

SHOCK TACTICS APPLIED TO THE PROBLEM OF USER  
 APATHY IN IDENTIFYING USER NEEDS (DES TACTI-  
 QUES DE CHOC DIRIGÉES VERS LE PROBLÈME D'AP-  
 ATHIE DES CLIENTS DANS L'IDENTIFICATION DE  
 LEURS BESOINS)

Norman Sabowitz and Brian Nicholls  
 Bedford Institute of Oceanography  
 Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, B2Y4A2

ABSTRACT

The problem of user apathy in identifying user needs at the Bedford Institute of Oceanography is examined. Recourse was had to the use of shock tactics insofar that the customers were given a "chance" to express their views on a set of proposed cutbacks in service. This provocative gambit had the desired effect. Results are discussed. (Le problème d'apathie des clients dans l'identification de leurs besoins à l'Institut océanographique de Bedford est examiné. Nous employons les tactiques de choc dans la mesure où les opinions des clients envers la proposition de réduire les services ont été sollicitées. Cette stratégie provocatrice a eu l'effet désiré. Les résultats sont discutés.)

The planning of an information service requires that the information needs of the users be identified. Being of the school that teaches that an information service ought to rely on the client's own expressed views, we set out one fine spring morning -- somewhat like the Hobbit and his friends -- to secure those riches of knowledge about the information needs of our users which we, as managers of the "Scientific Information Services and Library" (SISL for short) felt to be our legacy, as if from some dark heroic antiquity.

Like Bilbo Baggins and his friends, we had many hair-raising adventures, and encountered monsters (both figurative and actual) before our efforts, by dint of a few good hunches and a great deal of luck, were finally rewarded by a modest degree of victory. This paper concerns our encounter with one of these figurative monsters, one that reputedly tends to possess the bodies of customers of information services -- scientists especially -- and renders them helpless either to take the initiative in pointing out their information needs or even to comment on any

of our attempts to improve service. Yes, the diabolical monster we speak of is the dread apathy. So, it came to pass that we found ourselves faced with a paralyzing contradiction: on the one hand, our principles required us to divest ourselves as entirely as possible of all preconceived notions -- whether deriving from the superstition, folklore, or personal bias of the information scientist, librarian, or professional administrator -- and to rely on the customers themselves to tell us what they needed from us; on the other hand, we couldn't seem to get the customers to talk about those needs: they seemed in fact to expect us, as professionals, to know what they were supposed to want. The astonishing implication -- easy for us to see in retrospect, but not at all obvious at the time -- was not that the customers could not tell us what they needed from us (because what they needed was not necessarily identical with what they wished) but that they could hardly discuss the subject at all because, for the most part they had not even formed a clear idea of what it was they wished of us.

We began to become aware of the quandary we were in when, after deciding that our main approach would consist of a mass meeting rather than any of the other usual approaches: (questionnaires, personal interviews, observation of the customers in action, etc.), we struck out with our first announcement of the meeting. In this announcement, (a notice placed on all bulletin boards and other strategic locations in the Institute) the users were invited to provide input in advance of the actual date. They were in fact invited to design both the form and content of the meeting. We thought this was a novel approach but it produced no comments or suggestions whatever.

This silence could conceivably have been interpreted as a total and deliberate approval of our service; we felt this unlikely. Did the users really have no input? Were they all so disillusioned with the present service that they didn't consider it worthwhile responding? Was everybody too busy? Maybe they just didn't read notices on bulletin boards? Were scientists naturally unparticipative -- perhaps only marine scientists? Whatever the reason time was running out for us. The prospect of holding a mass meeting attended by only three or four customers -- or, worse, attended by many people with nothing to say except, "Oh sure, you're doing just fine since you ask" -- was chilling.

We needed to get the users to the meeting, and to get them thinking and talking about their information needs before and at the meeting. So, almost out of desperation, we resorted to the following grim logic: If the customers will not respond to any of our constructive attempts, let's try being a bit provocative.

Accordingly we proposed cut-backs in certain basic library services, such as journal subscriptions and interlibrary loans, in order to develop and expand other services, such as literature searching and editorial

services. A list of the more radical proposals was sent to all research, survey and senior support staff one week before the meeting. The actual notice is reproduced below.<sup>1</sup>

*Are YOU coming to the special meeting on library and other scientific information services next THURSDAY?*

*The following are some of the changes SISL proposes to implement in 1973/74:*

- (a) comprehensive collection of scientific and technical books to be available in the library at all times, indexed so that information retrieval is easy;*
- (b) library to subscribe to 'core' journals only; many titles to be dropped;*
- (c) books and reports to be weeded from the collection if they are not used;*
- (d) editing service to be available on request;*
- (e) restrictions to be placed on the number of interlibrary loans we get for you;*
- (f) literature search staff available to answer technical questions and prepare bibliographies.*

*This is your chance to voice your approval, disapproval, or to make alternative suggestions.*

Suddenly, strange things began to happen: memos flew back and forth questioning the wisdom of our proposals; conversation at coffee breaks turned readily from scientific topics to that of how scientific information should be handled; SISL staff were engaged in many hours of warm debate regarding the increasing prices of scientific journals, the number of interlibrary loans that could be handled per clerical man-month, how well a publishing scientist should be able to write without editorial assistance. Presently, SISL staff emerged as villains, and

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<sup>1</sup>For the information of the reader the situation existing at the time of the meeting under each of these proposals was:

- (a) small "reference" collection (ca 400 vols.); most books in a separate "circulating" collection; conventional cataloguing;
- (b) all journals requested by the customers are subscribed to;
- (c) no weeding undertaken;
- (d) no editing service available;
- (e) no restrictions on the number of interlibrary loans, but service slow;
- (f) limited service available during part of the year only - staffed by summer students.

we found our notoriety curiously comfortable. We had taken a gamble by engaging in shock tactics -- we might even be accused of intentional deceit -- and now our gamble appeared to be paying off: we had created the required interest and we anticipated a good attendance at the meeting.

We were not disappointed! The users came out in force (eighty of them), and presented their views with force. Several people who couldn't make the meeting sent their apologies (most unusual!), and let us have their views in advance of the meeting. The customers had been provoked, and for 3½ hours there was a frank, and often heated, discussion. For the four members of SISL on the platform it was not the easiest of situations. The meeting took the form of a hearing - we on the platform listened, and answered any questions, but we purposely kept our comments to a minimum. The meeting followed the order of items in a "Work Plan and Review", which had been prepared and distributed shortly before the event, but no attempt was made to restrict the amount of discussion on any one topic - everyone was allowed his full say.

Essentially the users said cut out the frills, such as literature searching, and give us a good, basic library. In particular they requested:

- greater and prompter availability of the journal literature (whether by purchase of subscription or through interlibrary loan);
- increased rate of acquisition of books, both for reference and for lending;
- increased rate of acquisition of reports, etc. on gift and exchange programs;
- improved access to the collection (by indexes and subject arrangement).

During the meeting a short questionnaire, reflecting the main proposals in the Work Plan and Review, was handed out with the request that it be completed during or immediately after the meeting. The users were asked to rank any or all of the services according to their importance to the user. The results of this questionnaire are given in the appendix to this paper.

Following the meeting we were invited to present the next version of our plans to the directors of the Institute. These plans took into account the needs of the users as expressed immediately before, during, and after the meeting. They also attempted to take into account the longer-term needs of the Institute which were not so clearly expressed at the meeting, but which were the subject of a series of memoranda afterwards. The directors approved the majority of our proposals, including, notably, a new position of Collections Development Officer, and a substantially increased budget for 1974/75.

The entire proceedings of the open meeting were recorded on tape, which was of great use in analyzing the discussions during the preparation of our report to the directors. The tapes have been referred to

many times since the meeting and no doubt will be of great use in the future.

We are by no means unreservedly happy with everything we have done to plan our information service. Even within the framework of the particular exercise described here, we were not entirely consistent: for example, since the questionnaire distributed at the meeting was made up prior to the meeting, it was likely to contain our own biases, which in turn were likely to influence unduly the opinions being solicited. What we feel we have dealt with in a noteworthy manner, however, is the problem of user apathy, a topic on which we could find nothing in the literature applicable to our situation.

The thing to remember is this: the object is not so much to exorcise a devil; but rather to get him to move out of the way for a bit so you can get a better view of the victim's soul.

#### APPENDIX

##### Results of user priorities questionnaire

This questionnaire was distributed at the special meeting on SISL, held on Thursday, 29th March 1973. Thirty-nine completed questionnaires were returned.

One new service was added to the list by a user (distribution of contents pages of journals), bringing the total number of services to 24.

Each service was assigned a score by SISL depending on the preference expressed by the users, according to the formula:

$$\sum_{r=1}^{24} N_r(25-r)$$

where  $r$  is the rank assigned by the user, and  $N_r$  is the number of times a service was ranked  $r$ th. That is, each time a service was ranked first, it was given 24 points; ranked second, 23 points; ranked third, 22 points; etc. The resultant ranking is given below.

RANK	SERVICE NAME	SCORE
1	Journal subscriptions	908
2	Purchase of reference books	882
3	Purchase of books for lending	832
4	Interlibrary loans	711
5	Subject access to documents through indexes, etc.	601
6	Physical arrangement of documents (books, journals, etc.) by subject	513
7	Acquisition of reports, etc. on gift and exchange	461

RANK	SERVICE NAME	SCORE
8	CAN/SDI	437
9	Meeting outside requests for technical information originating at the Institute	331
10	Retention of all documents acquired, regardless how little used	322
11	Obtaining reprints of papers authored by Institute staff	293
12	Investigation of the need for a regional marine sciences library	289
13	Editing of reports and papers authored by Institute staff	277
14	Identification of the information needs of the user	273
15	Local translation service	269
16	Routing of advertisements for new books, etc.	259
17	Literature searches	251
18	Identification of core journals in the marine sciences field	243
19	Annual volume of collected contributions (papers by Institute staff)	239
20	Development of a personal information system	215
21	Preparation of user manuals to SISL services	205
22	Production of Institute's Biennial Review	191
23	Writing articles about the Institute for publication	141
24	Distribution of contents pages of journals	20