



Evidence Summary

Relationships Between Librarians and Faculty Still Need Further Investigation

A Review of:

Phelps, S. F., & Campbell, N. (2012). Commitment and trust in librarian-faculty relationships: A systematic review of the literature. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 38(1), 13-19.
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Objective – To examine how the Key Mediating Variable (KMV) model of Morgan and Hunt’s Commitment-Trust Theory of Relationship Marketing can be used to look at the relationships between librarians and faculty as reported in the literature. Relationship marketing stresses customer retention and long-term customer relationships, rather than focusing on the product.

To also identify: 1) the methods reported in the literature to evaluate relationships between librarians and faculty; 2) the elements reported in the literature that lead to commitment and trust in librarian-faculty relationships; and 3) the elements reported in the literature that prevent commitment and trust in librarian-faculty relationships.

Design – A systematic review.

Setting – A university in the United States.

Subjects – 304 journal articles on librarian-faculty relationships were read and analyzed for variables included in the KMV model of relationship marketing.

Methods – The authors searched 20 databases to find publications in various disciplines. Their search strategy included, but was not limited, to the following keywords: faculty, librarian*, relationships, library users, information professionals, liaisons, academic, university, college*, collaboration, and perceptions. They initially selected 389 references based on the occurrence of search terms in the title or abstract, as well as the

presence of related subject headings. The authors then read the abstracts and included/excluded references based on the following criteria:

Inclusion criteria: Academic libraries or special libraries. English language, any instance of collaboration or cooperation, subject term or mention of relationship, the words trust or commitment or antecedents or outcomes from the model included in the abstract. Exclusion criteria: blogs, books, emails, or any article that could not meet the subject inclusion criteria (p. 14).

Additional articles were identified by scanning the bibliographies of the articles selected at the abstract stage, searching the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) and Google Scholar, as well as conducting a cited reference search in Web of Science and Google Scholar.

Among the 304 journal articles that the authors selected, read and analyzed, only 13 of these satisfied the last inclusion criteria of the systematic review in that they contained “a high presence of the KMV model’s antecedents and outcomes” (p. 15). Many articles concentrated on a service or project that librarians worked on with faculty and did not discuss the librarian-faculty relationship.

Main Results – 77 out of the 304 analyzed articles discussed research methodologies. The methods used in these articles to evaluate relationships between librarians and faculty were: surveys (53%); literature reviews (26%); interviews (18%); and focus groups (5%). The 13 articles containing variables from the KMV model indicated the following positive antecedents as leading to commitment and trust in librarian-faculty relationships: communication (7/13 articles); shared values (7/13 articles); and relationship benefits (7/13 articles). The negative antecedent that hindered commitment and trust in librarian-faculty relationships was reported as opportunistic behavior in 4 articles (e.g., librarians seen as having an ulterior motive when they market their services to faculty).

Cooperation (12/13 articles); functional conflict (2/13 articles); and uncertainty, i.e., faculty uncertain about the teaching ability of librarians (2/13 articles), were found to be the outcomes of relationships between librarians and faculty.

Conclusion – The authors found that “a focus on communication, shared values and benefits of the relationship would build stronger ties and foster commitment and trust with teaching faculty” (p. 17). Whereas the literature shows that collaborations between librarians and faculty are important to librarians’ work, very few studies have actually examined the librarian-faculty relationship. Future studies should explore in-depth the basics of relationship building between librarians and faculty.

Commentary

This study is unique in that it combined the KMV model of relationship marketing and the research methodology of systematic reviews to answer questions about librarian-faculty relationships. The authors described relationship marketing and summarize literature that deems it appropriate for use in libraries. They used the KMV model to look at the relationships between librarians and faculty since it provided a previously tested framework for their investigation.

Questions from Lindsay Glynn’s EBLIP Critical Appraisal Checklist (2006) were used to help determine the strengths and weaknesses of this study. The strengths of this study lie in its systematic review of the published literature to identify studies about librarian-faculty relationships, and the authors’ analysis of their combined use of the systematic review process and KMV model to answer their research questions.

A weakness of this study is the brief description of the search strategy used for the systematic review. The authors provide some of the terms they used in their search strategy, but they do not provide their complete strategy and indicate how the search terms

were combined. This makes it difficult to duplicate the search, thus contradicting the authors' statement that "systematic reviews ... use a replicable search strategy" (p. 14). Another weakness of the study, which the authors mention, is their combined use of the systematic review process and KMV model. Journal articles identified from the literature search were coded using variables from the KMV model, thereby excluding from the authors' analysis the elements from librarian-faculty relationships that did not fit into this model. The published literature also does not contain all antecedents and outcomes of librarian-faculty relationships, since some of these "are expected social norms of academia and therefore not always written about explicitly" (p. 17).

Notwithstanding its weaknesses, this study describes characteristics that librarians can

adopt in their relationships, such as communicating regularly with faculty and concentrating on common values rather than on marketing library services, if they wish to establish new relations or strengthen existing ones with faculty. It also provides a lesson to librarians considering the use of a theoretical model to analyze data from a systematic review, i.e., refrain from using only a pre-existing model for data analysis since it can potentially exclude findings that do not fit into the model, thereby biasing the conclusions of the systematic review.

References

- Glynn, L. (2006). A critical appraisal tool for library and information research. *Library Hi Tech*, 24(3), 387-399. doi:10.1108/07378830610692154