

Client-Centred Marketing at the Parliamentary Library

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ABSTRACT

One size doesn't fit all for library clients. Each client will have a different expectation and perception of the service depending on the approaches they take to access the service, and the varying elements of the total service that the client may be using. This understanding is key to the marketing and communication strategies of the Australian Parliamentary Library.

The Parliamentary library provides information and research services in the complex environment of the Parliament. The challenge for the Library is to maintain a high profile with a client group of Senators and Members, who not only have time pressures, but also tend to have a high turnover of staff in their offices. The marketing focus of the Parliamentary Library is on building relationships with these clients and developing an understanding of their individual information and research needs. One-on-one programs such as the Contact Officer Program, orientations and office visits all have a focus on developing a mutually beneficial relationship.

Marketing strategies and communication plans are based on the knowledge built through these relationships and through client interviews/assessments. Developing these strategies and plans requires a careful balancing act. The Parliamentary Library must not only focus on meeting their clients' needs by providing what they want, when and how they want it, but also on anticipating the clients' future needs and responding in whatever way and through whatever method the client may want.

1. CLIENT RELATIONSHIP MARKETING

"...can I thank the Parliamentary Library, in particular Leslie Nielson from the economics section, for the terrific work they do in assisting all of us who wish to speak on tax matters, and indeed economics matters...." (Sussan Ley, MP, 10/2/2010 [1])

“...I sometimes think we do not realise how well we are assisted by this parliament. We certainly do not go around recognising that we have one of the best parliamentary libraries in the world, and we should. That is one of the things I can tell you all from this conference: that we are up there with the Library of Congress and perhaps the Canadian parliamentary library. Firstly, we should be aware of that; secondly, we should be very proud of it; and, thirdly, we should be concerned to make sure that the excellent library to assist parliamentarians in this place continues... We are dealing with decisions that need to be made, I believe, to maintain our parliament—because, in the end, what the Parliamentary Library provides to parliamentarians in this place contributes to that precious thing called democracy.” (Senator Crowley, 29/8/2001 [2])

“I would like to acknowledge the Parliamentary Library people. They do an extraordinary amount of work and always do it efficiently and quickly.” (Nola Marino, MP, 26/11/2009 [3])

It is not unusual for the Parliamentary Library or individual staff of the Library to be thanked or acknowledged in the chamber of either the House of Representatives or the Senate. This may be because the Library staff provided a level of service which went beyond the expectation of the client, or it may be that Library staff were successful in forming a relationship with the Member of Parliament which went beyond a simple transaction.

Marketing in the Parliamentary Library is based on building relationships with our clients, identifying their needs and targeting services to meet these needs. This client-centred focus, which goes beyond the simple transaction with a customer, is relationship marketing [4]. Relationship marketing is not a new concept in the library environment. Libraries as service providers should be, without question, customer-focussed. Building trust with a known group of “customers” and providing a service is the underlying premise of a library [5]. Listening to the client is essential in building a relationship – providing a service or product that meets their needs, building trust in the service you provide and getting to know the individual user will contribute to the development of an ongoing relationship. These existing clients can become the best marketing tool you have.

Relationship marketing also requires that you go beyond the clients’ immediate needs and wants, and try to anticipate their future needs as much as possible. There is of course some caution needed to be taken here, as resources can be so tight that there is no point developing new services at the expense of an existing valued service.

2. AUSTRALIAN PARLIAMENTARY LIBRARY

“I am sure that every member of this parliament is well aware from personal experience of the great service of the Parliamentary Library. We all rely on it. We rely on their professionalism. We rely on their assistance.” (Julia Gillard, MP, 25/9/2008 [6])

The Parliamentary Library provides services which support parliament and contributes to the democratic process in Australia, and has done so since the first library services were provided to the first federal parliament in 1901 [7]. The Parliamentary Librarian's role has been legislated and is required by the *Parliamentary Service Act 1999* to, among other things:

“... provide high quality information, analysis and advice to Senators and Members of the House of Representatives in support of their parliamentary and representational roles.”[8]

According to the Act, the Parliamentary Librarian is required to perform this function:

- a) in a timely, impartial and confidential manner; and
- b) maintaining the highest standards of scholarship and integrity; and
- c) on the basis of equality of access for all Senators, Members of the House of Representatives, parliamentary committees and staff acting on behalf of Senators, Members or parliamentary committees; and
- d) having regard to the independence of Parliament from the Executive Government of the Commonwealth.[9]

The Parliamentary Library provides information, analysis and advice to the offices of the two hundred and twenty-six Senators and Members of the Australian Parliament. These Senators and Members, and their staff are the clients of the Parliamentary Library, and are the focus of the Library's marketing efforts.

There are two branches in the Parliamentary Library: the Information Access Branch with approximately 60 staff; and the Research Branch with around 80 staff. The research staff have specialist subject expertise that cover the range of policy areas covered by the Ministerial portfolios, and come from diverse backgrounds that include science, law, economics, statistical analysis, research and information management. The Library researchers are particularly important in the democratic process as most Senators and Members have only three or four staff in their offices to assist them with everything that needs to be done in that office, including electorate work, media advice and policy advice. Through the Library's researchers, Members of Parliament can obtain oral or written briefings on policy issues, legal matters, topics that have been raised in the media, or background information to assist in policy development. We respond to approximately 15,000 individual requests from our clients for information each year, and in 2009 had completed requests from every Senator and Members' office.

We may refer to them as clients, customers or users, but in the special library environment we are providing a service to a specific group of people. That is not to say all of our clients are the same, they may, in fact, be very different, and we may be able to identify clear segments within the larger group to focus our marketing efforts on [10]. The clients of the Parliamentary Library can be grouped into three segments: the new parliamentarian; the mid-term parliamentarian and the long-term parliamentarian [11].

2.1. The new parliamentarian

Joining the parliament can be an overwhelming experience for the new parliamentarian. They are not only learning parliamentary processes and requirements of their new role but also setting up a new office, finding their way around a new work environment and coming to terms with the services available to them as a Member of Parliament (MP). Establishing some contact with the new MP at this point is vital to begin building a relationship. The Library orientation focuses on two aspects. The first is to be visible in the new Member training seminar/workshops run by the chamber departments. This gives an early awareness of the service and is generally undertaken in the first few months of the new parliament or, if a Member is elected through a by-election, their first few days in Canberra. Secondly, all new Senators and Members are provided with a “contact officer” or library buddy.

The Contact Officer Program has been running for over fifteen years and the feedback from clients indicate that it is one of our most popular and highly valued services. Contact officers usually first meet their Senator and/or Member at the introductory sessions organised by one of the Parliamentary Departments. Ongoing interaction is the responsibility of the contact officer and it is expected that they will make a number of visits to the client’s office. A major role is to act as first point of contact for new Senators, Members and their staff in the early weeks/months of their time in the Parliament; to train them in the use of resources or direct them to the appropriate experts in those resources. Responses will vary, some Senators and Members and their staff will be less receptive than others and it is therefore not possible to be too prescriptive about how to establish and build the relationship, and while there may be a good relationship built with the contact officer, the new parliamentarian may still have limited trust in other staff and services offered by the Library.

2.2. Mid-term parliamentarian

The mid-term parliamentarians are those with greatest unmet need for library orientation and knowledge, and offer the greatest opportunity for the Library to establish a more mutually beneficial relationship [12]. MPs in this group have settled into their role and are no longer overwhelmed with information. They have however gone beyond the period where they had a contact officer and have to rely on the library’s general training program. Until this year our ongoing training had been titled “orientation” and clients thought that it was only accessible for new starters, not continuing parliamentarians and their staff. This year we have started a “refresher” training stream which provides a specific opportunity for ongoing staff to have a session tailored to their requirements. Library staff will also make office visits to individual parliamentarians focusing on this group, as personal contact is essential for building on those initial relationships established through the contact officer program.

2.3. Long-term parliamentarian

This group is amongst the library’s greatest advocates and established users. At this stage they have settled into using the library and, for the most part, only need to be informed about new services. Many in this category have become ministers, shadow ministers, parliamentary secretaries or shadow parliamentary secretaries. Clients in these positions tend to use the Library less for a number of reasons: for those in government, it is often because they have departmental/government resources; and in opposition often because of policy committees and access to other resources such as lobbyists.

Generally this group is the most trusting of the Library and the most forgiving if there is a hiccup in the relationship. This is only the case, however if the relationship has been established early and built on throughout their parliamentary career.

2.4. Staffers

The greatest challenge in the Parliamentary Library is building and maintaining relationships with the staff in the offices of the Senators and Members. There are approximately 50–70 new staff each month with some having great handovers from their predecessors and are well informed about library services, while others know very little. It is these staff that will be given the task to find information for their Senator and Member. It is therefore essential that we ensure they know who we are and how we can help them do their job.

The Parliamentary Library offers at least one orientation/training session per week during Parliamentary sitting periods. The orientation is scheduled for one hour and includes a tour of the library, an overview of the services and products we provide and a short session on how to find material via the intranet. While clients do not have to book to attend a session, they often do, which is very helpful in organising the session. If we know who is coming and which office they are from, it gives us an opportunity to do some background research on the party they are with, the electorate they are in, and their areas of interest. The orientation session can then be more targeted to them and will feel more relevant which will help in building some level of trust in the Library staff's knowledge.

As many of the new electorate staff are very rarely in Canberra we have also developed an online training module using Pulse Interaction Training. There was no initial outlay, beyond staff time to develop the module, as the program was already being used in the Department for computer-based training for office products such as Microsoft Word and Excel. The training program is short, providing a general introduction to the Parliamentary Library and including an overview of the structure, services and products we offer. This is not an ideal tool in terms of building relationships, but there has been an effort to ensure the "people" of the Library are portrayed throughout the module to give the library a human face.

Parliamentary Library staff also provide tailored and targeted training sessions. Tailored sessions may be in response to a particular group need, or a requirement of a particular office. Library staff may attend a Senator or Member's office to provide training to an individual or group on any component of the Library service or provide an orientation overview. Targeted sessions are organised to promote and provide training in a new or popular service. Examples include workshops on using Google Earth with electorate maps, and finding newspaper articles online. Our Collection Management section also organises training sessions with database suppliers such as Library Press Display, Proquest and LexisNexis Au.

3. CLIENT FEEDBACK

"...I recall, for the House, my first interaction with the Parliamentary Library as a member of parliament in 2004. I was summoned in with all of the other new members, and the Librarian, austere and authoritative—Tony Burke is nodding; he remembers it—surveyed us as though we were a room of the dullest 11-year-olds

olds imaginable. She said, 'Our job is to make you look intelligent.' She said it in a tone of voice that suggested she just might not be able to achieve it." (Malcolm Turnbull, MP, 4/12/2008 [13])

While we have established training and orientations to try and begin a relationship with our clients we are also aware that every client will have a different experience of the Library or the service we provide. Their experience will be determined by how they interact with us, how welcoming we are, how we determine their needs and how we respond. Their experience will also be affected by their first impressions and the expectations they held prior to the initial contact [14].

The implication for us, as the service provider, is to find ways of ensuring consistency of service and a customer-focus throughout the organisation. One strategy is to provide regular staff training in communicating with clients with a focus on the reference interview process. Another strategy is to regularly discuss within work groups and at Directors' meetings issues that have arisen and client feedback. A key area of building relationships with clients at the Parliamentary Library is concerned with ensuring our current group of clients is satisfied. We want to learn as much as possible about clients including their opinions, attitudes and behaviour, so that our services can be targeted at their needs. We undertake a client evaluation or survey each Parliament to help pull together this information.

3.1 Customer Service Research Evaluation

The 2010 Customer Service Research Evaluation consisted of in-depth interviews with 39 Senators, Members and/or their staff by an independent researcher. The interviews provided an opportunity to obtain feedback on the level of satisfaction with Library services, and to gather information on what type of information clients required, their information seeking behaviour, and the best way to reach them.

The Evaluation Report highlighted the perception of the Library's role among Senators and Members:

"Many expressed the crucial nature of the library's role to provide timely, independent, impartial and confidential high quality information, analysis and advice that supports informed decision making on policy issues faced by legislature... this helps to support the accountability and quality of debate and the performance of the parliament." [15]

The report also confirmed that each client has unique information needs and preferences. Senators and Members in government indicated that they relied on the library less due to access to ministerial and departmental information and services. Senators and Members in opposition found that they relied more on Library services since losing government, and many had to reacquaint themselves with the services and products offered. Smaller parties and independents found the library to be an essential resource as they lacked the party infrastructure and staffing resources to cover all research needs internally. One Greens Senator stated:

“It is a very critical information source, which is close to the needs of parliament ... we are eternally grateful ... it provides the ability for the processes of democracy to occur on an informed basis.” [16]

The type of information required varies from office to office and depends on the interests of the MP and their responsibilities in the party. Some are particularly focussed on their electorate, while others are focussed on issues highlighted by the media. Similarly, Senators, Members and their staff are very diverse in terms of their background and their experience in information retrieval or research. They may be highly skilled researchers, laymen or somewhere in between. The library has to cater for all clients, providing access to self-help resources for those who wish to undertake their own research, as well as contact with subject experts for individual briefs.

The report also highlighted Google as the Library's main competitor. Senators' and Members' staff will often “google” rather than contact the Library initially because it is a fast and easy tool to use for straightforward information. There is recognition that they don't have the same confidence in the accuracy of the information obtained through Google, but clients also indicated that they don't always want to bother Library staff with questions they feel they should be able to research themselves.

The report confirmed that Senators and Members offices operate with competing demands on their time and attention. A number of participants expressed the idea “there is no margin for wasting time” [17]. Some indicated that while they recognise the value of receiving by email unsolicited information from the Library on new services and publications, in reality the email may never be opened or read. Several suggestions were provided for ensuring the Library's message was reaching the clients:

- Short simple and personally relevant communication is the key
- Short emails that are straight to the point with links to further information are effective
- Library staff need to be visible, and contact MP offices regularly including electorate offices. A consistent message from the client evaluation was that clients value personal contact.
- Use information services that are compatible with mobile devices such as blackberries.
- A mixed communication approach is required.

Past experiences clients have had with the service will have a strong influence on their information seeking and research behaviour, and ultimately, their perception of the Library. Where clients have had positive interactions with staff and developed a strong working relationship over a period of time, residual trust will be established and a high value will be placed on the service. This residual trust may mean that a client is more forgiving if a deadline is not met or the service provided in an individual instance is not what was expected. Those with a more transaction based relationship with the library will be less forgiving of poor service and will rely on alternative sources of information. Building productive, positive relationships with our clients will lead to them spreading the word, and word of mouth can be the most effective method of marketing.

3.2 Parliamentary Library response

The information gained from the client evaluation is considered when developing the Library's strategic, business and communication plans. The information requirements of the Senators and Members highlighted by the report should be a priority and can currently be met by the Library. We presently provide assistance with each of the areas they outlined including access to data, subject guides, databases, online media streaming, maps and full text resources so that those that would like to undertake research themselves are able to do so.

"The excellent Bills Digest produced for this bill by the Parliamentary Library provides us with a simple and succinct overview of the provisions of the bill."(Mr Jon Sullivan MP, 9/9/2009 [18])

The preference with Google has highlighted the complexities of finding information through the Parliament's primary online database, ParInfo, and through the Library's intranet site. Both these issues will be addressed through the implementation of a new content management system for the Parliament website and the intranet, with a great deal of consideration being placed on making searching and navigating more intuitive. The preference for Google also highlighted the importance of using comprehensive and accurate metadata for all our publications to ensure they are found through Google and ranked highly on the search result lists.

We have also made a number of changes to the way in which we communicate with our clients as a result of the report:

- Emails are short and to the point with a succinct message that can be viewed in the preview pane, and subject lines of all emails from the Library are considered carefully to ensure the information will reach those clients most interested in the content of the message.
- A short personalised welcome email from the Parliamentary Librarian is sent to new starters in Senators and Members office.
- Our newsletter has been redesigned as a short email newsletter with links to further information and subject experts.
- We promote events and seminars a week in advance so that they can be scheduled into calendars, and a follow-up email is sent the morning of the event as a reminder.
- Publications and new products are tested on mobile devices such as blackberries.

Social media has provided an opportunity for us to build on the idea of "word of mouth" marketing. While we acknowledge that this isn't necessarily the best way to reach Senators and Members, it does offer an alternative way to reach their staff, particularly political and media advisors who use these tools as a way of monitoring the media and public opinion.

- RSS feeds automatically provide updates on our new publications [19].
- Twitter is used to promote new services and products by using an RSS feed from our publications page [20].

- Facebook is another way of using our RSS feed to promote our publication to our clients and the community [21].

While social media is about enabling conversations with the focus not on controlling the conversation but influencing it [22], our current focus is in using the tool simply to promote our publications and services. The environment in which we work makes it difficult to interact in a public, or even parliamentary forum with our clients. Confidentiality and impartiality must be maintained by Library staff to ensure we maintain a trusting relationship with our clients, and it is unlikely that our clients would be comfortable demonstrating an interest in a specific topic in a public or parliamentary forum.

Personal contact will remain a priority for the Parliamentary Library. A face to face meeting, or a phone call to our interstate clients is preferable to email, particularly when developing a relationship. This demonstrates the value we place in our relationship with our clients – that they are our priority and that we are receptive to questions, suggestions and feedback [23].

4. FINAL THOUGHTS

If we return to words that the “austere” Librarian uttered to the Hon Malcolm Turnbull on his first experience with the Library – we would hope that a new parliamentarian, making a similar speech today, would perhaps say:

“...I recall, for the House, my first interaction with the Parliamentary Library as a member of parliament. I was invited in with all of the other new members, and the Librarian, friendly but authoritative, greeted us with enthusiasm. She said, ‘Our job is to ensure we have an informed parliament, with quality debate which supports Australian democracy.’ She said it in a tone of voice that suggested she might be able to achieve it.”

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