Are publishers failing as a service industry?

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Publishers (from my experience) are comfortable being part of the knowledge economy and feel pivotal to the wide dissemination and reuse of scholarly content; however, the idea of being part of a service economy perhaps sits rather less comfortably and I suspect we are not (yet) very good at it. The past 20 years have seen a move away from producing physical objects and towards delivering information validation and access, but I am not sure that we have completely understood the ‘customer service’ aspects of what we are now expected to do.

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ResearchGate has become a ubiquitous part of the knowledge economy, and succeeds partly because (alongside a relatively simplistic offering) it takes great care to flatter the ego of the participants: ‘Pippa you have 1 more citation’ a recent e-mail told me (although I couldn’t find it when I hurried to the site to gloat). A few weeks before that it told me there was a job that matched my profile (sadly, it didn’t); and just before that it asked me if I could verify the identity of an author. It is all clever stuff; both flattering my ego by apparently believing I am able to answer other people’s questions (the Q&A section) and asking my advice (to verify author identities). It congratulates me when other people think my work worthy of citation (flattery, all is flattery), intrigues me by reporting when others answer questions I have already responded to (thus sucking me back to the site), plus it checks it has all my publications neatly listed (like a well behaved PA).

In his article, ResearchGate: Reputation uncovered, David Nicholas (2016) suggests that the site leads in researcher engagement (albeit in a sometimes irritatingly frequent manner), and that there are lessons for publishers to learn. The caricature of publishers as monolithic organizations sucking the research lifeblood out of unsuspecting authors and packaging it for their own commercial gain without rewarding them is wrong in so many ways, and yet is often the default position for those looking to unbundle knowledge dissemination and commercial publishing. Perhaps publishers have left themselves open to accusations because of lack of attention to customer service – and I say this advisedly. Authors are mentioned numerous times in the list of ‘96 things publishers do’ on the Scholarly Kitchen blog (Anderson, 2016) – 52 times in case you are interested – but Anderson starts by saying ‘authors only experience a small part of the journal publishing process’ – which is rather my point. We, as publishers, provide a wealth of activities and services, and they are mostly welcome, but they service the needs of the researcher-authors rather than their desires. And good customer services should respond to these desires (preferably before the recipient is aware of them).

This is evident in other areas of life. When I take my car to be serviced what makes me really happy is when they clean it. I don’t really care about the hundreds of things they do during the service because that is what I pay them to do, and I expect them to get it right. However, cleaning my car is an unexpected bonus: it gives me a warm glow and it makes me go back again. I’m not undermining the skill of the mechanics or the fact that they managed to keep my car going, and I am grateful to them for this – but it is the added (often unexpected – and usually ‘free’) extras that delight me. Conversely, when I go to the doctor, as much as I am in awe of his skills and knowledge I still find the experience frustrating (sitting in that room with all those sick people, having to wait, nasty plastic chairs, difficult parking …).

Having said this, I know publishers have paid great attention to managing the ‘pain points’ in libraries, and library workshops are a regular feature of publisher outreach. Watching the airwaves, I am seeing fewer complaints about platform problems which is a good thing, but there are still problems and complaints aired on these platforms that reveal a sector of the ‘customers’ that remain unhappy with the ‘providers’ – although how many out of the total is hard to gauge.

However, authors are harder to evaluate, since dealings with them are largely left to editorial offices and these are often outside the direct control of the publisher. And unlike librarians, there is no cohesive group to be monitored and responded to. From my own perspective I feel that whilst online systems (ScholarOne, Aries, BenchPress, etc.) have been invaluable in managing the peer review system more efficiently, they have also been detrimental in other respects. Their efficiency allows editors to ignore authors as people and to use standard e-mails rather than to respond directly. Here I
speak as both an author and an editor: as an author/reviewer I have been frequently annoyed by badly written and obviously standard e-mails. (If you are asking me to do you a favour by reviewing, am I not worth the time to write a personal invitation?) As an editor I have often used the standard response provided by the editorial system without considering whether it shows the author or reviewer that I have seriously thought about what I want to say to them. Personalizing the reviewer invitation (and the chasing e-mails) has dramatically changed Learned Publishing’s response success and more than one reviewer has told me that they respond more quickly to our personalized e-mails than to the standard automated ones.

Of course author relationships don’t end with article acceptance – in fact in many ways what happens later may be more important in terms of customer service (and customer retention). In her article, Broader outreach: Fad or future? Vicky Williams (2016) states that promotion is becoming a more important feature of the scholarly cycle and that there is a ‘need to shift the mindset and the services offered to researchers when promotion needs to become a more integral part of the scholarly research cycle’ [my emphasis]. She comments on the growing pressures for ‘wider impact’ of research but argues that researchers are ill-equipped to do this. So where can – and do – publishers help with this? Of course there are some services offered, for example Springer Nature now allows authors to share view-only versions of their articles via ReadCube, and independent of publishers there is Kudos helping authors to create lay summaries and promote their articles (https://www.growkudos.com).

But have we got the mix right? Compared to the social networking sites are our publishing offerings too much ‘push’ (asking authors to do the work) and not enough ‘pull’ (ego-flattering incitements)? Do we both provide valuable customer service and make authors aware of where we are helping them?

A comment made on the LibLicense-L ListServ about a year ago said that nobody buys ScienceDirect for the content, you buy it for the services, and (although ‘Content is King’ according to Bill Gates, 1996) this is where many of the commercial publishers have traditionally focussed their efforts. Interestingly, however, Anderson’s blog only mentions libraries three times. But in the mix I am not sure that we have won the hearts of authors. It is interesting to see the developments of some publishers to extend their reach into other researcher activities, such as Elsevier’s recent acquisition of SSRN (and Mendeley) and the development of preprint repositories underpinning journals (such as PeerJ), but this extends reach – it doesn’t necessarily provide a desirable service. Looking at the ResearchGate ‘community’ (or at least those that use the service), I wonder if publishers are missing a potential opportunity. Publishers already have a platform with content, amazing linking technologies, user details and access to users that would enable them to overlay social services on top of the traditional publications – providing something that may not be needed, but which might be desirable.

We depend on authors using publisher services because they have to: academia (currently) really only rewards such publications. But would they still use our services if there was no need? Many years ago I argued that within sub-Saharan Africa larger repository-type platforms were more suitable for their research than the smaller (often print based) and struggling local journals (Smart, 2007). However my ideas were somewhat fatuous since the reward system meant that this would not fit with the needs of researchers. But a change in the reward system could cause a dramatic shift in author behaviour – away from formal journal publications and towards more customer-led service providers. These could be repositories, but (according to Björk, 2016) are more likely to be the newer social media companies – those that offer easier systems and more instant (and repeated) gratification.

Although researcher needs will probably not change in the near future, there are increasing numbers of competing providers engaging with researchers in a way that traditional publishers do not. If we want to change attitudes, build longer-term loyalties apart from the reward system and future-proof our business, we have to make the authors truly appreciate us, and I don’t think they all do at the moment.

REFERENCES


