

Never standing still: Using evidence to improve visitors' experiences at State Library of Queensland

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Abstract: State Library of Queensland (SLQ) provides free access to information and services for all Queenslanders, as well as fulfilling the role of primary collector of Queensland's document heritage. The Visitor Experience team leads the organisation in this goal, working to promote and nurture a positive and engaging experience for all visitors to State Library, regardless of whether people visit us in person, via our telephone service, website or social media channels. To do this, we gather, interpret and apply a range of quantitative and qualitative data sets, using evidence to inform decision making in service innovation. This case study will examine a selection of these data sources to demonstrate how SLQ responds to the evidence to create an agile, continuously improving service. By investing in data collection and analysis, SLQ's Visitor Experience team is able to respond in a timely and appropriate manner to the rapidly changing needs and expectations of our visitors.

Keywords: Visitor Experiences, State Library of Queensland, evidence-based practice

1. Introduction

State Library of Queensland (SLQ) is the primary collector of Queensland's documentary heritage with more than one million visitors per year to our site in central Brisbane, Australia. SLQ staff are dedicated to creating welcoming spaces for everyone. The Visitor Experience team leads the organisation in this goal, working to promote and nurture a positive and engaging experience for all visitors to State Library, regardless whether people visit us in person, via our telephone service, website or social media channels. To do this, we gather, interpret and apply a range of quantitative and qualitative data sets, using evidence to inform decision making in service innovation. This paper will examine as a case study a selection of these data sources to demonstrate how the VE team respond to the evidence to create an agile, continuously improving service. These examples include visitation counts, *Visitor 360⁰* audience research, qualitative comments from online and comment card feedback and our *Happiness* touch screen exit poll. This paper will discuss how the data collected

is validated by these varied approaches and how the VE management team has responded to this data by applying an evidence-based decision making approach, to meet the ever-changing needs and expectations of our visitors.

2. About State Library of Queensland

SLQ provides information services to all Queenslanders, including more than 80,000 registered members and via state-wide library services in partnership with more than 340 public libraries and 23 Indigenous Knowledge Centres. As a physical and virtual space for sharing, learning, collaborating and creating, SLQ meets the Library Board of Queensland's legislative responsibilities to contribute to the cultural, social and intellectual development of all Queenslanders. Our public campus is at South Bank within Brisbane's Cultural Precinct, supported by offices in Brisbane's eastern suburbs and in Cairns in north Queensland (Library Board of Queensland 2015). As a state library, SLQ provides a blend of both public library and research library experiences for visitors. "Public library" type experiences include children's activities in The Corner, makerspaces and learning programs in The Edge, lending from our Information Collections and spaces for social interaction, relaxation and serendipitous discovery. Research offerings include the John Oxley Library, the Australian Library of Art, the Australian Pacific Design Library, family history services and support for entrepreneurship and small business in The Business Studio. SLQ's Visitor Experience (VE) team have the responsibility of welcoming and serving our visitors and members at the South Bank building, leading the library in creating an inclusive place for all. The team of thirty staff who are a mix of librarians, library technicians and visitor services officers, provide concierge, information and advanced reference services via face-to-face, telephone and online channels. Our goal is provide outstanding visitor experiences and interactions, with the aim of encouraging repeat visitation and engagement (Hernon & Altman 2015).

3. Methodology – Data collection channels

Libraries have long collected data about operations, services, inputs and expenditure (Hiller & Self 2004). State Library of Queensland is no different. SLQ collects a range of data about our core business including visitation (online and onsite), circulation, membership, visitor feedback and audience research. SLQ is a client-centred organisation committed to seeking information from our visitors and using this information to better satisfy their needs and build deeper relationships with them (Celuch, Robinson & Walsh 2015). This approach of constantly measuring and matching supports an evidence-based approach to professional practice (Yerbury 2016). Feedback gathered via multiple channels allows VE managers to examine how we are satisfying our visitors and members, to gauge our visitors' expectations and perceptions, to learn what they need and want and to discover what they know (Celuch et al 2015). As Tenopir (2013) argues, multiple methods should be used to measure value, including quantitative, qualitative and a mixture of both. For the purposes of this case study, five measures will be discussed. These are *Tell us* visitor feedback, *Ask*

us information service reports, *Visitor 360⁰* audience research, occupancy counts and the *Happiness* exit poll. Each of these tools provides insights into service quality, which is an important measure in determining visitor satisfaction and impacting return visitation. The higher the perception of service quality, the greater is the intention of the visitor to return and to spread positive word-of-mouth recommendations to others (Keith & Simmers 2011).

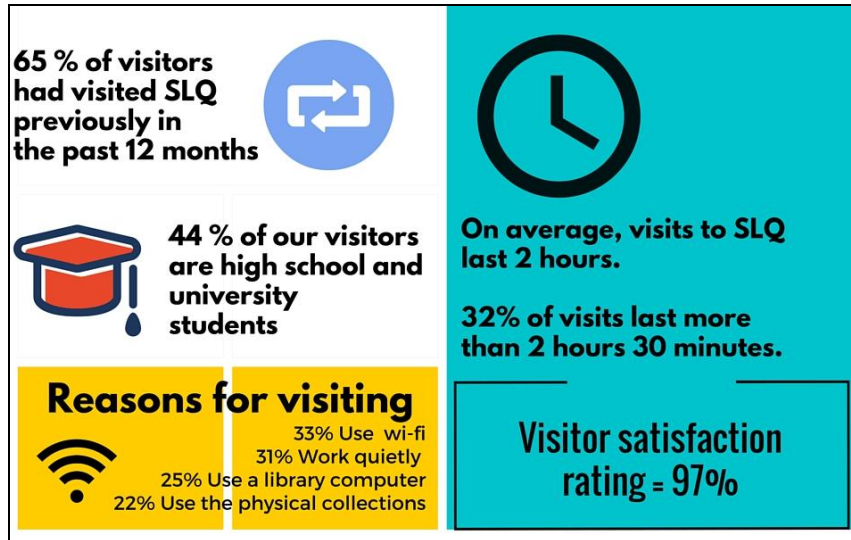
4. *Visitor 360⁰* audience research

In 2014 SLQ embarked on a two-year audience research project in partnership with the firm, Morris Hargreaves McIntyre. It was commissioned to offer deeper insight into the motivations and behaviour of the library's current visitors, with the aim of communicating more effectively with existing visitors and to attract new visitors (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2015) In the first year of research (July 2014 to June 2015), 979 questionnaires were completed by visitors exiting the SLQ building. The surveys are administered via iPad using an assisted self-completion method, facilitated by Visitor Experience staff. Visitors are approached at random by interviewers and the interviews are distributed across each three-month quarter according to a sample frame based on visitation patterns from previous years. Data is reported quarterly and annually to SLQ. The survey questions cover:

- Visitation patterns
- Demographics
- Psychographic/Culture segments
- Attractors and intentions
- Needs and motivation
- Media consumption

The data reported from the first year of collection has revealed useful insights into visitor experiences, perceptions and attractors. Highlights are outlined in Figure 1. The insights gained into our visitors' intentions, motivations and expectations are extremely valuable in providing a better understanding of the service delivery the VE staff provide. While audience research surveys are primarily designed to inform marketing and communications strategies, the richness of the information gathered via this methodology is beneficial for understanding use of spaces, services and collections with the aim of improving services. When considered alongside the other measures discussed in this paper, this data validates and affirms the evidence collected by other tools and supports anecdotal observations reported by staff.

Figure 1: Summary of findings from the first year of audience research (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre 2015)



5. Ask us information services data

SLQ has been using Altarama's RefTracker software since 2011 to track, triage and respond to information enquiries and to record statistics of interactions at our service points. This includes six information desks, telephone, email and instant messaging service. In July 2014, SLQ began using a common set of enquiry categories as part of the RefTracker Project coordinated by National and State Libraries Australasia (NSLA). By using a standard set of categories, we are able to compare and benchmark quantitative data against NSLA consortium member, which includes state libraries around Australia and the national libraries of Australia and New Zealand. In the financial year 2014-2015 SLQ recorded a total of number of 166,360 interactions, making SLQ the fourth busiest information service after the State Libraries of Victoria, New South Wales and Western Australia. Of these interactions, the majority (135,393) occurred face-to-face at information desks. The remaining 30,967 were requests for our extended research services. The data collected and stored in RefTracker is extremely rich and allows us to learn more about our visitors' interests and interactions during visits. Recording the types of support visitors seek in the library enables library managers to demonstrate the value of the library as a trusted information provider (Cole 2014). This data shows that subject area generating the most enquiries is Family History (7109), followed by Queensland

History (2717). The desk statistics also allow us to track the busyness of each service point across the day and this data has been used to make decisions about how many staff to roster at each location. In August 2015, this data provided the evidence to support a decision to close the Family History service desk from 5pm weekdays. The extremely low levels of interactions could not be justified against the cost of employing a staff member during evening opening hours. Clients using the extended information service are also sent a survey seeking feedback on their satisfaction with the service. While response rates are low at 5%, the satisfaction rating of 96% mirrors the rating obtained from the more comprehensive *Visitor 360^o* audience research.

6. Tell us feedback

Tell us is the feedback service introduced and run by VE but which covers all aspects of people's SLQ experience. Analysing qualitative feedback comments provides an opportunity to identify trends in visitor experiences. In 2014, SLQ configured Altarama's Refracker software into a centralised client feedback database. This tool now collates all feedback received by SLQ, with a few exceptions, such as events or learning programs, which use tailored survey instruments to gather client evaluations. Feedback is received via an online form or physical comment cards, which are then manually entered into the database. In most cases, the feedback lodged in *Tell Us* is unsolicited and often anonymous. Staff may ask visitors to formally put their thoughts in writing either via the web form or comment card. VE staff also record verbal feedback by entering it into *Tell us*. Feedback is defined into four categories - complaints, compliments, suggestions and comments. Both positive and negative feedback is valued. The Visitor Services Manager triages the incoming feedback, assigns each entry to a category, distributes feedback to the appropriate manager and ensures that timely responses are provided where required to close the feedback loop. In the first full year of data (July 2014-June 2015), 520 responses were collected in the database, an average of ten per week. The breakdown by type of feedback was:

- Comments - 188 (36%)
- Compliments - 167 (31%)
- Complaints -108 (21%)
- Suggestions – 56 (11%)

When this data is analysed by theme, the largest single theme attracting feedback is Compliments about our services (14% of the total) followed by Comments about our collections (13%). Complaints tend to focus on our facilities. Noise is a recurring item, reinforcing the *Visitor 360^o* feedback that visitors often come to SLQ seeking a quiet place to study. The slowness of wi-fi is also a recurring complaint. We receive a pleasing number of unsolicited positive feedbacks, which is often multi-part, including appreciation of services, staff and spaces simultaneously. Prior to the implementation of this database,

there was no coherent organisational approach to understanding complaints and comments. As Herson and Altman (2015) state, unless library managers establish a mechanism to capture and record data, they have no way of knowing what is a major or minor issue affecting visitors' satisfaction. Keith and Simmers (2011) argue that comment cards are usually a source of feedback at the time of the service experience and therefore a useful tool for assessing quality. Positive feedback, or comments, provide personal evidence of the value of the library's collections and services and can lead to specific courses of action (Tenopir 2013). Feedback received can be used as a diagnostic tool for improving service and encouraging return patronage (Keith & Simmers 2011). The evidence collated by this centralised approach to feedback has supported requests for enhancements to our facilities and spaces. For example, in response to feedback we have added more client-accessible power sockets throughout the reading rooms to support "bring your own device" behaviour. We also trialled and changed the venue and time of our Music Hour initiative, during which volunteers perform instrumental music as entertainment. As a result of ongoing feedback, Music Hour was moved from inside the Level 2 reading room on Friday afternoons to outside the library entrance on Monday mornings to better suit the needs, expectations and experiences of our visitors.

7. Happiness exit poll

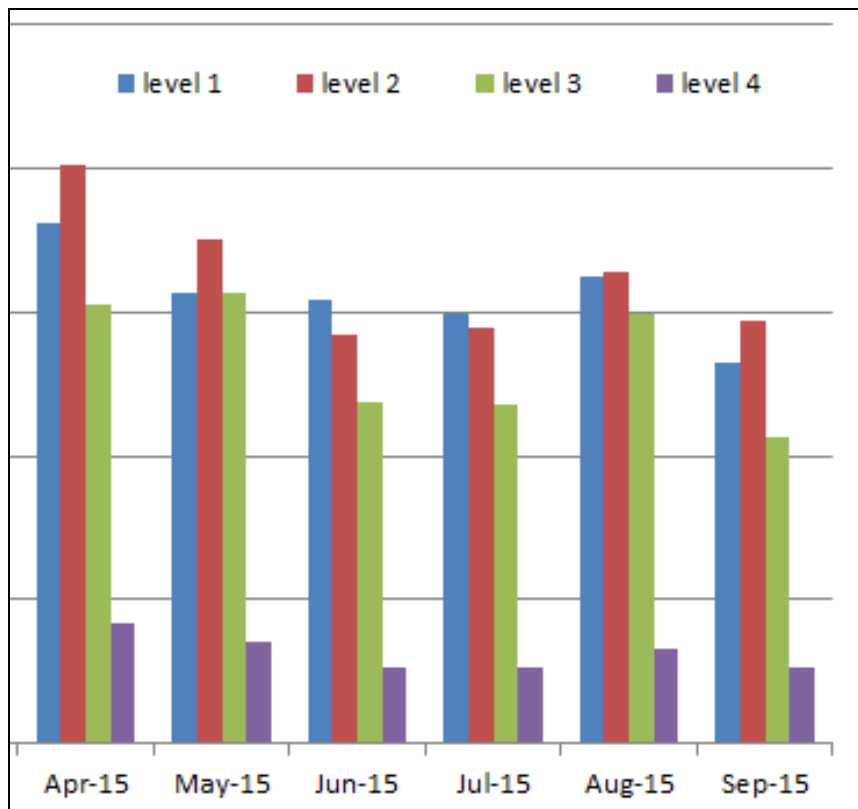
The slightly whimsical *Happiness* exit poll has been in operation since the last week in July 2015. A large touch screen located in the Reception foyer simply asks "How satisfied were you by your visit today?". Visitors touch the appropriate "face" icon to indicate their satisfaction level as they walk past. The intention is to run the feedback screen for a year until June 2016 to collect a full year of data. The first six months of data from the screen collected 22,286 responses with 91% of visitors selecting very or somewhat satisfied. This level of positive feedback ratings is slightly lower the satisfaction ratings reported via *Visitor 360⁰* audience research which reported 97% on the same scale. While there is little scientific value in this poll, it does serve to inform our visitors that we are interested in their experience and their feedback. The "splash" screen which displays after an individual touches the screen promotes the online *Tell us* form. VE managers are currently investigating the best options to graphically display the outcomes of this exit poll back to visitors after June, to close the feedback loop and encourage more comprehensive feedback from our visitors.

8. Occupancy counts

Like many public institutions, SLQ collects visitation numbers using automated people counters on entry and exit doors. This measure is one of our key reporting indicators. The evidence of visitation trends indicates that visitor numbers have remained stable over the past three years. Onsite visit results essentially matched levels of the previous two years. While door counts are a measure of entrances and exits, these counts do not inform us of where visitors go within the building and what they used (Dotson & Garris 2008). Visitor

Experience is currently undertaking a two-year project conducting actual headcounts in our spaces each day in the third week of every month. Supplementing automatic door counts gives us a better understanding of actual occupancy in different spaces. This gives us enough granular data to work with to match the undifferentiated people counter stats with actual occupancy rates and to better inform decisions about space planning and facilities.

Figure 2: Excerpt from occupancy counts 2015



9. Results – applying the evidence in decision making

Evidence based practice in library and information work is all about using evidence in our decision-making and is usually associated with effectiveness or whether something works (Brettle 2014), in this case, the myriad of issues which impact on the experience of visiting SLQ. Tenopir (2013) argues that multiple methods should be used to measure value, including quantitative, qualitative and a mixture of both; no one method stands alone. The evidence collected via multiple tools (audience research, unsolicited feedback and exit polls) shows that visitors to SLQ are highly satisfied and have positive

experiences during their visits and encounters with staff. For service delivery, quality often means exceeding expectations and delivery satisfaction (Cole 2014). The high level of satisfaction ratings via these multiple assessment tools validates that staff are consistently providing exceptional visitor experiences. The quantitative data gathered by the *Visitor 360⁰* audience research combined with the qualitative data collated in the *Tell Us* database and via the post-service feedback for our *Ask Us* reference service help us to measure our achievements in service delivery.

This does not mean that our service delivery is flawless. Indeed the evidence recently revealed a visitor need that we are addressing. The analysis and comparison of these multivariate data sources has led to a project reviewing and renewing spaces and access in the John Oxley Library reading room on level 4. Dotson and Garris (2008) argue that allocation and use of space in libraries has always been a complex and challenging issue and this is certainly true at SLQ. From the evidence, we identified that:

1. SLQ is a destination for visitors seeking a space to study, often for long periods of time (Data source: *Visitor 360⁰* audience research)
2. There is high demand for quiet/silent study space (Data source: occupancy counts, *Visitor 360⁰*, *Tell us* feedback)
3. High use of study spaces (desks, chairs, power points) on Levels 2 and 3 where bags are permitted (visitation counts) which leads to increased noise levels and less quiet space (Data source: *Tell us* feedback)
4. In spite of large availability of quiet facilities on Level 4, there is low use of this space. This is likely to be due to bag restrictions in this reading room. (Data source: occupancy counts)

This evidence supported a proposal to review the Level 4 reading room to reconfigure access, with the dual aim of providing additional quiet study spaces and enhancing the space for researchers using our Queensland collections, especially rare and original materials. Funding was sought and granted for this project and it is on track to deliver improved access for all visitors in this space by July 2016.

10. Conclusion

Libraries must constantly meet visitor expectations through creativity, innovation and risk-taking (Hirshon 1996). No one method stands alone (Tenopir 2013). At SLQ we constantly strive to provide the best visitor experience to everyone. By collecting, reviewing and analysing a variety of data sources, we gain a clearer understanding of visitors' expectations and experiences. The quantitative data from *Ask us* statistics and visitation counts can show a return on investment and trends while qualitative data, from *Tell us* feedback can tell a story or put a personal face on data (Tenopir, 2013). In the Visitor Experience team, we aim to never stand still, to constantly seek to better

the service we deliver and to continue to achieve the very high satisfaction ratings by creating welcoming spaces and accessible collections.

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