THE EVOLUTION OF THE TAFE LIBRARY IN A TECHNOLOGY CHARGED WORLD

This paper is an opinion piece which purports that technological innovation right now, offers a TAFE library, a great opportunity to improve the way students access information and customer service.

This paper claims that when you walk into the majority of TAFE libraries in Australia today, you will find that not much has changed in the past 20 years. They're still primarily a brick-and-mortar business.

Books take up a large chunk of floor space. The place is full of desks with computers and places to sit and relax. There is a decent sized Help Desk open at all times and library staff are stationed there ready to help students and teachers in any way they can.

Some will say that things have changed dramatically in recent years, that technology has made a marked difference to the way libraries operate now. And it has. TAFE libraries in many ways are at the forefront of innovative information and service delivery. But many of the technology innovations TAFE libraries have introduced were first adopted in the late 90s when the Internet became common place.

Computers were brought in then, but are now smaller, slimmer in look and feel and portable. Online information was available but now there is more content offered electronically and it's much easier to access. E-books are becoming more prominent, but paper books are still the number one product of choice. Students have been able to contact libraries by email via the website, but the personal touch is the primary service experience. So things are pretty much the same albeit it's all gone up a notch.

Over the years, TAFE libraries have embraced technology. However, it's been incremental and a case of making small noticeable differences to the service. The primary driver is still brick-and-mortar service delivery. It's the way we have done things for so long. We deliver service in a way that we believe, best offers students immediate gratification and quality delivery. Either the information is on the shelves or our staff will find it and get it to you without delay. So brick-and-mortar is still the primary channel for TAFE libraries.

However, right now and in the coming years, things are going to change much more quickly and with greater impact for TAFE libraries and students. I believe, we are reaching the precipice of change. We are now in a technology charged world that is accelerating at a rapid pace, opening the doors for TAFE libraries to dramatically change the way we deliver information and service. The coming years will see TAFE libraries push quicker towards an omni-channel strategy - a mash up of physical and digital service experience for students.

The omni-channel strategy

So what is an omni-channel strategy? An omni-channel can be defined as viewing the experience through the eyes of your customer, orchestrating the customer experience across all channels so that it is seamless, integrated, and consistent. Omni-channel anticipates that customers may start in one channel and move to another as they progress to a resolution. Making these complex 'hand-offs' between channels must be fluid for the customer (Stocker, 2014).

A library that adopts an omni-channel strategy makes the decision to interact with customers through multiple channels each working synchronously to create a seamless experience. The idea is to reach customers wherever they are – in the library space itself, walking around campus, on the bus heading home or waiting in queue at the supermarket. Wherever they are, at whatever time, either in person or online, the service experience is seamless,

where physical and online environments blend and complement each other. An example is searching a resource database for an assignment using their smart phone while in class and then visiting the library space, accessing a computer and using the paper for an assignment that is due.

The TAFE library has been heading down this road for some time. The question is, however, in a technology charged world, is the TAFE library still too fixated on the traditional brick-and-mortar channel and moving too slowly to develop a high quality digital library experience? Regardless of the pace of change, the TAFE library of today must evolve towards an omni-channel library experience that is seamless and integrated and where the brick-and-mortar experience is great and the digital experience is better.

Why is the TAFE library being pushed towards omni-channeling?

The reality is, that the library building still dominates the way library professionals think. The investment in new library buildings across Australia in all sectors has been exceptional in the past decade and library professionals are placing a greater emphasis on the appearance and functionality of their buildings, spaces and the merchandising of physical resources than ever before. Ensuring students receive personalised service continues to also be part and parcel of the modern TAFE library. Due to this, most of our energy day in day out goes towards keeping the physical library vibrant and out staff rostered on desk. We do this because the brick-and-mortar channel still has much to offer students.

Despite the modernisation of the brick-and-mortar library, in a technology driven world, students want more than a great place to visit, study and relax. They now want the advantages of digital. Not just a website that allows them to browse the catalogue and renew books. But a bona fide channel that is just as good as the physical spaces they visit and the personalised service they receive.

But why is this happening? Why should TAFE libraries take time and resources away from the physical space and divert it to the digital channel and opportunities. In a technology charged world, the reasons are clear.

For one, the majority of students have a smart device such as an iPad, iPhone or Android device to enter and experience the digital channel. It’s no longer an excuse that students don’t have the necessary technology. The net effect of the proliferation of mobile devices is that TAFE students are no longer subpar in computer literacy meaning that the time to expand the digital channel is right now (Rigby, 2011).

Moreover, the mobility of computer devices means that students are not restricted from visiting the library digitally like they were a few years ago. Students can interact with the library from wherever they are and anytime they wish via their smartphone.

Today’s students are online all the time (Traf-Sys, 2014). Students are engaging in several different channels consistently. On leaving home on their way to class, they could be browsing Facebook to find out what’s been happening at the library, then switch to the library website to download a reading list relevant to a new assignment. When they arrive on campus, they visit the library to study with their classmates.

What this tells us is that students are ready for technology driven library services that they can access that’s convenient, instantaneous and seamless.

But there is more, it’s not just driven by the customer. The need to fast track the digital channel is also influenced by product. The explosion of content and how to capture, store and communicate it also pushes the case for an omni-channel strategy for TAFE libraries.

There is so much content out there available that TAFE libraries just can't fit into their showroom. The digital channel enables libraries to expand their content product offering more broadly and extensively than what a physical space can accommodate.

What should an omni-channel strategy look like for a TAFE library in a technology charged world?

Many TAFE libraries already have an omni-channel in place. The library as a physical space with books on shelves, computers for use, a place to study and staff there to help is a strong and much loved channel. The brick-and-mortar channel is still the primary channel.

Students can call the library by phone or send through an email. So the call centre channel continues to play a role.

Libraries have developed the website as a place for students to access library information and resources via the Internet. The digital channel is now alive and provides the anytime anywhere solution.

Social media through Facebook and Twitter is the latest channel to be adopted by TAFE libraries.

We can therefore say that TAFE libraries do have an omni-channel approach in place.

But what should an omni-channel strategy look like in the TAFE library in the coming few years?

The key to a successful omni-channel approach is to ensure the channels operate synchronously and complement each other and different mobile devices. This is because the Generation Y and upcoming Generation Z student does not understand the pre-Internet library service. They get the concept of a library space and that staff are there to help but they favour the digital. Yes, students do value parts of the library service differently. But all are likely to want to be able to move in and out of channels and receive speed and convenience regardless where they happen to be.

Moreover, interacting with students through various channels that work in synergy creates a service experience that is superior. The TAFE library in a technology charged world needs to adopt the best from the physical and online worlds to create a 'seven days a week, 24 hours a day, on your time, at your convenience, where you want to be' library service. A seamless omni-channel approach achieves this.

A TAFE library can achieve a synchronous and seamless omni-channel in three ways. The first is to integrate digital technology into its brick-and-mortar channel. The second is to accelerate and expand its digital channel, the library website. The third is to use social media to satisfy the student's 'immediate' academic needs as well as promote library activities and events which is currently what it is being used for.

Developing the omni-channel

As I have said already, the omni-channel strategy is too geared towards the brick-and-mortar operation. The way TAFE libraries are structured, the work that staff perform, the products that are made available and the primary customer service approach of rostering staff to sit at the help desk are too heavily weighted to the physical channel. Not enough energy, time and funding is being allocated to providing great customer service when the doors are closed or not existent. Remember, the large proportion of students are using their mobile devices and

smartphones at all sorts of time and from all sorts of places away from campus. Greater attention needs to go towards thinking through how to best support the 24/7 service concept.

One way TAFE libraries can do this is through Internet Relay Chat (IRC) - a text-based chat system that allows students to communicate with library staff online in real time whenever they enter the website. IRC is being activated by many libraries especially at universities where resources are greater. However, TAFE needs to be more progressive and implement the technology as well. They need to place teams at computers back of house or empower staff at help desks to support the technology. This is a first step towards being seamless as service can be provided at the physical space, by phone or via the website.

Augmented Reality is another digital tool that can be used to complement the brick-and-mortar channel. Augmented Reality offers students a digital perspective of the library service. By using their smartphone, a student can discover the library through visual data imagery that is not normally visible. It will enable the TAFE library to embed information discoveries in limitless possibilities around campus especially where a physical library may not be available. Let's say a student is walking in a campus specializing in nursing that does not have a library located within its grounds. The student takes out their smartphone, connects to the Internet and launches an app. The student runs the smartphone's camera over a poster board promoting the library service. They can scan their smartphone over different icons and gain expanded information on subject guides, suggested reading lists, new resources and contact information if they need to call. Also, libraries can use Augmented Reality to replace lifeless shopfront windows and displays with vibrant, interactive content that be changed electronically by staff at any time.

The capacity to merge physical space with technology to deliver information to students in this way is one TAFE libraries need to start investigating. Especially once devices become even more mobile when smart glasses become the student's technology tool of choice. TAFE libraries can then use physical space and technology to create an omni-channel experience that is more than an attractive library space and purely static webpages - merging touch and feel information to create a seamless physical and online world.

Another technology innovation which TAFE libraries can consider is indoor positioning technology to track down students as they navigate through the library itself and other learning spaces and hubs across campus. Indoor positioning can be used to track the physical movements of students in detail. This data provides an opportunity to understand student transactions and interactions in the physical and online channels. Indoor positioning technology uses WiFi signals to understand the movement behaviours of students and their visiting patterns around campus replacing the traditional performance metrics which have been in libraries for years.

A second and most important way TAFE libraries can build their omni-channel strategy is to enhance the capability and capacity of its online channel, the library website. Today's students are always online. While Baby Boomers have predominantly used the website to access general library information and undertake tasks such as renewing and reserving resources, Generation Y and Z turn more to imagery and video as their communication tool of choice when online (Patterson, 2014). Plus many may find visiting a library in person time consuming and customer service slow.

For this reason, the TAFE library website (e-Library) must become as strong a channel as the physical library. The e-Library experience needs to deliver a digital option that not only complements the physical library experience but makes customer service quick and easier. The e-Library is an opportunity to create new and lasting value to students.

The e-Library can create new value in a number of ways. Firstly, the e-Library needs to be accessible from anywhere and on any device. So more thinking, energy and resources needs to go towards acquiring and setting up the best possible web technology and having dynamic apps developed that enables the e-Library do more than just perform transactions and display static information.

Secondly, the e-Library needs to greet visitors and students and be staff approachable just like they are in the physical world. Students need to be able to engage in a two way dialogue on entering the e-Library rather than filling out an electronic form and waiting. Connecting with a student as they enter the website via Interactive Relay Chat for assistance makes the experience convenient, speedy and instantly engaging. It offers the student the opportunity to get real time help from wherever they are browsing. It could be anywhere. This is one of the key advantages a balanced omni-channel strategy offers students.

The e-Library can also create new and lasting value by moving away from websites where the information is static and is developed with a one size fits approach. Libraries need to let go of the philosophy of putting the onus on students to find information themselves. If TAFE libraries are to be relevant in a technology charged world, we need to move away from embedding research, discovery and literacy skills as our number one position. It goes against the principles of service excellence and focuses on a self-service orientation. To achieve new value, libraries need to adopt a concierge model geared towards helping students get what they need when they need it through multiple touch points (Brynjolfsson and Rahman, 2013). This way, they will visit the website knowing someone is there to help them and they will gain customised information filtered to them in a way they can quickly use. For example, students may receive a list of resources to start them working on their assignment immediately instead of being pointed to an electronic database and be told to go away and see what you can find.

In addition, TAFE libraries need to put website content up and then down in line with the life cycle of a student. At the start of the semester, students want to know what courses and information is available that applies to their study. As the semester progresses, students need information that relates directly to what they are studying where they are in their course and the assessments due. The information needs to be curated and customised so they can find what they need exactly at the time they need it. An easy way TAFE libraries can do this is by customising subject guides in line with a student's curriculum which changes as assignments are due and then new ones start up again. This way students can focus on doing what they should be – learning.

Another key channel in the omni-channel strategy is social media. The TAFE library like many organisations uses Facebook and Twitter to engage with students and promote events and resources that have just come in. But social media can be a very effective channel if used by library staff to communicate information that is very much in the 'immediate'. Social media can be used to meet the demanding students looking for answers in the fastest possible time with the least amount of effort. Facebook can be used to tell students what's happening in the library this week. Twitter can be used to tell students what is happening right now. Social media is the best channel to communicate information that reaches students in a fast check-in, fast check-out way.

Moving forward

Developing an omni-channel strategy in a technology charged world requires a big shift in thinking and doing. To build the digital channel means redirecting time, staff, resources and budgets away from the physical space and towards the digital. This needs to be reflected in the organisation's strategic plan.

The way staff work in a TAFE library needs to change. The ratio of staff working on tasks that have been part and parcel in the past 20 years such as library management systems, fines and overdue processes, acquisitions and cataloguing, circulating and shelving books and staffing help desks in the physical library will be greatly reduced. This will be replaced with new ways of working with all staff (not just Liaison Librarians) understanding and breaking down the curriculum of courses, constantly uploading and downloading content, creating and uploading video and imagery, developing and improving apps, working on web technology, researching and embedding new technology that will make the e-Library interactive and communicating with students instantaneously on social media. The skill set of a TAFE library professional will change dramatically in the coming years.

Most critical, Library Managers will face the challenge of securing additional funding and taking funding away from traditional activities to pursue the seamless omni-channel strategy. For this is the evolution of the TAFE library in a technology charged world. And it's just the start.

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