

Chapter 9

Informing Users and Understanding Their Needs

We have already discussed in Chapter 5 the importance of seeking clarity as to what the user really wants when library staff are receiving and responding to enquiries from individual parliamentarians. This chapter looks more broadly at the business of understanding user needs and of user education: in short, how to market library services. When the first edition of this book was published the concept of marketing in relation to parliamentary libraries would have seemed an alien one – and it probably still is to some who would be uncomfortable with the importing of concepts from the world of business and commerce into the very different world of parliamentary libraries. However, at the root of the concept of marketing are:

- The understanding of the needs of customers
- Ensuring the products available meet those needs
- Ensuring customers understand what products are available and how they gain access to them – often called ‘user education’ in this context.

Parliamentarians (and other users of parliamentary libraries such as staff working for parliamentarians) form a very specialist customer base with particular information needs, as was discussed in Chapter 2. They also have many sources of information available to them other than the parliamentary library, hence the need for the library to be clear about its role and about how to explain what it does. Failure to understand user needs and to explain them properly risks the library being sidelined: users who do not feel the library meets its needs or who do not know what can be provided for them and how are likely to go elsewhere. It is important that the library systematically seeks feedback on whether the services provided are giving the users what they want.

Although the processes of understanding needs, developing products to meet those needs and user education are conceptually separate, in terms

of practical development and implementation they will often overlap. For example, if a library has a programme of interviews with its users, then it can be used both to understand the needs of a particular parliamentarian and to educate him or her in how to get the best of the services available. So although they are described separately here, those responsible for putting them into practice need to be prepared to act flexibly and both seek information from, and provide information to, parliamentarians whenever the opportunity permits.

Understanding user needs

To understand the needs of parliamentarians it is important to understand what their lives are like. Although this will vary from country to country it is striking how international discussions point up the similarities. They are time pressured, often working in multiple roles which may conflict with one another. For example, they may have roles in their constituency, in committees, in the chamber of the parliament or in their political party. They may be called on to make speeches, appear on radio or television or write articles. They will often work to short deadlines dealing only with the most immediate priorities; and those priorities may constantly change. They will often work through intermediaries and will frequently be in the public spotlight. They are also time poor and overwhelmed by information. They may prefer to function mainly orally, while librarians and researchers may be more used to providing written advice. But they are also all individuals, with different needs for information and different capacities for absorbing it. Their needs will also be different in different contexts. For example, on a topic on which they have expertise they may well require detailed and complex information. On other topics they may wish to be able to appear well informed but will only be looking for a quick overview of a topic which can readily be absorbed.

In the context of this world where parliamentarians lead complex and busy lives how should legislative libraries set about understanding those needs? There can be no hard and fast rules. The differing needs of parliamentarians in different contexts and their differing preferences for receiving and absorbing information mean that such rules are not practical.

It also means that it is a job that will never be completed. There is a need for a pragmatic and opportunistic approach and a recognition that there is no single method for understanding needs. However, these are some possible approaches:

- *Learning how parliamentarians work.* If staff of the legislative library do not understand how parliamentarians function and what are the pressures on them in their job, then it will be hard to design an information service which will meet their needs. This means an understanding above and beyond the text book descriptions of the role of the legislature in the country concerned: it means understanding how they set about their jobs on a day to day basis.
- *User surveys.* Many parliaments survey their users on a periodic basis. Such surveys can provide useful information about what works well and what is not working so well. However, parliamentarians may suffer from ‘survey fatigue’ and response rates may not be as high as would be wished. It is difficult to get in depth responses in reply to a survey: overall ratings for parliamentary libraries are typically high. Ideally surveys should be carried out by independent surveyors. This should ensure that the survey is properly constructed and that it is analysed without bias. Funding may not permit this approach: at the very least any survey should be carefully drawn up then tested on a small number of people to ensure that the questions are clear and the responses likely to be useful.
- *Interviews with parliamentarians.* Well structured interviews may dig beneath the rather superficial information that surveys are likely to produce. They may be linked to surveys, as a means of following up results that seem to need further investigation. They may be the result of a programme of interviews with new members, or a way of following up responses to enquiries. It may be a good idea to seek interviews with parliamentarians who seldom or never use the library in an attempt to discover why not and what the library would need to do in order to encourage them to use the services. Such interviews may be carried out as part of a contact officer scheme or as part of focus group type meetings.

- *Contact officer schemes.* A number of parliaments run schemes under which members of staff act as contact points for parliamentarians and their staff. They can operate in a variety of ways but the general principle is that a member of staff will act as a contact point for a number of parliamentarians, particularly newly elected ones who they will endeavour to spend time with in order to explain the services available and determine their information needs. Further on in the process they will seek feedback on the services and generally be available if there are queries, comments or feedback about the services.
- *Encouraging feedback.* The library needs to have a culture of encouraging feedback from parliamentarians and other authorised users and of taking every opportunity to get this, from the formal (such as the suggestions given above) to the informal – making use of chance meetings or other discussions with users to better understand their needs.
- *Showing that you have listened.* It is good practice to tell your users how you have handled their feedback and to encourage users to feel that their comments are valued. This can be done on an individual basis or by way of a newsletter or similar.
- *Be visible.* This is especially important if the library or research service are not located near the chamber or other parts of parliament frequented by parliamentarians. Establishing some sort of presence near the chamber may help in these circumstances.

Ensuring products meet the needs of users

An effective programme of understanding user needs is clearly the starting point for ensuring that products meet those needs. Chapter 5 discussed the ways of making products and services available and clearly availability is a key factor in ensuring that needs are met. There is no point in having excellent products if users do not know how to access them or choose not to access them. The other key factors are content and format. Again, there is no point in having a product which includes all

the necessary information if it is presented in a format which users do not find helpful. Experience suggests that, generally, busy parliamentarians are looking for information that is simply and concisely presented, perhaps provided orally, and adapting to this need can sometimes present a challenge to staff of parliamentary libraries, especially if they come from an academic background. But there will be other parliamentarians who have an expertise on a particular subject who will expect to find depth in the responses they get from the library. As part of the general process of understanding user needs responses can be sought on specific products. Paper or email products can include feedback forms (although response is likely to be low). Responses to individual enquiries can be followed up by telephone calls or interviews in order to find out how useful they were. As part of the general culture of encouraging feedback any opportunity can be taken which will give more information on how useful parliamentarians have found particular products.

User education

User education – the process of informing users about the services available to them and how best to make use of those services was at one time a rather neglected subject – it was not really discussed in the first edition of these Guidelines. It is now, however, a topic of considerable interest, as evidenced by regular discussions at international meetings of parliamentary librarians. (For example, a workshop on the subject at the Seoul IFLA conference in 2006 reported in the IFLA Section on Library and Research Services for Parliaments Newsletter for January 2007)¹⁵ This change can be seen to be the result of the explosion in the availability of information, meaning that legislative libraries need to work hard to make it clear to their users the unique contribution that they are in a position to make. It is also the result of the realisation in some parliaments that making services available does not, however good they are, mean that parliamentarians will use them. It is often observed that even in busy parliamentary libraries there are likely to be a substantial number of potential users who do not, in practice, take up the services on offer, or only do so infrequently. This may be because they have other sources of information

¹⁵ <http://archive.ifla.org/VII/s3/news/s3-newsletter-Jan07.pdf>

and do not feel the need of the services provided. But experience suggests that in many cases it is the result of ignorance of what is available.

As with understanding user needs, there is no single way of getting information across about the services available. An opportunistic approach which takes every opportunity is likely to be needed. Some of the approaches which may be useful are:

- *Producing a guide or leaflet about the library's services.* This can explain what is available and how to access it. It is also desirable to set out the boundaries for the service, that is, services that will not be provided. (See chapter 5). Such leaflets are likely to be available both in paper form and on the parliamentary intranet. In addition, a DVD or video can be produced demonstrating what is on offer.
- *Induction programmes for new parliamentarians.* Many parliaments run induction programmes for newly elected parliamentarians following an election and the library services can be explained as part of this. If there is no such programme then the library may be able to provide its own.
- *Tours of the library,* explaining the facilities available, showing how to access services. The challenge can be to get parliamentarians to come to the library in the first place.
- *Presentations.* These can be to interested parliamentarians generally, or to party caucuses.
- *Contact officers.* These have been discussed under user needs. They have a particular role in relation to explaining the services to new parliamentarians, but also updating existing ones on developments in the services
- *Newsletters, bulletins etc.* These (paper, electronic or both) can explain new products or other changes to the service
- *The opportunistic approach.* As with seeking feedback, it is desirable that library staff are encouraged to take any opportunity when

they are in contact with parliamentarians or their staff to explain what the library can do for them.

The marketing process is not a once and for all one, but should be seen as something continuous, ensuring that the services meet the needs of users and that users understand what the library can do for them.

