

LIS 708: Library Service Evaluation Paper

Somerset County Library System Evaluation Plan: Attracting and Retaining New Users**Introduction:**

Users are not just a part of the library; they are the sole reason libraries exist. In order to be successful, libraries must consider users, potential users and nonusers in their community. How does the library bring in new members? Many new users come in to use the computers, read books in a comfy place, attend a free program, or meet with colleagues. However, the only way to know the reasons people come into the library is by preparing an evaluation. The Somerset County Library System has prepared this evaluation plan. The data will be collected over a period of six months. This timeframe will include both busier and slower times in the effort of maintaining that realistic and representative data is collected. To achieve the most accurate results, the librarians will use various data collection methods to complete the evaluation.

Evaluation Plan:

A crucial starting point of the evaluation is to learn more about the type of community the library serves and gain an awareness about user needs. The Somerset County Library System located in New Jersey has a service area of fifteen municipalities to be closely studied. On the library's website, there is a strategic plan with yearly updates, a message from the library director, and policies all available online. The strategic plan is set to be evaluated each year and conclude in 2025. The

priorities listed in the strategic plan report from 2022 are: providing activities, places and opportunities for community engagement, addressing demographic needs, and enhancing the customer experience. All of these goals relate to bringing new members into the library. To reach the goals, librarians will collect demographic data about both users and nonusers in the community.

Within the strategic plan, a hyperlink is included to a demographic data summary document including data from the service area. For example, one section of the table provides percentages of library computer and Wi-Fi use. This information can be compared with the overall computer or Wi-Fi use in the entire county to determine if people are using the library as their technology point of access. With this data, librarians can decide whether or not their technology services are adequate for the demand. Additional demographic data can be found on the internet. The New Jersey State Library has a 2022 library data table with all municipalities in New Jersey available. The table holds so much information, including, number of staff, collection size, salary and budget information, etc. This table can be used to compare findings from the Somerset County Library System with other similarly-sized library consortiums in the state.

For finding non-library related demographics, the United States Census Bureau also provides online access to census information for Somerset County. The website gives an overview of the county's population with specific stats like age, gender, education status, and more. Information found on this website will help the library meet the goals listed in the strategic plan, particularly, the goal of addressing demographic

needs. These needs can only be met if the library sets out to understand the community and the needs of their users.

In the second edition of *The Evaluation and Measurement of Library Services*, Joseph Matthews suggests another tool for evaluating library usage. The benefit segmentation technique considers how people benefit from using the library. In order to enhance the user experience and provide a safe and comfortable community space, as specified in the strategic plan, the library must seek to understand the values people receive when visiting the library and using library services. According to Matthews, there are different factors that may influence the likelihood of people using the library. Some of these factors include age, ethnicity, proximity to library location, lifestyle and education.

How the library fits into the user's life will vary from person to person. Users range from the person who comes in the library once to get information on a specific topic to the person who is always looking to learn something new. Some people are interested in the library as a place to relax. A heavy library user may be a mother with multiple children, getting an early start with reading and education. Reasons for using the library can become clear by using survey or interview questions asking why the person visited the library that day. The results can help the library improve services to meet the needs of various segments.

In addition to the collection of demographic data, librarians should determine quantitative data including the exact number of library card signups, daily foot traffic and other data such as reference questions asked or program attendance. The data will be

collected over the six-month timeframe to give a more accurate estimate of how many new cardholders come into the library in a given period of time. Naturally, some seasons are busier than others, so this fluctuation must be represented by the study. Data can be gathered from the ILS and statistical records already kept by the library.

Observation is another method to gather information about library usage. Observation has no cost and is simple for any staff member to complete. A librarian can observe users throughout the day to see which areas/collections are most and least used, how long people stay in the library, etc. The observation method can yield biased results, so this method should only be used in addition to the other methods discussed in this evaluation plan. Having multiple observers can help produce more consistent data. Furthermore, Matthews recommends that the librarian should not help the users being observed to avoid inaccurate results. If librarians would like to be more involved in the study, they can administer surveys, prepare interview questions or ask questions at a focus group.

When evaluating the population of users and nonusers, it is important to collect data that demonstrates the value people receive from using the library. User quotes are helpful, especially when communicating value to important stakeholders or at budget hearings. Some methods that could be used to gather this information are surveys, interviews and focus groups. Surveys provide more personal results than observation studies, but do not require staff to directly interact with users. A convenient time to administer a survey could be after a patron participates in the following library activities: attending a program, using a computer/printer/Wi-Fi, asking a reference question or

signing up for a new card. These moments are opportunities to ask people how they feel about the services and what they might want to see in the future.

Without asking questions, it is impossible to know the feelings and values people associate with using the library. For example, one survey question can ask people their purpose for visiting the library. On the other hand, it is just as important to know what might stop people from coming to the library. Knowing these obstacles could lead to finding new services that would attract more people to the library. Surveys can also ask people about programs, technology usage, hours of operation, and availability of services. Quantitative data can also come from surveys. For example, how many people prefer self-checkout or checkout with a librarian. People like convenience, so the time and ease of checking out materials could make or break the library experience for some users. Questions about the ease and accessibility of services will determine what the library should do to enhance the customer experience.

The Public Library Association's Project Outcome was created to communicate the value and impact of libraries. There are many resources available on the website that can be accessed with a free account. Project Outcome offers prepared surveys for various topics that can be printed and used. If the standardized surveys do not ask the right questions for the evaluation, there is further guidance available to librarians to create surveys. When considering how to attract new users to the library, a custom survey may be more appropriate. For example, the survey could ask a new member how they heard about the library. An important tip from Project Outcome is to keep survey questions and overall survey length short and simple. Any type of person can be

taking the survey, so it is crucial that questions are clear and concise, with no library lingo. Having only a few questions to answer encourages people to participate since it will not take up a tremendous amount of time.

To offset the brevity of the surveys, interviews can also be set up with users to gather more in-depth feedback from individuals. Surveys can be vague because people are choosing a pre-determined answer or are limited by the given time or space to respond. Interviews allow for further details for each question. In an interview, librarians can also hear and see the emotions expressed when discussing library services. The library can put out a sign-up sheet for people to voluntarily participate. Interviews can be structured or unstructured, however, structured interviews are more reliable. A structured style interview process asks the same questions of numerous people, providing consistent results.

In his book, *Information Needs Analysis: Principles and Practice in Information Organizations*, Daniel Dorner provides insight on conducting interviews. Because it is impossible to meet with and interview every person in the community, the chosen participants must be selected based on who can provide the most useful feedback. This means all types of users, from heavy users to the seldom user, and nonusers, if possible, should be interviewed. Dorner also explains that the advantage of interviews is efficiency. More data can be collected from interviews than from surveys in a shorter period of time.

Interview questions should focus on demographic information, opinions, experience and behavior. These topics are most helpful when addressing the goal of

attracting new users. However, as Dorner states, questions do not need to directly address a topic, but can elicit explanations about the person's behaviors or thought process. Since interviews take place in person, there may not be an opportunity to go back and review misunderstood information. Therefore, it is a good idea to test interview questions with another staff member or a volunteer to ensure maximum clarity. Another option is to send participants the interview questions in advance of the interview time.

When used in conjunction with surveys and interviews, results can be confirmed in a focus group setting. Unlike interviews, focus groups stimulate conversation between people, rather than asking questions of a single person. This process measures reactions to various topics as well as reactions to the viewpoints of others. For example, if one person says they love the convenience of curbside service, another may say that they miss the human interaction with the librarians.

To make the most of a focus group, one librarian can ask questions, while another person can record the resulting conversation, with consent from participants. One downside of focus groups is that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. When discussing library services, this should not be a problem, but it can be difficult if demographic information is collected in a focus group. To ensure confidentiality, demographic information could be gathered only in individual interviews or surveys. Like interviews, a sign-up sheet could be used so that people will only sign up on their own accord.

In their book, *Assessing Service Quality: Satisfying the Expectations of Library Customers*, authors Peter Hernon, Ellen Altman, and Robert Dugan discuss many aspects of listening to users through focus groups. The authors state that choosing the

participants in the group is very important. Librarians should consider the benefits of having an individual in the group, which could depend on the type of questions asked. Focus groups are more successful when the participants are selected carefully by various traits, rather than selected by convenience. Focus groups can include users, lost users and nonusers. The participants should accurately represent the demographic of the service area and the number of participants should be kept to under ten people. Equally important is the selection of the moderator. The moderator is only there to maintain the conversation, and should remain impartial.

Review:

At the end of the six-month data collection period, librarians should have collected demographic data and data from library records. Librarians implemented techniques including observation, surveys, interviews and focus groups to receive feedback from users. For future reference, the librarians should also determine if the methods used were appropriate and successful. Once the data has been collected, it will then be assessed.

The developments created as a result of the evaluation will also meet the goals listed in the Somerset Country Library System's strategic plan. These goals were designed to attract and retain members of the community as regular library users. The goals from the strategic plan are providing activities, places and opportunities for community engagement, addressing demographic needs, and enhancing the customer experience. Finally, with the information that has been gathered, the library will work towards extending or improving services to attract even more users.

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