THE ABC's OF CUSTOMER SUPPORT
ACADEMIC AND BUSINESS ASPECTS OF CUSTOMER SUPPORT
A PERSPECTIVE ON MARKETING OUR SERVICES

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"Are we doing what we ought to be doing for our users?" "Are we in fact providing services for the campus and other service communities that we think we should be providing?" "Are we serving the people we should be serving?" "Is User Services dying or just beginning?"

User Services staffs all too often are faced with hard choices about which services to support, or which users to assist. We are expected to address user needs in a timely and effective manner. In many instances we do, but at a high internal cost to the User Services staff or in a lower quality service to the user. There must be some steps found to decrease the internal costs and increase the quality of the services provided. Possibly, if User Services could change its role from one of a "reactionary" force to one of providing direction, and support for that direction, much of the "frenzy" within User Services could be removed along with providing a stabilizing affect on the user community. By applying basic marketing principles to the User Services environment, the appropriate service needs can be delineated, costed and provided.

The profile of a general user base (or user community) may be categorized as follows:

1. need for tools required to accomplish tasks, geared toward specific support for teaching, specialized research, and administrative functions (growing, but mature in scope),

2. need for education and training support (changing as computer literacy increases and computing resources become more available), and

3. resource information for hardware, software, or systems acquisitions
    (infancy/growing).

User Services staffs can adapt functions of strategic planning from marketing techniques in the development of new products and/or services for their user community. By using these functions and thereby developing a marketing stance for support of hardware, software and services, User Services can become proactive on their campus. They will be able to take the lead in decisions concerning hardware selections, supported software packages and work with users to develop time tables as to when new services will be made available. For many the idea of "leading" rather than "following" may be something only dreamed of while on vacation. The functions that should be considered in the development or re-evaluation of services are:

*   a generic concept definition,

*   segmentation,

*   market research,

*   product development,

*   pricing (costing) decisions,

*   distribution,

*   and communication.

A critical look at the needs of most users, will disclose that those needs are not discipline-dependent. Rather they are a function of certain applications of relatively GENERIC CONCEPTS to a specific discipline. For example, a spreadsheet in an integrated software package may be appropriately used as an analysis tool for agricultural applications as it may be for business researchers or engineers. By approaching the assessment of user needs from the perspective of generic solutions to generic problems, a service can be provided with less associated costs to a much larger part of the user community.

The difference between providing quality instead of marginally adequate user support lies in the ability to differentiate the various market segments within the total user community. Those of us in User Services have long referred to the market segment as subgroups within our total user community. This SEGMENTATION requires that the limited resources available to the organization be focused upon those segments where need and responsiveness are likely to be the greatest, thus maximizing the service provided. We are in a unique position to match available products and services with those subgroups in the user community who have a potential need for such services. For example, evaluating a new integrated software package for the institution could potentially involve users from several subgroups across many disciplines. They may have use for one or more tools available in the product, and by evaluating the effectiveness of serving their needs, a better determination could be made about the viability of supporting such a product. The same rationale holds for hardware and hardware/software acquisition issues. The User Services staff is more able to act as facilitators for such matches than virtually any other organization

within an institution. There is such a large void on most campuses in providing this leadership that if User Services were to step into the void they could provide almost campus wide direction.

To identify those market segments, traditional MARKETING RESEARCH (needs analysis) techniques can be used. These techniques allow User Services staff to define the problem and objectives, develop the information sources, collect and analyze the information, and present the findings. A part of the market research process may include the decision to demarket an existing product and/or service to meet the growing demand for new services and products. Market research also continues into the post-implementation phase to assess and review decisions, products and services to gain insight on how to better package future efforts. Too often, once the final implementation is complete, we fail to go back and critically review the task, especially from the standpoint of the user, to figure out what could be done better the next time. We get too busy solving the next crisis to adequately assess the post-implementation attitudes of the users. We often rely on the one-to-one channels of communication rather than the formal ones within the organization to get an overall feedback. Also, politics of the organization may counter any realistic analysis as well.

After the generic need has been defined, PRODUCT DEVELOPMENT can be established. For every product there needs to be a "bridge" provided with either documentation, training or support. The "bridge" that User Services provides may be large or small depending upon what vendors provide. This "bridge" compliments what the vendor provides to supply a complete support system to allow the user to function, as our goal always has been, more independently. The "bridge" can be documentation in the form of an "instant" or "mini" guide, an introductory training seminar, or any other technique to get the user functioning with the resources provided by the vendor. We all prepare and deliver "bridges". In some cases, we redevelop ones available at other institutions. Documentation, training, support, and staffing issues must be solved and in place *before* the product is announced to the user community. This planning, implementation and support is critical to the successful adoption of the product by the users.

The PLACE and level of service provided by the staff must be addressed. Many institutions are grappling with maintaining a balance of centralized and/or decentralized support. Concurrently, many departments or units are hiring their own support staff with whom we are expected to compliment support efforts and training. Maintaining a constant level of quality support in such situations is challenging at best. Part of the solution may be to develop the role of a facilitator for User Services within a department to provide discipline specific support for the department. For example, an accountant faculty member is better able to demonstrate how a spreadsheet can be incorporated into a basic accounting class to another faculty member.

Whether or not User Services groups charge for their products or services, PRICING DECISIONS need to be a part of the planning process. What are the costs to User Services? What are the costs to the user community? Both real and implied costs must be included. Too often only the real or obvious costs are looked at, not what the trade-offs or hidden costs are going to be. Also, to be considered is the cost of saying "NO" or not providing the product, hardware or service. After all the costs have been determined and weighted, the decision

can be made whether or not to provide the product, hardware or service. These cost determinations are usually never considered by User Services when the group is "reactive" or "following" in nature. They are the "tail" being wagged by the campus "dog". In most cases the pricing or cost decisions have been made by some user subgroup, not the whole user community, so for one subgroup the entire user community "pays" by the rearranging of priorities of User Services staff. The goal *must be* to match the hardware, software, and service provided to solve the user's needs in the most cost effective manner for all concerned.

If product development continues, the DISTRIBUTION mechanisms must be considered next. A target population could be selected to participate in a pilot project. This allows the testing of the various elements of the product by users who can commit to testing and help refine the product offering before introducing it to the total user community. If all goes well, the participants in the pilot project will then in turn market the product through word of mouth within the user community. With or without a pilot project, formalization of the mechanisms for distributing training and documentation must be established, and a formal plan to promote the product and services needs to be implemented. Part of the distribution mechanism might include the decentralized support staff or knowledgeable users in the different departments.

How to disseminate information, as well as what is to be provided to whom, can be delineated to the user community through PROMOTION. A proactive effort is needed to effectively and efficiently determine what to say, how to say it, who to say it to, and why. This involves defining the services and making sure the user community knows what they are, where they can get them and at what cost. Not only advertising training sessions, documentation and support levels, but getting involved around the campus and posing the new product as a solution to perceived needs; inserting it into the user community not just letting the user come to you out of curiosity.

Funnelling our efforts into assessment of user behavior and subsequent evaluation of post-support attitudes allows us to be proactive in our user support, and provide a healthy marketing/business approach to the services provided. Such an effort will ensure that User Services staffs will continue to provide products and services which are supported and needed by the user community. As such we will be one team, our users and us. With these marketing tools you have another means of pulling it all together, providing information to consider the new roles, new services, new products, and new strategies for providing User Services growth for the 80's and beyond.

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