

THE USE OF SUGGESTION BOX AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION AND PROMOTION OF PUBLIC RELATION SERVICES: THE EXPERIENCE OF USMANU DANFODIYO UNIVERSITY LIBRARY, SOKOTO, NIGERIA

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Abstract

In a bid to improve services to the satisfaction of customers, many organizations use suggestion box to elicit information from their customers, clients or patrons. Given the complexity of university library system, this study specifically explored the use of suggestion box for communication and promotion of public relation services in Usmanu Danfodiyo University Library, Sokoto. The study applied quantitative research method, using case study and descriptive research design. The study covered the Main Library and 18 other branches in the University. Using a purposeful sampling technique, a sample of 96 users' suggestions drawn from across the University were used. The study revealed that many suggestions were received by the Library from users through the suggestion boxes provided for them within an experimental period of two years (2015 - 2016). These suggestions, which further influenced the actions or decisions of the Library, centered mainly on the areas of reservation of seats, access to current serials collection, ICT facilities, security, and environmental condition, among others. Despite its effectiveness, however, the use of suggestion box has inherent shortcomings such as coordination, non-participation of majority of users, fake/false suggestions by users, amongst others. To this end, the study proffered some useful suggestions for improvement.

Keywords: Information, Communication, Public Relation, Academic Library, Suggestion Box

Introduction

Information elicits communication which is an essential tool to societal-cum-organizational development. Ndolo and Udeze (2008) analogically posit that information is the muscle, the ligament and the sinew of any society, especially democratic societies. This assertion holds sway when we note that corporate organization's management styles are somehow akin to democratic leadership styles. According to them, communication acts as the fulcrum upon which an organization revolves. Taking away communication from the organization simply portends that the strength and life of the organization are deliberately washed away.

According to Lesner (2010), communication transverses every aspect of human relations and endeavours. He stressed that in the context of development, communication is sine-qua-non for healthy interaction between change agents and change targets, and noting that communication system is both an index and agent of change in a total social system. Despite the fact that communication can play these important roles, it has remained one of the least applied and least recognized variables in the development equation of modern organizations. It therefore follows that there is a strong link between communication and development. Gathering patrons' opinions through a suggestion box can influence policy formulation and decision making concerning the overall development of an organization.

Collins Dictionary (2019) describes suggestion box as a device for obtaining additional comments, questions and requests or a receptacle with an opening in which people may place slips of paper containing suggestions for improvement for similar feedback. Suggestion box is used for collecting slips of paper with input from customers and patrons of a particular organization. Suggestion box may also exist internally within an organization as a means of gathering opinions of employees. While some organizations refer to the "box" as suggestion box, others refer to it by some other different names, depending on the intention or purpose for introducing it. Thus, the term ranges from opinion box, complaint box, information box, service failure box to customer relations box, among numerous other connotations.

Bailey (2018) advocates that putting up a suggestion box, either for company's employees or its customers is one sure way to get a creative mix of ideas to consider. Since information brings about communication and which invariably leads to change in action or programme, it is desirable that in any social development campaign, individuals from the target population should be encouraged to initiate, execute and evaluate both the strategy and content of the information for the social action programme (Nwuneli, 2015). One way of doing this, in most cases, has been through the use of suggestion box or information box in organizations. For customers to show implicit loyalty, the firm must make a concrete commitment to satisfying their needs and wants. This is necessary because, given the high cost of acquiring new customers, organizations have stepped up efforts to keep existing customers, especially the most profitable ones. These efforts, among many others include the use of the suggestion box to capture customers' complaints by ascertaining when the customers are not satisfied with the services offered or the need to open up new avenues of service (Nnabuko, 2014).

In consideration of its positive impact, several organizations have introduced a suggestion box as their channel of communication and relationship management. This helps to improve both information dissemination and customer relationship management of various organizations. While the importance of suggestion box to organisations is very certain, how the suggestion box promotes communication and public relations services in the Usmanu Danfodiyo University Library remains uncertain; hence the main focus of this study.

Statement of the Problem

The increasing expansion of the Usmanu Danfodiyo University, Sokoto in various spheres, coupled with the geographical distances between the central Library on the one hand and its constituent branches, faculties, departments and research centres on the other, have far-reaching implications not only for coordination and administration but also communication and services delivery of the Library.

Established by the Federal Government in 1975, the University has, over the years, continued to expand in physical size, academic programmes, staff and students population. Currently, there are two campuses and a Teaching Hospital, which are separately located at distant places. Like its parent institution, the Library has also witnessed a gradual expansion in response to the growth and developmental changes affecting the University. Presently, the Library has grown into a very complex system, consisting of the Main Library and 18 branches, 162 staff

and serving about 20,000 users across 14 faculties and 4 research centers. The Library complex comprises the following major branches which are situated at different locations: Law Library, Medical Library, Management Sciences Library, Social Sciences Library, Pharmacy Library, Veterinary Medical Library, Medical Laboratory Science Library, School of Matriculation Studies Library, Agriculture Library, Science Library, and Arabic and Islamic Library. In addition, there is also the American Corner which is located at the School of Matriculation Studies; serving both the University Community and the general public (Balarabe, etal, 2016). In an effort to determine the quality of its services and satisfaction of users, the Library introduced a suggestion box through which the users' opinions could be obtained regularly. Since then, however, the extent of use and impact of the suggestion box remain uncertain. It is thus against this background that the study was conceived in order to investigate the nature, impact and implications of this important initiative.

Objectives of the Study

Primarily, the study aimed at investigating the impact of suggestion box as a channel of communication and promotion of public relation services in Usmanu Danfodiyo University Library, Sokoto. The study has the following specific objectives:

1. To identify the nature of users' suggestions communicated to Usmanu Danfodiyo University Library using suggestion box from 2015-2016.
2. To determine the level of response of the Library to the users' suggestions.
3. To ascertain the impact of the suggestion box on communication and public relation services in the Library.
4. To identify the challenges militating against the use of the suggestion box in the Library.

Review of Related Literature

The concept of suggestion box thrives on the old principle of the simple idea box which is aligned to current and future needs which has a history going back to over a hundred years. According to Turrell (2010), suggestion boxes became popular in the manufacturing sector during and after the Second World War. They became part of the total quality movement and an integral part of cost, safety and quality improvement initiatives over the following fifty years. They are still the mainstay of corporate suggestion programmes, be they physical boxes or virtual boxes on company's intranet and websites.

However, there are various types of suggestions boxes. Nnabuko (2014) identified them to include the paper feedback forms which can be sent via postal mail; solicitation to provide comments over the telephone, such as a voluntary survey at the end of a transaction with a call center; an invitation on a printed store receipt to call and complete a customer satisfaction survey (sometimes offered with a product discount); placement of feedback forms on an institution's website; or the physical box type where customers are expected to drop their comments, observations or suggestions written or printed on paper. Black (2013) hinted that suggestion box has several benefits, amongst which are the provisions of some degree of detachment (complete anonymity) from the person or service that a customer may be critiquing. This yields more frank and open feedback, thereby providing greater opportunities for obtaining accurate market research data and improving customer relations.

The internal routing of comment within an organization may also provide those without direct contact with customers a realistic appraisal of the quality of customer care being given. Sengputa (2012) is of the opinion that a suggestion box can assist the organization because of the need to consult and communicate clearly and truthfully between the customer and the organization. This two-way communication at times increases networking towards cordial employee - employer relations. The external routing of responses to receive suggestions, such as posting responses to questions and requests on a physical or virtual bulletin board, may also

help to educate consumers and improve a company's image and customer loyalty. Similarly, Ojoh and Chyke (2011) are of the view that the effectiveness of communication is very central to the stability, wellbeing, peace, progress and performance of organizations. They further stressed that, organizations depend on effective communication to perform all their functions, including planning, directing, controlling, decision-making and execution of decisions and goals. However, such information should be accurate, verifiable, relevant, complete and timely. According to Turrel (2010), suggestion box widget allows companies to add a sleek user interface for collecting actionable ideas to their site, which they can use to manage and share suggestions throughout the organization. Suggestion box is often quick to implement as it requires relatively little infrastructure and pre-planning. Web-based suggestion programmes, typically a web-based form to collect ideas, can be created at low cost. They allow a wide range of employees to make their contributions, especially if they do not have access to computers. Boxes can be placed in production facilities and in retail outlets, providing a cost-effective means of collecting paper-based suggestions. Suggestion box provides an interactive suggestion system for users to submit insightful suggestions for improvement to any company they care about. Didiugwu and Nworgu (2011) agree that suggestion box promotes client/customer relationship because it enlivens the strategic partnership between the organization and those who need their services.

On the other hand, Nwaizugbo and Nnabuko (2010), Awaeze and Nkoli (2011) argued that it is not the industry practice, but the customers themselves that should be the basis for determining the service requirements. Without doubt, this is one benefit which a suggestion box serves in contemporary corporate organizations provide. Users can make suggestions from the suggestion box, website or via a mobile interface. The suggestion box dashboard allows them to track the status of their suggestions in real time as they travel through the review and implementation cycle. While suggestion box provides some benefits in its ability to capture ideas from anyone in an organization, there are many associated problems that tend to undermine such benefits. For instance, individuals going to drop their comments may be seen by others and hence be branded enemies of the organization by lesser minds. Again, sometimes clients may not be sincere with their comments, hence offering deceptive suggestions and comments. Also, some clients may need certain incentives to motivate them to offer suggestions or contributions to the organization or they would want to be safe in the knowledge that both they and their ideas will be treated fairly.

Black(2013) lamented that those issues often lead to outright failure of the suggestion box or produce less than spectacular results, arguing further that most suggestion boxes are not freely open for sharing while ideas are only visible to the evaluation committee. In addition, web-based suggestion boxes are sometimes open for browsing and comment, but regularly fail to attract the attention of employees. There is usually no search functionality and the turnaround time for ideas can be many months. At times, due to non-implementation of earlier suggestions by the management, organizations tend to negligently downplay the suggestion box. Sometimes contributors' ideas rot away in the box. The small format paper used to put down users' ideas do not encourage a lot of thought. There is also no focus to idea gathering, which can make the purpose of the box obviously discouraging. Further more, people can refrain from contributing, if they perceive it as a complaint box rather than a 'new idea' box (Turrell, 2010). From the foregoing, the review of literature has provided an understanding of the concept, genesis, nature, types, benefits, and negative impacts of suggestion box in an organization or institution. While suggestion box is beneficial in numerous ways, there are obvious challenges inherent in its use.. It is therefore based on this fundamental fact that this study attempted to investigate the use of suggestion box from the practical experience of the Usmanu Danfodiyo University Library, Sokoto.

Research Methodology

This study applied quantitative research method, using case study descriptive research design. A case study approach was considered appropriate due to the focus of the research on a particular library system as well as the need for the collection and analysis of data which would lead to an in depth understanding of the actual phenomenon under investigation. The population of the study consisted of the suggestion boxes in the Main Library of Usmanu Danfodiyo University and its branches, all library users that cut across 14 faculties and 4 research centers in the institution.

Using a purposeful sampling technique, the sample of the study consisted of all 96 users that dropped suggestions and complains in any of the suggestion boxes provided by the Library at strategic locations in the University from 2015 - 2016. The boxes were located at the Main Library and its branches, the faculties, University Teaching Hospital, and the students' halls of residence on both the campuses. Three instruments were used for data collection. This included observation and a careful scrutiny of the 96 written suggestions and complains collected by the Library from the designated boxes within the two-year period in question. In addition, an interview was also conducted with the University Librarian who provided some vital information on the problem under investigation. Descriptive statistical method was used in analyzing the data collected based on the four research questions raised. Tables, frequency counts and percentages were used for presentation, analysis and interpretation of the data. In the tables, data were presented in a ranking order so as to ensure logical presentation, comparison and comprehension.

Findings and Discussions

The sample of the study comprised ninety-six (96) suggestions and complaints of the Library users from 2015 to 2016; and all the 96 (100%) were found relevant and therefore used as the study's respondents. This included 58(60%) suggestions collected in 2015 and 38 (40%) in 2016.

Nature of Users' Suggestions in 2015

Table 1.1 below shows the nature or types of suggestions/complains of users communicated to the Library in 2015.

Table 1.1: Nature of Users' Suggestions in 2015

S/N	Users' Suggestions	Frequency	Percentages %
1	Reservation of seats	15	26%
2	Noise making in reading areas	11	19%
3	ICT services	7	12%
4	Appreciation/satisfaction/commendation	7	12%
5	Access to serials collection	5	9%
6	Conducive library environment	5	9%
7	Increase of library hours	3	5%
8	Inadequate lightning	2	3%
9	Library security	2	3%
10	Book borrowing	1	2%
	Total	58	100%

Table 1.1 above has shown the nature or types of suggestions/complains communicated by users through the suggestion boxes provided for them by the Library. Generally, the responses covered various aspects of the Library's services, facilities and operations. The major suggestions/complains by the respondents in 2015 concerned reservation of seats 15(26%) whereby some selfish users occupy seats while not actually in the Library, thereby denying

the right of others. This was followed by noise making in reading areas 11(19%) of the respondents complaining of too much noise such as group discussions, phone calls, side talks and other distractions. The next issue pertained to ICT services 7(12%), which included lack of enough time to use the Cafe, slow or intermittent network connectivity, inadequate computers for users and power outage.

Surprisingly, the respondents also expressed appreciation/satisfaction/commendation 7(12%) for the introduction of the suggestion box, quality library services and positive response to their suggestions/complains. Another issue of concern was access to serials collection in the Library 5(9%). This covered adequacy, currency and accessibility to serial publications such as journals, magazines and newspapers. Unconducive library environment also generated some interests of the respondents 5(9%). This included lack of toilets inside the Library for users, inadequate air conditioning and lack of freedom to regulate fans or open windows for enough ventilation in the reading areas.

Other areas of concern to the respondents was the need for the Library to increase its opening hours 3(5%) more especially during semester examinations. This was followed by complains on inadequate lightning and security system 2(3%) respectively. The least response was book borrowing 1(2%). Contrary to the current practice, undergraduate students should be allowed to borrow more than four books at a time.

From the data presented in Table 1.1 above, it is deducible that the major areas of concern to users in 2015 were reservation of seats and noise making in reading areas. Both the complains imply a flagrant violation and less enforcement of the rules and regulations of the Library as contained in the Library Guide.

Nature of Users' Suggestions in 2016

Table 1.2 below shows the nature or types of suggestions/complains of users communicated to the Library in 2016

Table 1.2: Nature of Users' Suggestions in 2016

S/N	Users' Suggestions	Frequency	Percentages %
1	Access to serials collection	10	26%
2	Appreciation/satisfaction and commendation	7	19%
3	Noise making in reading areas	6	16%
4	Reservation of seats	4	10%
5	ICT services	4	10%
6	Conducive library environment	3	8%
7	Inadequate lightning	2	5%
8	Increase of library hours	1	3%
9	Library security	1	3%
10	Book borrowing	0	0%
	Total	38	100%

Table 1.2 above has shown the users' suggestions/responses in 2016. The most serious issue raised in the year in question was restriction on access to serials collection 10(26%). This was followed by appreciation/satisfaction and commendation 7(18%). Next was noise making in reading areas 6(16%) (i.e. group discussions and phone calls around the reading areas). Reservation of seats and ICT services generated the same response 4(10%) each (i.e. poor network services and inadequate time to use the Cafe. Another concern was lack of conducive library environment which recorded 3(9%) (i.e. lack of toilets in the Library for users). This

was followed by inadequate lightning in the reading areas 2(5%), while increase of library opening hours and security had only 1(3%) each.

From the results presented in Table 1.2 above, it is clear that the major concerns of Library users in 2016 were access to serials collection, appreciation/satisfaction and then noise making respectively. These findings indicate some significant changes between the users' suggestions/complains in 2015 and 2016.

Level of Library's Response to Users' Suggestions

Based on the interview conducted and observation, it was found out that users' suggestions were collected weekly from the boxes provided at the designated locations. They were then sorted, scrutinized and appropriate actions taken by the Library management. For instance, concerning the issue of reservation of seats, a general circular was issued, reminding all users of the existing regulations as contained in the Library Guide (2015) viz: "readers shall not reserve seats either for themselves or for others. The Library staff shall remove books and other materials from any seat left unoccupied, and then allocate the space to any other user". Consequently, the Library instructed all staff on duty in the reading areas to always ensure enforcement.

Likewise, on the second problem of noise making, the Library Guide (2015) also states that "noise making, playing, sleeping and other acts of disturbance are prohibited in the Library and its surrounding". To this end, the Library further instructed its staff in all the reading areas to ensure enforcement. In addition, notices such as "no noise", "silence", "no phone calls", and "no reservation of seats" were conspicuously pasted on the reading tables and other strategic locations in the Library.

It was found out that complains on ICT services, cooling/ventilation and lighting, as well as security system were generally caused by frequent power outage. As a result, a new 500 KVA generator dedicated to the Library was procured and installed. This is in addition to the solar PV system and inverter installed which guarantee uninterrupted power supply throughout the opening hours of the Library. Furthermore, the problem of toilet facilities was equally addressed squarely by constructing two separate block of toilets in the vicinity of the Library exclusively for male and female library users. However, the action taken by the Library on the issue of access to serials collection was less satisfactory (i.e. currency, adequacy and access) due mainly to paucity of funds. Similarly, no action was taken on the need for increased library hours as well as book borrowing because of the extant regulations of the Library on both the issues.

Impact of Suggestion Box on Communication and Public Relation Services in the Library

In order to determine the impact of suggestion box on communication and public relation services in the Library, a comparative analysis was made of the users' suggestions in 2015 and 2016 as presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Comparative Analysis of Users' Suggestions in 2015 - 2016

S/N	Suggestions	Complains and Suggestions		Lower	Higher
		2015	2016		
1	Reservation of seats	15(26%)	4(10%)	√	
2	Noise making in reading areas	11(19%)	6(16%)	√	
3	ICT services	7(12%)	4(10%)	√	

4	Appreciation/satisfaction and commendation	7(12%)	7(19%)		√
5	Access to serials collection	5(9%)	10(26%)		√
6	Conducive library environment	5(9%)	3(8%)	√	
7	Increase of library hours	3(5%)	1(3%)	√	
8	Inadequate lightning	2(3%)	2(5%)		√
9	Library security	2(3%)	1(3%)	√	
10	Book borrowing	1(2%)	0(0%)	√	
	Total	58(100%)	38(100%)		

From the data presented in Table 2 above, it is evident that users' suggestions/complains on reservation of seats, noise making in reading areas, ICT services, conducive library environment, increase in library opening hours and book borrowing drastically reduced in 2016 compared to the situation in 2015 when the suggestion box was introduced by the Library. This development may not be unconnected with the users' satisfaction with the positive responses and measures taken by the Library to address their complains in the year 2015.

In contrast, however, suggestions/complains on access to serials collection and inadequate lightning increased in 2016; indicating less satisfaction of users with the response or inaction of the Library on these two issues only. In spite of this problem, however, the users were generally satisfied with the responses/actions of the Library on most of the suggestions/complains they made from 2015-2016. This is evident from the higher percentage of appreciation/satisfaction and commendation (19%) recorded in 2016 than in 2015 (12%).

Overall, the above findings quite clearly proved the effectiveness of suggestion box for communication and promotion of public relation services in Usmanu Danfodiyo University Library. In fact, the findings of this study corroborate the notion of Didiugwu and Nworgu (2011) that suggestion box promotes client - customer relationship because it enlivens the strategic partnership between an organization and those who need its services.

Challenges Militating Against the Use of Suggestion Box

In identifying the challenges associated with the use of suggestion box in the Library, an unstructured interview was conducted with the University Librarian and his responses are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Challenges of Using Suggestion Box

S/N	Challenges
1	Identification of strategic, attractive and secured locations to avoid damage, removal or destruction of suggestion box by unscrupulous person(s)
2	Getting committed and trustworthy staff to coordinate the collection, sorting and analyzing users' suggestions and ensure confidentiality
3	Non participation of most library users, thereby having minority opinions about the services of the Library
4.	Some suggestions/complains are treated confidentially and not freely shared; they are only visible to the Library management and the staff concerned
5.	Delayed response or decision/implementation due to paucity of funds or procedures/bureaucratic bottlenecks at the University Management level
6.	Too many suggestions or duplications and time consuming to sort out and treat, resulting to selective or hasty response. All suggestions and complains need a feedback but sometimes a few complaints are treated while others do not receive any feedback. This discourages users' interests and halts further suggestions.

7.	Fake/wrong suggestions from users- not all complains and suggestions are meaningful or relevant to the Library while others are mere false accusations/allegations against the Library or staff.
8.	Poor attitude of staff - some Library staff have sinister feelings about suggestion box due to poor attitude to work, misconduct, inefficiency/incompetence, etc; they have the fear of being exposed by users.
9.	Failure to implement management decisions by supervisory heads or Library staff.
10.	Cost: Some users' suggestions require a long-term planning and adequate funding to implement

Conclusion

In line with its primary aim, the study has succeeded in determining the impact of suggestion box on communication and promotion of public relation services in Usmanu Danfodiyo University Library as well as the major challenges militating against its effective use. From the findings of the study, it is obvious that the suggestion box is indispensable in improving the efficiency of the library system, quality of services and users' satisfaction. It proved to be a veritable means of communication with the library management by all users notwithstanding their status or geographical distances in the University. Despite the fact that the study focused on the Usmanu Danfodiyo University Library, it is apparent that other Nigerian university libraries in general stand to benefit from the practical experience of this particular Library if they decide to introduce suggestion box in their respective institutions.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were made with a view to ensuring effective use of suggestion box for improved communication and promotion of public relation services in the Library.

1. The Library should continue to use the suggestion box, intensify publicity and awareness amongst all categories of users (staff and students) across the University.
2. In view of the fact that most of the suggestions/complains concerned violation of the rules and regulations of the Library, the Library should embark on a systematic, vigorous and sustained orientation programme so as to ensure effective use of the Library Guide by all users.
3. It is important for all Library staff (especially heads of units/divisions) to be well informed so as to ensure their maximum support and cooperation for the use of suggestions box.
4. Suggestions should be promptly collected, sorted and treated accordingly. Since some suggestions/complains of user financial implications, the Library should be adequately funded so as to ensure timely solution to such problems/issues.

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