participating in a service transaction with the Library. While this was rewarding feedback, the aim of identifying service or performance gaps was fulfilled also.

An example of how the total service transaction was evaluated is offered in the findings for telephone services. This model was adapted for Chat to a Librarian and Email a Librarian, however, the findings for these services will not be discussed in detail in this paper.

Telephone service
The telephone service was evaluated 17 times. Three major service themes were explored: payment of fines, group study room bookings and reference enquiries tailored to the students' research needs.

Timeliness of response
The Library has in place a service standard that telephone calls will be answered within 5 rings. This was achieved 94% of the time and 29% of calls were considered to be answered immediately. See the table below:

How long did you wait for the phone to be answered?	
Immediately	29.41%
< 5 rings	64.71%
> 5 rings	5.88%

First impressions
Feedback from the 2004 mystery shopper project indicated that telephone greetings and staff responses were inconsistent and staff often did not provide their names when answering the phone. In response, telephone training techniques were revised and a new standard greeting introduced. The mystery shoppers were asked to rate their first impressions of how the telephone call was answered. See the table below. 88.24% of the students rated their impressions as good to excellent.

What were your first impressions of the way the phone was answered?	
Excellent	23.53%
Very good	52.94%
Good	11.76%
Fair	11.76%

Two students rated their first impression as fair. Feedback to support this perception included: *No name and sounded aggressive but then she got friendly as it went on*. The focus group findings revealed that some staff speak too fast when offering the greeting, so clients don't always hear the staff name. The students offered the following feedback:

- *Phone call didn't take too long and she was very friendly and helpful. She explained step-by-step … maybe a little too quickly, but overall she did a great job*
- *Overall the service was efficient and easy to understand. Provided great service that was prompt and helpful. The only negative aspect was that they spoke quite fast, which may lead the customer to think that they are being rushed.*
- *It was a very pleasant transaction … Very good – offered positive options*

When asked if a more standard approach to greetings seemed too artificial, the mystery shoppers stated that they preferred this approach and particularly liked *'how can I help you?'* at the end of the greeting.

Was the staff member friendly/approachable?
Embedded within the Library Values and Ideal Culture is the notion of *people first*. Staff have identified the following behaviours that they would like to see demonstrated by their peers during all interactions with customers:

- Interacting with other people in a helpful and sincere manner
- Meeting the needs of others in a prompt, efficient and pleasant manner

The mystery shoppers were invited to rate the friendliness and approachability of staff during the telephone transaction. See the table below.

Was the staff member on the phone friendly/approachable?	
Very	58.82%
Yes	35.29%
A little	5.88%
No	0.00%

94% of the Mystery Shoppers rated the friendliness and approachability of staff highly. Examples of feedback included:

- *Extremely helpful and professional in her phone manner. She was patient with my questions and responded to my enquiry without hesitation and in a manner that made the atmosphere of the conversation quite comfortable. She made every effort to attend to my queries.*
- *She was bubbly and very helpful*
- *Sounded eager to help*

Did you feel confident in their knowledge?
The mystery shoppers were asked to rate their perceptions of staff's knowledge in fulfilling their enquiries. See the table below. 94% of the student shoppers were confident of staff's knowledge in meeting their needs.

Did you feel confident in their knowledge?	
Very	47.06%
Yes	47.06%
A little	5.88%
No	0.00%

Feedback from the evaluation forms included:

- *I feel confident with her ability and knowledge.*
- *Staff were extremely friendly, helpful and willing to spend additional time ensuring that I was able to navigate the library databases and make the most accurate search possible. It was also good to see that the library staff provided some sample resources to get me started. I would not hesitate to use this service again.*
- *It was reassuring to see staff made the enquiry personal with their responses tailored to the specific inquiry rather than making generic responses.*

Did you feel welcome to ask again?
In addition to rating the importance of the greeting, students were asked to comment on how the telephone transaction concluded and, in particular whether they felt welcome to use the service again. 94% of the student shoppers indicated that they felt welcome to use the Library's telephone services again. See the table below.

Did you feel welcome to ask again?	
Very	52.94%
Yes	41.18%
A little	5.88%
No	0.00%

Feedback from the evaluation forms included:

- *Based on this experience, I wouldn't hesitate to use this service again.*
- *If I still had trouble, then suggested getting in contact with the Librarian or call her back and she would help me do that*

Were you happy with the way that you were treated?
The mystery shoppers were asked to rate their perceptions of their overall treatment during the telephone transaction. Of the three services evaluated, the telephone service received higher ratings than Chat to a Librarian and Email a Librarian. 100% (see table below) of the students were happy with the way they were treated, with 65% indicating they were 'very happy' with the treatment received via this service

Table 3.1.6

Were you happy with the way you were treated?	
Very	64.71%
Yes	35.29%
A little	0.00%
No	0.00%

A summary of common criteria across the three service areas is offered below. The values represent the percentage of shoppers evaluating the service.

Summary of findings

First impressions			
	Telephone	Chat to a Librarian	Email a Librarian
Excellent	23.53%	12.50%	13.33%
Very good	52.94%	56.25%	33.33%
Good	11.76%	18.75%	40.00%
Fair	11.76%	12.50%	13.33%
Staff friendly/approachable?			
	Telephone	Chat to a Librarian	Email a Librarian
Very	58.82%	18.75%	40.00%
Yes	35.29%	62.50%	20.00%
A little	5.88%	18.75%	13.33%
No	0.00%	0.00%	26.67%*
Confident in staff knowledge?			
	Telephone	Chat to a Librarian	Email a Librarian
Very	47.06%	18.75%	20.00%
Yes	47.06%	68.75%	46.67%
A little	5.88%	6.25%	6.67%
No	0.00%	6.25%	26.67%*
Welcome to ask again?			
	Telephone	Chat to a Librarian	Email a Librarian
Very	52.94%	25.00%	13.33%
Yes	41.18%	56.25%	60.00%
A little	5.88%	18.75%	6.67%
No	0.00%	0.00%	20.00%*
Happy with the way you were treated?			
	Telephone	Chat to a Librarian	Email a Librarian
Very	64.71%	37.50%	33.33%
Yes	35.29%	50.00%	33.33%
A little	0.00%	12.50%	13.33%*

*These customers received blank email responses

An unanticipated, but important outcome of the research was the identification of a 'bug' that resulted in the receipt of blank responses to some Email a Librarian enquiries. Of those students who experienced this problem, all stated they would not have used the service again except for their involvement in the mystery shopper exercise. This information has been incorporated in a review of the Email a Librarian database software. Feedback also revealed the need to:

- Provide regular peer review of Email a Librarian and Chat to a Librarian responses to check for consistency and comprehensiveness of replies
- Improve the transparency of closing transactions for Chat to a Librarian

- Improve student awareness of Chat to a Librarian and Email a Librarian services
- Conduct refresher training in telephone techniques prior to the commencement of the academic year.

Benefits
Surveys and questionnaires play an important role in gathering data on perceptions, performance and satisfaction with library services and resources. The interpretation and understanding of data generated from such surveys is often limited to a select few within the organisation, yet the responsibility for translating results into action, usually falls to the staff dealing directly with customers (Wilson 1998). These staff are often required to develop strategies for improvement based on broader assessment items contained with surveys, such as:

- Library staff are friendly
- Service desk staff respond in a timely manner
- Library staff provide quality service
- Library staff are proactive in their dealings with me
- Library staff display professionalism

Mystery shopping has enabled the 'deconstruction' of these items by closely examining the processes underlying service as well as the personal attributes and competencies desired by customers in the delivery of service (Deane 2003). This has facilitated a more targeted approach to process improvement and has provided a new element to test the effectiveness of staff training and its application within the workplace.

Conclusion
The systematic use of customer surveys and feedback systems to assess satisfaction with services and resources are long-standing practices at UWL, integral to its commitment to the principles of business excellence. Both forms of assessment are important indicators to test the acceptance and integration of the *quality, service, excellence* program by both customers and staff. Over time, with satisfaction levels generally high, the ability to isolate specific aspects of service which could be improved proved difficult (McGregor 2005). UWL recognised the need to develop different approaches to capturing more detailed, qualitative information about its services, outside the somewhat artificial focus group setting. Adoption of the mystery shopper approach provided a new vehicle with which to objectively assess the various elements of service provision in a real-time setting.

Implementation of this approach has enriched the Library's capacity to contextualise data and information gathered through other forms of assessment. It has enabled staff to more effectively target improvement opportunities through the mystery shoppers' articulation of root cause of discontent through the deconstruction of the elements of processes designed to deliver excellent service.

Importantly, it has provided customers with the opportunity to be more actively involved in assessing Library performance, a practice that had been addressed less rigorously in the past. Mystery shopping has not only given customers a process for testing service delivery, it has provided UWL with a more rigorous and detailed means of evaluating the aims and standards communicated in the Client Service Charter and the Ideal Culture.

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