

Business Information: five key findings of a survey

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Abstract:

This paper reports five key findings from a survey comparing the use of internal and external information services by business persons in the City of Brisbane. The *Business Information: an investigation of its sources and use* survey was undertaken on behalf of Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Library's *Expert Information Service*. The Survey aimed to determine where and how business information is currently sourced; how often and why information is sought from any particular source; and problems people have in finding business information. The main findings of this survey are that (1) Medium Small Businesses are highly interested in commercial information services; (2) Internal Information Services are heavily used to source business information needs and they rate higher than external information services for Computer Training, Competitor Analysis and Consultancy Services; (3) External Information Service units rate much higher than internal information services for their ability to provide information searching and Patents & Standards access; (4) the majority of respondents have never used a library based Fee-Based Information Service (FBIS); and (5) the Internet is currently the most relied upon electronic form of information resource. Overall FBIS units should aim to understand the commercial paradigm, providing accurate, timely and up-to-date information for their clients in the most convenient and specific manner possible.

Introduction

This paper reports five key findings from a survey comparing the use of internal and external information services by business persons in the City of Brisbane. The survey was conducted as part of a research program for Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Library's commercial information service, *Expert Information Service*. The aim was to determine where and how business information is currently sourced; how often and why information is sought from any particular source; and any problems people have in sourcing business information.

Previous surveys have produced varying results that detail business use of information services or libraries. One consistent finding seems to be a general lack of business interest in libraries. Johnson & Kuehn (1987) found that small business owners primarily use verbal sources of business information. Harper (1986) surveyed business persons and farmers in the Illinois region and found that most relied on their own personal libraries or asked their peers for verbal information while using few other resources. In general libraries ranked well below other possible sources of business information. Harper believed that in the majority of cases there was a general lack of awareness of the types of information resources available in libraries. Major (1990) found that directors of Small Business Development Centers in Mississippi tended to develop resources independent of libraries. The Directors did use libraries but they did not consider them to be a primary information resource.

Two Australian and New Zealand studies, Chalmers (1995) and Maguire & Kench (1974) report similar findings. Maguire & Kench's study of over 900 small manufacturers found that verbal sources were the most common means of sourcing business information needs. Chalmers more recent study details research undertaken at the National Library of New Zealand which found that in the majority of cases managers did not systematically seek information. Managers tended to use primary personal sources of information and in general had a low level of awareness of their own information needs and how these needs could be met through the use of information services.

Maguire & Kench also found that small business manufacturers appeared to be relatively unaware of their dependence on information from the external environment. As businesses increased in size they received via mail increasing quantities of printed information from external sources. This in turn appeared to lead to a greater use by the larger manufacturers of printed sources of information.

Stewart (1994) states that "*Queensland is the small business capital of Australia*". Queensland enjoyed a 44% increase in the rate of employment in the small business sector between 1983 and 1993. Small business is defined in this sense as non-manufacturing companies employing less than 20 employees or manufacturing companies employing less than 100 employees.

Background to the Study: The Expert Information Service

Historically the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) Library has had a strong commitment to community services in particular to the business sector, developing programs to accommodate needs and expectations of non-QUT users. In addition to its range of non-commercial activities such as library tours and instruction for community groups, reciprocal memberships, interlibrary lending and professional contribution, the Library has provided individual and corporate associate memberships, ABN training, database production and a document delivery/reference service provided as a commercial information service which is titled: *Expert Information Services*.

Expert Information was established as a result of Rickards, Best and Linn's (1989) survey of engineering companies. It operated as a part of QUT Library's Gardens Point Reference Services, coordinated by a reference librarian who assigned searches to relevant librarians as needed. After an initial launch campaign and mailout, the service wasn't actively marketed. However, it was recommended by staff in appropriate situations and its reputation did spread through word of mouth. It is currently operated in a similar "on demand" fashion, with a Community Services Librarian coordinating client contact and searching.

In recent years, two factors have caused the Library to recognise the need to use existing resources and staff skills for the strategic advantage of income generation.

Firstly, universities in the last few years have been influenced by reduced public sector spending in the tertiary education sector. Most universities have accepted that the funding stagnation and cuts are not the results of temporary downshifts in the economy but, in fact, signal a permanent shift in the priority of government expenditure. Concurrently, the cost of technological infrastructure continues to increase even as it underpins future developments in teaching and learning. This dilemma is faced by the organization as a whole. No unit or division can avoid contributing to addressing these funding shortfalls, or hope to avoid them.

Secondly, as students bear more cost for their education and have more choice in where they will study, establishing a unique institutional profile becomes increasingly important. The university library, as one of the most visible of the non-academic units in the university, can contribute significantly to the overall impression the community has of the organization. Consequently, a proactive and prominent profile within the university, and the professional and business community also enhances the image and profile of the parent organization. QUT as a new university in a competitive environment is conscious of developing a unique profile in the tertiary education sector, and the Library management recognises the need to support this.

In the light of these factors, and the existing *Expert Information Services* ability to generate income, QUT Library decided to reassess the service. Before deciding to relaunch and market a reference service in the current information climate, the Library needed to update its knowledge of local target markets and niche products. QUT Library sponsored the *Business Information* survey project in order to gather market research information as a basis for decision making regarding its commercial and community activities.

Given the spread of Internet technology, the Library was particularly interested in determining how far small businesses had integrated the use of these technologies into their business environment. It was hoped that information provided by this study would assist the QUT Library in the relaunching and marketing process.

Method

The survey instrument, which was named “*Business Information: an investigation of its sources and use*”, had four aims:

1. to identify the service areas of Fee-Based Information Service (FBIS) units that should be targeted for marketing strategies.
2. to identify the sources of information currently accessed to make business decisions.
3. to identify what awareness business people have of commercial information services (eg: FBIS, independent Information Brokers, Consultants)
4. to establish if business people are currently using commercial information services.

Dillman’s (1978) Total Design Method (TDM) was used to construct a questionnaire survey. Dillman states:

Essentially, getting a good response rate [to a mailed survey] boils down to making respondents feel as though they are doing something worthwhile that also happens to be enjoyable, and making sure respondents know that you appreciate the effort they made.

Dillman is widely accepted as providing a comprehensive set of practices to increase response rates in mailed surveys. Dillman suggests the survey instrument should be printed in booklet form, be approximately the size of an examination booklet, and that it should contain no more than 10 interior pages. Further, the front cover should be interesting to capture the respondents attention, include sponsor details to convey legitimacy and some general instructions with one or more graphic illustrations to make it attractive. Dillman believes that the structure of the questions will affect the response rate significantly. Response rates hinge on ensuring that the first few questions are easy to complete, are not open questions, and that they are neutral and applicable to all members of the target group. The remainder of the questions should then be arranged with items of similar content grouped together, providing transitions from one section to another, and any sensitive items arranged towards the end of the section.

Business Information: an investigation of its sources and use Survey

The final survey instrument, which was designed following Dillman’s TDM, had 28 questions. (Prior to the final survey a pre-pilot test and a pilot survey were conducted.) Qualitative questions employed the use of scales varying from 3 to 7 ranking’s. Most commonly used was a 5 point scale where the smaller numbers indicate a positive meaning and the larger numbers a negative meaning.

Included in the survey instrument were broad sections aiming to determine where business information is found, how it is found, how often from any particular source, why that source is used and any problems business people have in finding business information. Summary key findings only will be reported here, as full detailed findings of this research are available elsewhere (Edwards, in progress).

Expected Response Rates

Various sources quote a range of response rates for a mailed surveys: Dooley (1995) and Nederhof (1985) state that mailed survey response rates average around the 20 to 30% mark; and Alreck & Settle (1995) state that 5 to 10% is considered satisfactory and over 30% fairly rare. It was therefore expected that this survey would have a response rate of around the 25% mark, and the actual response rate found was 28%.

Participants in the Study

Since Queensland is the Small Business capital of Australia, it was decided that the target group would include managers of small businesses, legal professionals, architects and engineers. The selection of small business, law, built environment (architecture), and engineering also correlated with the main subject strengths of the QUT Library. As the QUT Library is located in the CBD of Brisbane, it was decided to survey business within 10kms of the CBD.

A mailing list of approx. 1200 companies, supplied by *Direct Marketing*, formed a database from which a random sample of small business managers, lawyers, architects and engineers, were selected. The final mailing list was restricted to 310 to keep the cost of survey instrument production and mailing within the budget allocated by QUT Library. It included 70 architect firms, 70 Barristers/Solicitors; 70 Engineers and 100 small business firm managers (with 1 to 20 employees only). The 100 small business firms were separated into three groups to identify any differences between small businesses of varying numbers of employees. Small businesses were therefore broken down into: Small Small Business (SSB) with 1-6 employees; Medium Small Business (MSB) with 7-11 employees and finally Large Small Business (LSB) with 12-20 employees.

Summary of Main Findings

The main findings of the survey are listed below corresponding to each of the original aims.

Aim 1: Identify the service areas of Fee-Based Information Service (FBIS) units that should be targeted for marketing strategies are Medium Small Businesses.

- Medium Small Businesses are more interested in the topic overall and are therefore more likely to be interested in commercial information services than the other groups.

Aim 2: Identify the sources of information currently accessed to make business decisions are Internal Information Services and Professional Associations.

- Internal Information Services are heavily used to source business information needs.
- Professional Associations are more heavily used than any other external information service.

Aims 3 & 4: Identify business peoples awareness and use of commercial information services (eg: FBIS, independent Information Brokers, Consultants) fall into a few sub-categories:

- External Information Service units rate much higher than internal information services for their ability to provide information searching and Patents & Standards access than Internal Information Service units.
- Internal Information Service units rate higher than external information services for Computer Training, Competitor Analysis and Consultancy Services.
- FBIS units should aim to understand the commercial paradigm, providing accurate, timely and up-to-date information for their clients in the most convenient and specific manner possible.
- 90% of respondents have never used a library based Fee-Based Information Service.

One further finding of interest was that the Internet is currently the most relied upon electronic form of information resource used but its use is not expected to increase. Online Database Services and CD-Roms as sources of information are both expected to have increased usage in the future.

Response Rates differed significantly between participant groups

In particular MSB, small businesses with between 7 and 11 employees, would appear to be highly interested in the topic of the survey judging from their response rates.

One of the major findings of this survey has been the difference in response rates between sub-groups of the overall sample (see table below). While the overall response rate was 28%, the individual response rates in the sub-group categories vary from 19% for Engineers to 63% for Medium Small Business (MSB). Gillpatrick, Harmon & Tseng (1994) have already suggested that engineers in general have extremely low response rates which can only be increased by a nominal monetary gift or other reward system. As no reward system was included in the survey the final response rate for engineers in this survey was not unexpected. Given an expected 25% response rate overall, two of the sub-groups response rates are notable. MSB and Large Small Business (LSB) each gave above average rates. Table 1 shows the return rates for all sub-groups.

This indicates that MSB's are highly interested in the topic of business information and are therefore a primary potential market for FBIS. LSB's are also a potential market.

Table 1: Response Rates for Business Information Survey November 1996

Group	No. Mailed	No. Returned Not Opened	Final No. in Sample Group	No. Returns	No. Useable	Return Rate
Architect	70	3	67	18	16	27%
Engineers	70	5	65	12	12	19%
Lawyers	70	3	67	15	15	22%
Small Small Business (SSB) 1-6 employees	47	8	39	9	9	23%
Medium Small Business (MSB) 7-11 Employees	31	4	27	17	17	63%
Large Small Business (LSB) 12-20 employees	22	Nil	22	8	8	36%
TOTAL	310	23	287	79	77	28%

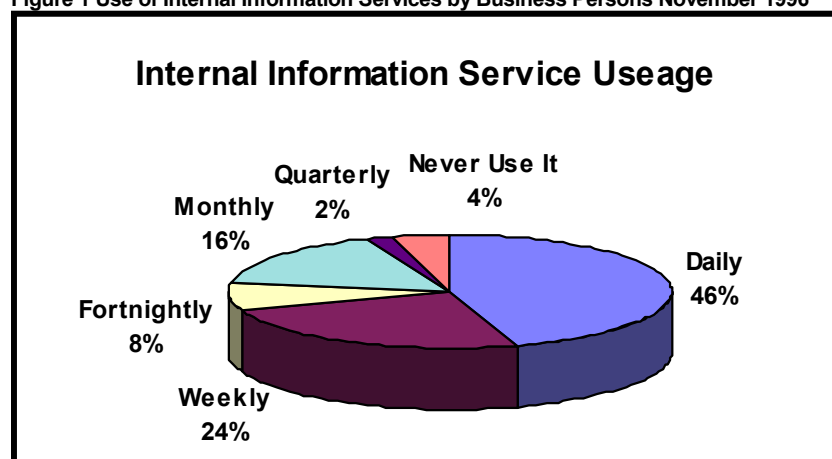
Use of Internal Information Services

Internal Information Services are heavily used to source business information needs with 70% of respondents stating they would use their internal information service at least weekly.

This survey found that 65% of respondents had a library or some form of Internal Information Service, a result similar to that of Rickards, Linn & Best (1989, p.65). However, while that study sought to determine the size and management of these libraries, this survey concentrated on the current usage patterns of any form of Internal Information Service. That is, do they have some separate section in their organisation that provides information for them; whether or not it is called a library was not important.

Figure 1 shows the frequency of use for Internal Information Service units. A surprising 70% of respondents stated that they would use their internal information service at least once per week to source business information needs.

Figure 1 Use of Internal Information Services by Business Persons November 1996



Use of External Information Services

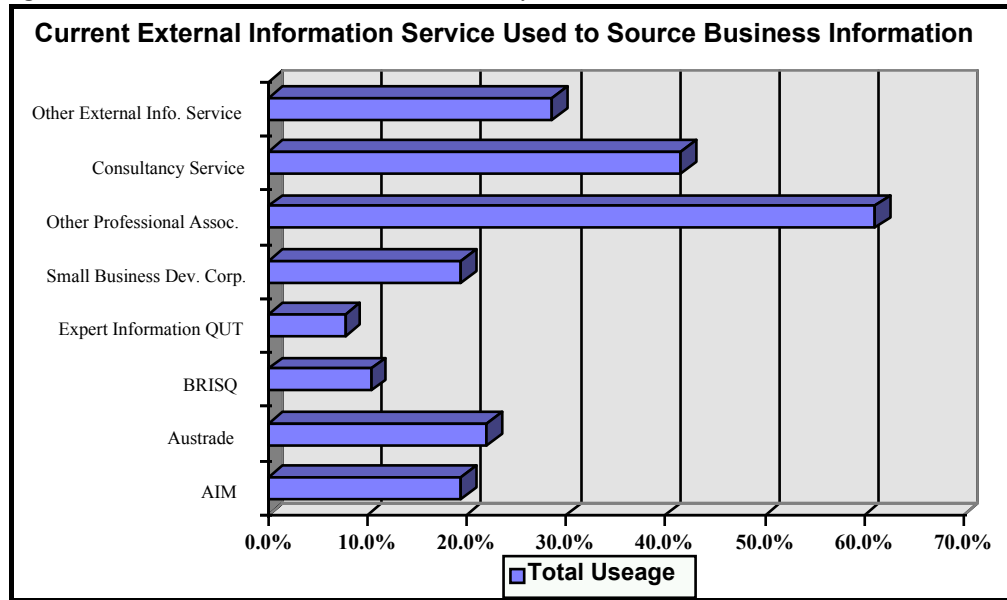
Professional Associations are more heavily used than any other external information service. Also, FBIS units are rarely used to source business information needs.

Respondents were asked whether or not they used any form of external information and to specify how frequently they use these services. They were given a choice of commercial services to choose from, including Australian Institute of Management, AUSTRADE, Small Business Development Corporation, other Professional Associations, Consultancy services, State Library of Queensland's BRISQ (Business Research & Information Service Queensland), QUT's *Expert Information Service*, or Other. Figure 2 shows the forms of external information service units used to source business

information needs. 70% of respondents use Professional associations, private Consultancy services and other types of External Information Services (eg: SPECIDATA, Law Libraries, Cd-Roms, Internet).

It is also clear that FBIS units like State Library of Queensland's BRISQ and QUT's *Expert Information Service* are not used extensively for business information needs. Approximately 10% of respondents claim to use FBIS units, inversely approximately 90% would never use a library based FBIS unit to source business information.

Figure 2 Current Use of External Information Services by Business Persons November 1996



Comparison of information provided by Internal Vs External Information Services

It is clear that External Information Service units rate much higher for their ability to provide information searching and Patents & Standards access than Internal Information Service units; whereas Internal Information Service units rate higher for Computer Training, Competitor Analysis and Consultancy Services. It would appear that most respondents have a decided preference to use their own Internal Information Service unit for computer training.

Having established what services are currently used to source business information needs, the survey then attempted to determine what individual items are sourced in each of the two types of services. That is, was there a difference in the type of information considered useful provided by Internal and External Information Services?

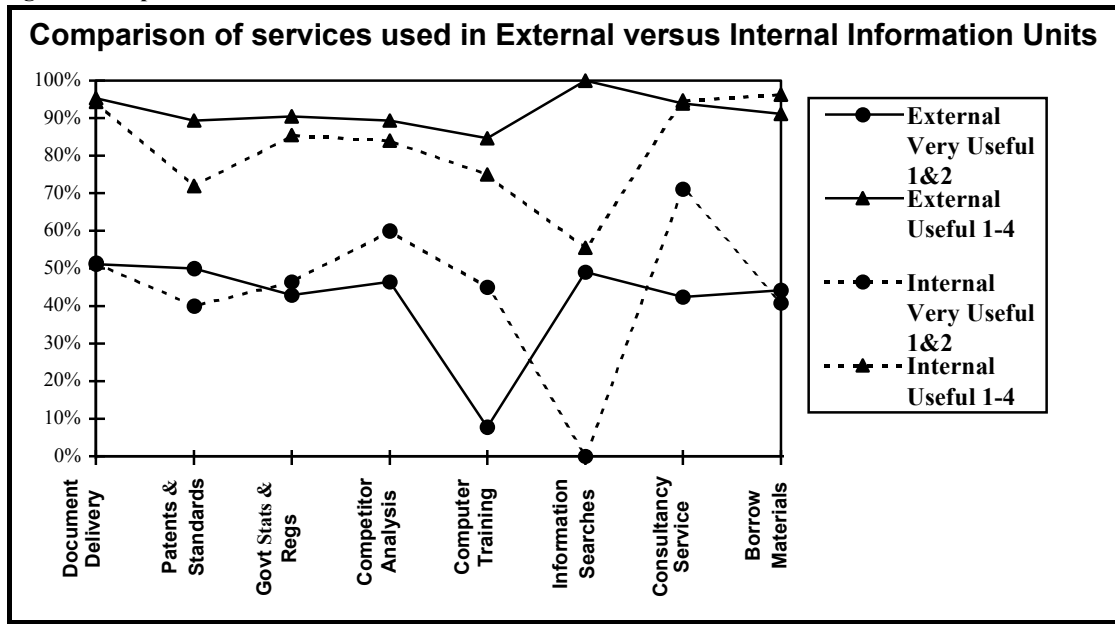
Respondents were asked to score the services that they used in either Internal or External Information service units on a scale of 1-5; where 1 was Very Useful and 5 was Useless. The services considered were Document Delivery of journal articles, Patents Standards or Specifications, Government Statistics or Regulations, Market Survey Reports/Sales Data, Competitor Analysis, Computer Training Courses, Information Searches (eg: databases, etc.), Consultancy Services, Borrow Materials (books), or Other.

Figure 3 shows the collated results from the comparisons of services used at each of the Internal and External Information Service units. The top two lines show the combination of any information provided which scored from Very Useful 1 to almost Useless 4, whereas the bottom two lines show only the services considered Very Useful from 1 to 2.

It is clearly evident from this figure that External Information Services are considered far superior to source information searching than Internal Information services. The other item usually preferred to be sourced externally would appear to be access to Patents and Standards.

It is also clearly evident that most business persons would prefer to use their own Internal Information Service for computer training.

Figure 3 Comparison of what services are used in Internal Vs external information Services



Strengths and weaknesses of External Information Service units

Several strengths and weaknesses were identified from open-ended comments made in the survey.

Respondents fell broadly into similar lines in this area and are obviously commenting from personal experiences of a specific external information service. In this manner what was considered a strength in a particular information service by one respondent was correspondingly reported as a weakness in a different service by another respondent. For example: one respondent stated that external service units have a great ability to keep abreast of new trends, and another respondent stated that they are not up-to-date and never current.

Despite respondents answers to these question being coloured by their own experience of an existing service and therefore are highly subjective, they are nevertheless also highly useful in establishing some patterns of the strengths a FBIS should aim to improve upon. In general the comments on the strengths and weakness of existing FBIS and other external Information Service units can be shown by the following examples from respondents:

Strengths of External Information Services are their:

- ability to find data or keep abreast of trends. This is difficult. They help.
- accuracy.
- convenience.
- understanding of my business .

Weaknesses of External Information Services are they:

- are too general and therefore non-specific to my needs.
- have limited access to international materials (specifically law area)
- need more convenient locations.
- mostly bureaucratic and they do not have a sense of urgency nor understand the commercial paradigm.
- have no access to competitor publications.
- are not up to date and are never current.
- lack accuracy.
- lack any in-depth analysis ability.

Given these strengths and weaknesses a FBIS unit should aim to understand the commercial paradigm, providing accurate, timely and up-to-date information for their clients in the most convenient and specific manner possible.

Current and Future expected use of Electronic Sources of Information

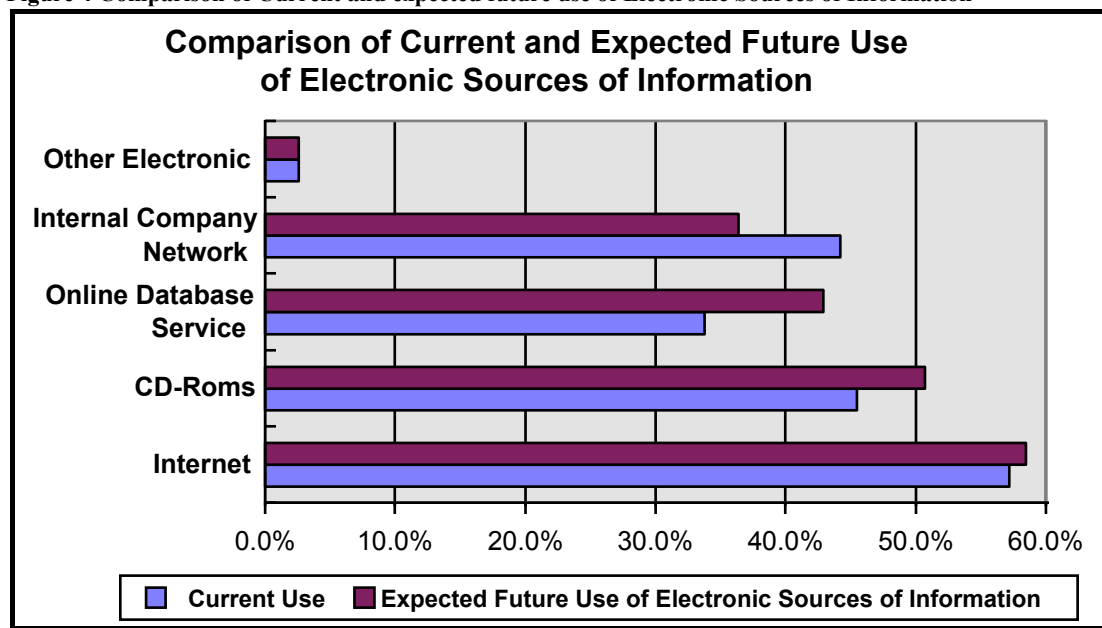
The Internet is currently the most relied upon electronic form of information resource used by survey respondents but they do not expect their usage of the Internet to increase. Online Database Services and CD-Roms as sources of information are both expected to have increased usage in the future.

Respondents were asked to identify if they currently used any form of electronic sources of information. The choices they were given in the survey were between CD-Roms, Online Database Services (for example Dialog), the Internet, their own Internal Company Network or any other form of electronic information. Respondents were asked to include their current usage patterns for these services as well as indicate any expected future usage for electronic sources of information. Figure 4 shows the collated results of these two questions.

Results from these questions indicated

- No expected change in current and future use of the Internet with 57% of respondents currently using the Internet to source business information needs and a total of 58% believing they would use it in the future.
- An expected slight increase in the use of CD-Roms to source business information with 45% currently using CD-Roms and 51% believing they would use them in the future.
- An expected increase in the use of Online Database services like Dialog with 34% currently using Online Database services and 43% believing they would use them in the future.
- An expected decrease in the use of the company internal network, with 44% currently using their internal network and 36% believing they will use it in the future.

Figure 4 Comparison of Current and expected future use of Electronic Sources of Information



Discussion

In general a number of possible marketing strategies for QUT Library and other FBIS units has emerged.

Recommendation 1: *Fee Based Information Service units based in libraries in Queensland should be targeting the small business sector in their marketing strategies.* FBIS units should actively target medium and larger sized small businesses, with between 7 and 20 employees. Given the response rates from these two sub-groups in particular, they are highly interested in possible sources for their business information needs and as indicated by Johnson & Kuehn, Major, Chalmers and Maguire & Kench, they are usually less likely to have a large support service to source such business information needs within their own company.

Recommendation 2: *Fee Based Information Service units should indicate their strengths in searching for business information, their abilities to search Online Databases, CD-Roms and the Internet, and access to search and obtain Patents and Standards.*

Interestingly despite an increased awareness in resources available for business information needs, library based FBIS units are not considered a valuable source of such information. FBIS units targeting small business in their marketing should indicate their strengths in searching for information, and their abilities to search Online Databases, CD-Roms and the Internet. Williams (1997) points out the threat to FBIS units by the increased awareness and use of electronic sources in particular the Internet, which is now available to business persons to search independent of requiring the skills of any information broker. Williams adds that despite this being a relatively “free” and “publicly available” resource we have the advantage over our business clients because of our skills in searching electronic databases to date. We should be emphasising to our potential clients that we have years of experience in searching techniques and are professional in this area.

It seems apparent that presently no matter what the size of the company, businesses are finding that their own internal information services are almost useless at providing this service. If this holds true, then marketing directly to their current need - that is - someone to provide information searching skills, is obvious.

Recommendation 3: *Fee Based Information Service units should emphasise in marketing that it is more cost-effective for FBIS units to search than the business person, leaving the business person time to concentrate on their own area of expertise. FBIS units can search faster and more accurately.*

It would seem likely that the trend in the Queensland small business community is towards relying more heavily on traditional and now electronic sources of information than has been observed in previous surveys. In particular the current and future expected usage of the Internet, CD-Roms and Online Database services would indicate a growing awareness of these types of information sources. Given an expected increase in the use of Online Database Services and CD-Roms, a FBIS units ability to search these with a greater level of skill should be emphasised.

Statistically the Internet has a phenomenal growth rate. (Grant ICC quote that *The World Wide Web grows an average of 25% per month with 100 to 400 pages being added every week*, companies connected grows at 10% per month with an overall 150% growth over the 1995 year, and it is expected that the 5 million computers connected to the Internet as at 1st January 1995 should reach 100 million by the year 2000.) The key to searching the ever increasing information resource lies in a searcher’s ability to seek information on the Internet quickly and efficiently. As librarians and information professionals we have increasingly moved into teaching others how to search for information on the Internet more effectively. Given that most business people are also increasingly under pressure to provide information quickly, our abilities to search faster than the business person and retrieve a more highly relevant result should be used in our marketing strategy. It matters not whether the resource we are accessing is Online database, CD-Roms, Library catalogues, or the Internet; we have the required skills to search for information quickly and more efficiently than most small business people. Let’s market those skills and target the small business for FBIS units.

Recommendation 4: *Australian Fee Based Information Service units should work together to develop a formal network of Australian Information Brokers.*

Williams (1997) also points out that in Australia we have not yet developed a network, whether formally or informally, of information brokers. She suggests that we would benefit from this approach that has been operating in the overseas information brokering sector for some years. After all, the business community already actively works towards networking in a number of areas. Maybe a little less fear, and a little more friendly an approach to competition would benefit all FBIS units in Australia.

Recommendation 5: *Fee Based Information Service units should develop an informal network with other Professional Associations.*

The major competitors to FBIS units are not the other FBIS units in this country but the services provided by Professional Associations. In this case, some further research into the existing competitors activities is probably necessary. If it can be identified what is missing in those services then this would provide opportunities for a FBIS unit to develop further. Conversely, it may be more cost-effective to

stop marketing a segment of the services offered by FBIS units that are richly provided already by Professional Associations.

Recommendation 6: *Fee Based Information Service units should work harder to improve their understanding of the commercial paradigm.*

Business wants it's information "Yesterday" not next week! Clients are obviously wanting current, fast and accurate information. If we are to survive and thrive as a commercial service, and continue to provide increased income generation for the governing parent body institution, then we must improve our abilities to provide information to our clients accurately, timely, currently and ground breakingly up-to-date, in the most convenient and specific manner possible..

Recommendation 7: *Fee-based Information Services should select their target groups and spend time alongside their clients understanding their specific information needs. The FBIS unit should then work to develop a continuing working relationship with their clients.*

We should be researching what methods of information access is more convenient and in what way we can make the information more specific to our clients needs. We have to ask our client what they actually want more often! Do they want information provided in a particular format, do they want value-added information or simple Brokering skills of repackaged information delivered as efficiently as possible. We need to develop an alliance with our clients that works as an ongoing partnership. This will help the clients but will also mean we develop a core set of clients to continue to grow the FBIS units business. Through this type alliance both parties work together to develop each other business. This would inevitably lead to further growth of a FBIS unit.

Conclusion

FBIS in the Brisbane CBD region should be targeting the small business sector in any of their marketing strategies. Within that business sector obviously the sub-group to target in any marketing campaign would be those small business' with between 7 and 20 employees.

Information searching skills should also be highly prevalent in any marketing campaign. FBIS are highly skilled in this area and they should be bold in their statements to the business community about these abilities and skills. Business needs FBIS units abilities at information searching in particular for Online Database Services, CD-Roms and the Internet.

It is clearly evident that Business People are more aware of available sources of business information and are no longer dismissing the library or other forms of information service units for their business information needs. With over 70% of respondents using their own internal information service at least weekly.

Further details of this research will be available in the final thesis report.

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