Survey Research Critique


*Research Summary*

In 2001, Shontz, Parker, and Parker surveyed librarians working in New Jersey public libraries to determine their attitudes toward marketing library services, and to investigate the relationship between those attitudes and several independent variables. The research instrument was a self-administered mail-in survey distributed to New Jersey Library Association (NJLA) members. The survey was pretested for face validity. Reliability was ascertained by using intercorrelated items in the survey, and statistical techniques during data analysis. The researchers concluded that number of years of experience, library position, and level of previous marketing education all contributed to librarians’ attitudes toward marketing library services.

*In-depth Critique*

*Research Problem*

Given that only New Jersey librarians were surveyed, and that their attitudes about the marketing of library services were correlated to years of experience, library position, and marketing education, the research problem might have been more accurately stated as, “Is there a relationship between years of experience, library position and marketing education, and attitudes held by New Jersey public librarians toward marketing library services?”
Literature Review

Literature from 1969 through 2003 was reviewed, representing multiple perspectives on marketing, from marketing in general, marketing in the not-for-profit sector, and marketing specific to libraries. National and international viewpoints were included. All of this helped to place the research question in a broad context. Much of the literature reviewed was anecdotal with respect to librarians’ attitudes and practices vis-à-vis marketing library services, underscoring the need for verification of observations.

Digression into specific marketing principles was unnecessary and distracting. While only one other library marketing attitude survey was noted in the literature review, a second British study was cited in the discussion of survey results.

Theoretical framework

As this was a preliminary data gathering survey, it did not need to specifically build on an existing theoretical base concerning librarians’ attitudes toward the marketing of library services. However, this research could have easily drawn upon business and/or psychological theories concerning attitudes and outcomes, to lay such a foundation.

Research Design/Instrument Design

For the purposes of this research problem and preliminary gathering of data, a survey was an appropriate research instrument choice, though there are problems with the questionnaire itself. Though pretested, pretesting mainly included library students, practicing librarians and library faculty (some marketing faculty were used). This may have meant that the reviewers assumed a professional familiarity with those who would be answering the survey, thus introducing bias, particularly with respect to the tone of the questions.
Part I included 28 seven-point Likert-scaled items for eliciting attitudes about marketing with respect to library services. Possible wording effects (“Marketing is mostly hype and hustle”) and order effects (the survey begins with nine clearly pro-marketing questions, followed by four anti-marketing questions) are likely. Given ongoing professional discourse related to the topic of marketing library services, context effects may have also biased answers, which is not addressed.¹

Part II of the questionnaire again used a seven-point Likert scale, this time to assess the amount of time respondents spend performing marketing-related activities and the importance of those activities to the library (according to each respondent’s belief). First, the question is awkwardly worded and presented: “For each of these marketing-related activities, please circle a number to indicate the degree to which they are part of your work, and how important you believe each is to the library.” The juxtaposition of the two questions and the answer choices is problematic for keeping the factors independent. The two questions should have been asked and answered sequentially, separately. Second, seven answer points forces a degree of granulation likely to introduce significant imprecision in answers rather than precision.

Part III was composed of 12 multiple-choice questions, of a demographic nature. There is no indication that answers to the last two questions² were independently verified, making the answers completely subjective and therefore useless in considering “the effects of community characteristics” (Shontz, Parker & Parker, 2004, p. 67) on attitudes.

¹ See Neuman, p. 282-285, for discussion of wording, order, and context effects.
² “What is the approximate population of the community served by your library?” and “How would you describe the income level of the community served by your library?”
Because the stated research problem was to survey public librarians, and not New Jersey Library Association members who work in public libraries, the researchers use of the NJLA membership list to identify potential respondents means that sampling can best be characterized as haphazard or convenience sampling (Neuman, 2003, p. 211). It was definitely not random. Since not all public librarians live in New Jersey, and not all New Jersey public librarians necessarily belong to the NJLA, the responses received may not represent the intended research population.

Data Gathering

Surveys were sent indiscriminately to 1,198 NJLA members. Six-hundred and twenty-three [623] responded. Approximately one third of those, or 208, were excluded because they were from non-public librarians or for unspecified reasons. The remaining 415 responses, or about 35% of the original number contacted, were tabulated and analyzed using SPSS.

Data Analysis

Data from each of the three parts of the questionnaire was analyzed to provide a profile of respondents, identify characteristics of the community, and of course, uncover attitudes towards marketing library services. While certain respondent characteristics could be determined, the statistical significance of that profile to the larger world of public librarians cannot be determined, due to poor sampling techniques. For a similar reason, community characteristics, as determined by answers to two highly subjective questions, do not contribute whatsoever to reliable community profiles.

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Most likely spoiled, incomplete or late responses, though the article does not explain.
Factor analysis of the data was performed using SPSS, resulting in three composite scales: promarketing, antimarketing, and marketing knowledge and experience, which were then tested for equivalence reliability using Cronbach’s alpha coefficient. These scales were then cross-correlated and further analyzed with respect to such variables as library position, years of experience, and years since graduation. The analysis of the data appears accurate, but the question still remains whether the data gathering provided reliable and valid data for analysis.

Conclusions

Unfortunately, the researchers strayed wildly from their research problem and its statistical support in some of their conclusions. One such conclusion was that “this study indicates that library managers have increasingly come to appreciate the importance of marketing library services in a competitive information marketplace” (Shontz, Parker & Parker, 2004, p.76). This error was further compounded by discussion of library school curriculum and empirical studies of web pages as effective marketing tools.

Critique Conclusions

Initially this appears to be a well-run research project using good design methodology and data analysis. Upon careful consideration, however, it demonstrates serious problems with problem definition, questionnaire design, and sampling, all of which result in questionable data, thereby affecting data analysis and research conclusions.

References