

THE CURTIN MATERIALS AVAILABILITY SURVEY 2017

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Abstract

Purpose

The research extends the principles of earlier print-based availability surveys to the context of today's electronic library, and explores the question of an appropriate methodology. The ability of clients to find what they want remains a central question, as does the library's ability to identify and address the reasons that clients fail to find what they are looking for.

Design/Methodology/Approach

Catalogue users at Curtin University Library were invited to complete an online survey indicating whether they had found the electronic item they were looking for, and if not to nominate the reason why. Responses were then verified and analysed by library staff.

Findings

The survey attracted a low number of usable responses, though the proportion of respondents who stated they were able to find what they were looking for was consistent with the findings of earlier studies. It was possible to identify a small number of cases where the library did not hold the item required, though most failures were either due to technical failures or could not be fully investigated because not enough information was provided by the respondent.

Research Limitations/Implications

The survey as run was inconclusive, partly because the delivery method used was quite cumbersome, and also because it focussed on known item searches rather than topic searches. The paper includes suggestions on how the survey could be broadened and technically improved.

Originality/Value

The paper shows the value and limitations of conducting a materials availability survey in the electronic library, and makes suggestions on how the effectiveness of such a survey can be maximised.

Introduction

The question "are library clients able to find the materials they want in the library?" has long exercised library managers, and can be seen as a fundamental measure of performance. The systematic investigation of the reasons for non-availability was pioneered in the 1970s (Buckland, 1975; Kantor, 1976), and Kantor's "branching method" formed the basis for numerous subsequent studies (Mansbridge, 1986; Nisonger, 2007). While early work focussed on the availability of print items, more recent studies have also sought to investigate the availability of items in electronic format (Nisonger, 2009; Crum, 2011).

Between 2005 and 2010 the T.L. Robertson Library of Curtin University, located in Perth, Western Australia, several times successfully ran an availability survey developed for the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) (Tang, 2014, 706-707; Poll and te Boekhorst, 2007, 68). This survey

depended on distributing forms to clients in the library and analysing their responses about their ability to find what they were looking for. It had the advantage of being based on actual client data, rather than, for example, bibliographies or reading lists, but by 2010 it was apparent that as an instrument it was no longer appropriate to contemporary library conditions: a large proportion of library users were now there primarily not to consult information resources, but to use the library's computers and study spaces, and because of the expansion of online electronic delivery it was often no longer necessary for clients to come into the library in person to find information resources at all.

Accordingly, Curtin University Library set out to develop a methodology for the online investigation of availability, and in 2013 ran a pilot survey, under the leadership of the library's then Associate Director, Corporate Services, Karen Tang (Tang, 2014). This entailed using a locally-written script to intercept a search in Curtin's Primo discovery system and inviting users to participate in a survey through a pop-up window. If they agreed and indicated that they were looking for a specific item, searchers were asked to provide an email address to which a link was later sent automatically for them to complete the survey once they had looked for their item. Survey responses were afterwards verified by library staff to identify reasons that users had not found what they were looking for. The survey allowed for the possibility of clients looking for resources in either print or electronic format.

The pilot survey identified several practical issues that required resolution before it would be possible to make the Curtin Materials Availability Survey (CMAS) a regular instrument of quality control. The intercept script was written specifically for the catalogue software currently in use at Curtin and was thus not easily transferable across different catalogues or discovery systems or indeed from one version of the discovery system to the next. The invitation pop-up did not work equally well across all browsers or on mobile devices. There was necessarily a delay between when clients searched for their items and when they completed the survey, potentially reducing the effective response rate and making it difficult for library staff to proceed to a timely and reliable verification of the reported outcomes.

In 2017 Curtin conducted a follow-up to the 2013 pilot, attempting to address these obstacles and to build on earlier experience.

The 2017 Curtin Survey

Users of the library's catalogue were selectively invited to participate in the survey through a web browser tab or window which appeared when they conducted a search using the catalogue search box on the library home page or clicked on one of the links associated with this search box. The catalogue search results screen also remained open in the browser. Note that the term "catalogue" is used here and below to refer to Curtin's Primo discovery system, which brings together

bibliographic data from multiple sources including Primo Central, and provides access to all library-curated material.

Users who agreed to participate were directed to a survey created in Qualtrics. The survey asked for basic demographic information, what the client was looking for, and whether or not they found it. If they did not find their item they were asked to nominate a reason from the list below.

- *The Library does not have it*
- *It wasn't clear to me whether the Library has it or not*
- *It is available electronically but I can't access it*
- *It is only available in print but I want an electronic copy*
- *None of the above* – in this case clients were asked to provide further details

Completed surveys were emailed by Qualtrics to a generic email box, and the emails were then printed for analysis and coding by project team members. The analysis involved replication of searches where clients had reported not finding their item, and confirming so far as possible whether the client assessment of the failure was correct. Outcomes were recorded manually in an Excel spreadsheet. The initial coding was subsequently reviewed, particularly in cases where the respondent gave the reason for failure as “None of the above”, and surveys were recoded to reflect both client and Library perspectives, and specifically to capture, where possible, whether or not the library held the item, regardless of the client’s perception. The coding schema used is given in Table 1.

Coding	Scope	Interpretation
<i>Client: Found it</i>	Client states that they found what they were looking for	
<i>Client: Library does not have it</i>		
A1 – Not held	Library agrees with client that the item is not held electronically	Acquisition Failure
A2 – Held electronically	Library disagrees with client’s statement that the item is not held electronically	Search failure
A3 – Held in print only	Library agrees with client that the item is not held electronically, but it is held in print	Electronic availability failure
AU – Insufficient data	The client was not looking for a specific item or did not provide enough information for us to determine whether the item is held or not	
<i>Client: It wasn't clear to me if the Library has it or not</i>		
B1 – Held	The Library was able to locate the item	Interpretation failure

B2 – Not held	The Library was not able to locate the item	Interpretation failure + Acquisition failure
BU – Insufficient data	The client was not looking for a specific item or did not provide enough information for us to determine whether the item is held or not	
<i>Client: It is available electronically but I can't access it</i>		
C1 – Held (access not OK)	The Library agrees that the item is held electronically, but there is a problem with access	
C2 – Held (access OK)	The Library agrees that the item is held electronically, but was unable to replicate a problem with access	Client access failure
CU – Insufficient data	The client was not looking for a specific item or did not provide enough information for us to determine whether the item is held or not	
CX2 – Not held	The Library disagrees with the client's statement that the item is available electronically	Client access + Acquisition failure
<i>Client: It is only available in print but I want an electronic copy</i>		
F1 – Print only	The Library agrees that the item is only available in print and there are no electronic holdings	Electronic availability failure
F2 – Held electronically	The Library does not agree with the client's statement that the item is not held electronically	
FU – Insufficient data	The client was not looking for a specific item or did not provide enough information for us to determine whether the item is held or not	
<i>Client: None of the above</i>		
KU – Insufficient data	The client was not looking for a specific item or did not provide enough information for us to determine whether the item is held or not	
KX1 – Technical block – Held	Client was unable to complete search process for technical reasons, but item is held electronically	Technical failure
KX2 – Technical block – Not held	Client was unable to complete search process for technical reasons, and item	Technical failure + Acquisition failure

	is not held electronically	
KX3 – Technical block – Held in print only	Client was unable to complete search process for technical reasons, and item is only held in print, not electronically	Technical + Electronic availability failure
KXU – Technical block – Insufficient data	Client was unable to complete search process for technical reasons, but client was not looking for a specific item or did not provide enough information for us to determine whether the item is held or not	

Table 1. CMAS Coding Schema

There were several differences between the 2017 survey and the 2013 pilot. In 2017 we did not use a pop-up but a link to a separate browser window or tab, in order to provide a more robust delivery method that would not be interrupted by software upgrades or browser security settings, and would work on a broader range of devices. For the same reasons, we preferred to link from a search box on the library home page rather than from within Primo itself. This also minimised the likelihood of clients being interrupted by multiple requests to participate if they conducted multiple searches within a single session (since after the first search from the library home page all subsequent searches would be made from inside the catalogue). We asked only about the availability of electronic items rather than print, acknowledging that the majority of our clients now prefer information in online formats – this meant that we were able to streamline the actual questionnaire considerably. We made the survey available to searchers at the time they were conducting their search on the assumption that they would look for their item and complete the survey within a few minutes. We also captured and analysed the survey data immediately, at least during office hours, to ensure that when validating users’ responses the conditions of the original search were replicated as nearly as possible. In addition we provided the opportunity for respondents to enter a draw for a small prize, and established the initiative as a research project (ethics approval HRE2016-0354) in order to allow the publication of results.

Outcomes

The survey ran over a period of 79 hours between Monday 27 March and Thursday 30 March 2017. The survey invitation was offered 2,283 times, but the number of valid responses was only 117, a disappointingly low return rate of 5.12%. It is not possible to draw statistically valid conclusions from the data given the small sample size. However, overall, 66% of respondents reported that they had found what they were looking for, a figure that is comparable with the result we achieved in the 2013 pilot (67%), though slightly less than what was achieved in the last print-based survey, run in 2010 (74%). A sizeable portion of respondents who stated that they did not find what they looking for either appeared to be not looking for a specific item, did not give sufficient information to

identify precisely what they were looking for, or reported that the survey mechanism had prevented them from following through on their search by preventing them from seeing their results. It was possible to identify (and subsequently rectify) a small number of “acquisitions failures”, though some for which clients were searching were outside the library’s collection scope, such as works of popular fiction. The number of “information literacy” failures, where respondents had clearly failed to construct an appropriate search or had misinterpreted the catalogue screens, was negligible.

Lessons and Prospects

Our experience with running the CMAS highlighted several technical difficulties which are likely to have discouraged catalogue users from participating. The delivery mechanism was quite cumbersome, as the browser tab or window obscured the catalogue results screen from view, which a browser pop-up would not have done. The survey itself was quite wordy as the ethics requirements of the research project required participants to give formal consent to the data collection, and also because it needed to provide for the associated competition draw – this also required the start and end times of the survey to be predetermined with the result that we were unable to extend it to collect more responses. The decision to launch the survey invitation from the catalogue search box on the library home page rather than from within the catalogue itself had the effect of excluding users who habitually enter the catalogue either directly or from other external links. These factors could be eliminated in future surveys by finding more appropriate and less cumbersome delivery software, by collecting data for internal use only and by not providing an incentive in the form of a competition.

A further limitation resulted from the fact that we relied on searchers to re-identify the item they were looking for in the survey form, and that the data provided was often unclear or incomplete. Ideally, citations would be captured from the catalogue in some way, or failing this the search terms and strategy used would be automatically transferred to the survey.

The survey asked for people to respond only if they were looking for a specific item and if they wanted it in electronic format. Analysis of the results, however, showed that a significant number of respondents were not in fact looking for specific items, but rather searching in general for works by a particular author or on a particular topic. Since this is a normal catalogue search activity, and one about which user satisfaction is equally important, it might be advantageous to revise the survey methodology to take into account both specific item searching and more general types of search enquiry. An initial question to elicit what type of search is being conducted could be included in the survey instrument. This would reduce the probability of catalogue users being interrupted by a survey that was not actually relevant to their current activity. It is noteworthy, and indicative of the

increasingly electronic nature of the library's collection, that no respondents indicated that they would have preferred to locate their item in print.

More generally, however, the low response rate suggests that this type of survey may not in fact be the most comprehensive or reliable way to collect information about clients' ability to find the materials they are looking for. Surveys and feedback forms are now ubiquitous in the web environment, perhaps leading to "survey fatigue". Other library surveys have also recently been showing diminishing returns, and even the print-based availability surveys run by Curtin between 2005 and 2010 showed a progressive reduction in the number of respondents. Perhaps the use of catalogue or discovery system logs or analysis of data recorded in enquiry management systems in conjunction with a materials availability survey would provide for a more complete solution.

Conclusion

Whether or not clients can find what they are looking for in the library remains an essential question. There are still, however, significant practical obstacles to collecting comprehensive, empirical, user-focussed data which can be used to ascertain exactly why some users do not find what they are looking for and to inform corrective action. With further development, initiatives such as CMAS have the potential to provide useful input in this area which can be used alongside analytic data produced directly from discovery systems themselves.

References

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