

Library Delivery 2.0: Delivering Library Materials in the Age of NetFlix

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This article discusses how Netflix and similar services are shaping expectations about product delivery, which in turn are driving libraries to rethink how items are delivered to their customers. Library Delivery 2.0 refers to the idea of delivering library materials into the user's hands in a way that is personalized, convenient and fast. Library Delivery 2.0 builds on the concept of Library 2.0, a concept of a very different library service that operates according to the expectations of today's library users. In this vision, the library makes information available wherever and whenever the user requires it" (Chad and Miller, 4). Similarly, Library Delivery 2.0 is a concept of a very different library delivery service that operates according to the expectations of today's users. In this vision, the library delivers information wherever and whenever the user requires it and in whatever format the user needs it.

NetFlix and Amazon have developed service and delivery models that are personal, easy, fast, and very convenient for users. Both companies have taken advantage of the long tail¹ phenomenon that aggregates supply and demand, making it profitable to sell

¹ The long tail refers to items that don't sell in large quantities and which retailers have traditionally determined were too costly to carry. With online access and cheap distribution methods, many retailers are now finding that it can be very profitable to sell items in the long tail (versus the head of the power curve) as long as there are enough buyers purchasing such items. By aggregating supply and demand, they have thus

products that aren't necessarily widely popular and they've found ways to get the items into their customers' hands quickly and conveniently.

Both companies also recognize how important personalization is to customers. Like NetFlix, Amazon helps users locate books they are likely to enjoy based on previous purchases and by comparing items that have sold together (“Other people who bought this book also bought that book.”) Amazon offers the user the option of purchasing new books or used books and gives the user a range of delivery options. Amazon leverages the long tail and makes it very convenient for customers to purchase books.

NetFlix provides a particularly apt model for libraries. By learning to leverage the long tail and eliminating some of the hurdles involved in using library materials, libraries will increase the numbers of people using their library.

How NetFlix Works

NetFlix offers monthly subscriptions at varying levels. Depending on the subscription plan, users can view an unlimited number of movies in a month but is limited by how many movies they can have in circulation at one time. For example, for \$14.99/month, users can have up to two movies in their possession at a time. Once movies are viewed (or the customer decides s/he is done with it), it is returned via US Mail in a prepaid mailer provided by NetFlix. Each time a movie is returned to NetFlix, the next movie on their queue is sent out. The user usually receives a new movie within two days of

leveraged the power of the long tail. For more on the concept of the long tail, see Anderson. For more on the impact of the long tail on libraries, see Dempsey.

returning one. There are no late fees. There are no restrictions on how long a user can keep a movie. The next movie just arrives automatically as soon as one is returned.

In addition to the low cost and convenience of the delivery and return service, NetFlix assists users in finding and selecting movies they are likely to enjoy. Unlike rental services like Blockbuster where users make most of their selections from the Just Released sections, NetFlix makes recommendations to users based on how they have rated movies they've borrowed. The NetFlix website is customized for each member (My NetFlix) with their own personalized queue of movies they want to watch. The top movie in the queue is the next one the customer will receive when they return their next movie.

Each time a customer returns a movie, their My NetFlix area is updated and they are asked to rate it. Rating a movie is simply a matter of assigning it 1-5 stars. NetFlix builds a personalized profile of each customer and uses this profile to suggest new titles. The more movies the customer rates, the better the recommendations are. In addition to personalized recommendations, NetFlix provides a bevy of search tools and topical title lists: genre, title, director, actor, Critic's Picks, Local Favorites and more.

With recommendations and a variety of search and browse options, the NetFlix customer then builds their own queue of movies to watch. Each time a movie is returned to NetFlix, the title at the top of the list is sent out. The customer has complete control over

the queue: she can change the order of the movies, delete movies from the queue, and add new movies.

My NetFlix makes it easy for the customers to locate any type of the movie regardless of whether the movie was a success at the box office. NetFlix helps users find the special titles that are a particularly good match for each customer.

What if the Library Worked Like NetFlix?

NetFlix is easy, personal, fast, and convenient. It assists users in finding titles they'll not only enjoy but titles that they are probably very excited to find because they are surprised that they could be found or they've never heard of them before. Their choices are not limited to the blockbusters of the day. NetFlix makes it very easy for customers to borrow and return titles. NetFlix is to movies as libraries should be to books.

Make it Easy

Cathy De Rosa, Lorcan Dempsey and Alane Wilson tell us that library users prefer to do things on their own (Social Landscape section, 3). Studies have shown that the more unmediated a service is, the more popular it is. Libraries everywhere report increases in circulation after self-check is rolled out. ILL is more likely to be used when it can be initiated without talking to a human being and remote borrowing has also been shown to increase circulation.

With libraries, there is a “transaction cost”² for each step of the processes involved in finding, requesting and actually taking possession of an item. These costs are measured in time, attention, money and expertise. The first transaction cost involves locating the item in the OPAC. If the user is able to find the desired item in the OPAC, she/he must then locate the item to determine how best to acquire it. Is it on the shelf? Can I put it on hold? Can I borrow it from another library? Do I need to put in an interlibrary loan request? Each of these steps may require additional authentication or search steps. These transaction costs inhibit use.

Make It Personal

While library search and discovery tools are improving with innovations such as faceted browsing, they are not intuitive nor are they personalized for the user. Utilizing the customer’s circulation history and their feedback about items borrowed, libraries could also find those special titles that excite their customers. Academic libraries have made more inroads into providing some personalization with portals designed around the student’s coursework. Public libraries, on the other hand, have done very little to personalize the online experience of their users.

Make it Fast and Convenient

Remote borrowing (in place of the cumbersome ILL process) is making it easier for users to request items. But there are few new developments when it comes to quickly and conveniently putting the item into the user’s hands. Customers can place holds on items

² Lorcan Dempsey uses the term “transaction costs” to refer to the cost in time or effort to perform the steps required to meet a goal (Library Catalogue, par. 8).

from most library websites but that's where the convenience ends. Once the item becomes available (the item is returned or is transferred from another library), the customer is notified by email or phone call (often from a 'virtual' person) of its availability. The completion of the request is then left in the hands of the customer.

Depending on how long items circulate at a library, how many people have the same item on hold, and how long it takes to get items transferred from one library to another, it may have taken weeks for the item to become available. Already, the delay in fulfilling the customer's order may have fallen outside of the "window of usefulness" (Weaver-Meyers and Stolt, 35-37) – the period of time when the customer could make use of the item. If the customer still wants the item, they must find the time to get to the library to pick it up.

Getting to the library isn't necessarily easy. It certainly isn't convenient. In urban and suburban settings, it may require navigating traffic to get across town, paying for parking, waiting on public transportation or squeezing the trip in around work schedules.

Depending on one's hourly wage, the cost of the trip could be difficult to afford (another bus ticket, more fuel for the car) or it could be difficult to justify (high earners might rather purchase the item and have it delivered than spend the time it takes to get to the library and back). In rural settings, the distance to the library might make the trip particularly time-consuming and untenable.

Libraries could also make it much easier for their customers to get and return books by offering home delivery options using UPS or FedEx. For high wage earners, providing

home delivery options for an additional fee would be a welcome service option.

Allowing customers to return items by U.S. Mail using library-provided envelopes would reduce the burden on customers. Even drive-through pick-up and drop-off services would alleviate some of the transaction costs of using the library. Libraries could also reduce the wait time for items on hold by purchasing more titles of a particularly popular item. In many cases, the cost of acquiring a new book is less than getting a copy through ILL channels (Campbell).

If libraries made it as personal, easy and convenient to find and borrow titles as Amazon and NetFlix do, circulation in libraries would skyrocket. Instead, business is booming at Amazon and NetFlix and circulation is holding relatively steady in public libraries.

The Value of Convenience

Consider Ranganathan's Five Laws of Library Science:

1. Books are for use
2. Every reader has his or her book
3. Every book has its reader
4. Save the time of the reader
5. The library is a growing organism

These rules still ring true. The difference is that now every reader has his or her book, and his or her fulfillment preferences. Some users pick up their books at the library and do not take issue with the time it takes to transfer the item from another library to the

holds shelf. Others might prefer to download their book immediately so would always choose an e-book if that is available. If given the option, many users would happily pay for home delivery. It will be increasingly important to offer *convenience services* to current library users who have money but little time. Providing these types of services is also likely to expand the population of active library users.

A study by ALA (KRC Research, 2006) found that 63% of Americans own a library card but that 25% of people with a library card have not visited the library in the last year. The study reports that 90% of library users taking out books have incomes between \$15K and \$35K. It is time for libraries to consider the value their users place on convenience. There is no question that many users use Amazon.com because they can get the desired item delivered to their home quickly and they can afford to buy it and pay for the delivery. They don't necessarily use Amazon because they want to own the book. Amazon is convenient. The library is not. Everyone loves the library – in theory. But there are large swaths of the public who just don't use it because it isn't convenient enough.

Expanding Fulfillment Options

Karen Calhoun and Lorcan Dempsey suggest that in the future users will have access to multiple discovery experiences (ways to find the books) which are connected to multiple fulfillment services (ways to get the books) via service routers. Library holdings would be among the items being 'discovered.' Dempsey envisions a registry of services that would match users to their delivery options based on their location, preferences and

affiliations (Library Catalogue). Calhoun sees the possibility of the library catalog providing that delivery service function (38). In other words, one way or another, users will eventually require multiple delivery options...multiple options for fulfilling their request.

Whether a library item is sourced from the local library, a consortial partner or from a library with whom the requesting library has no particular relationship, libraries need to find a way to get those items for their users and put them into the user's hands promptly. Offering a wider range of delivery options is one way to that. Not only must users be able to request UPS, Next Day Fed Ex, Hand Delivery, or download, libraries must also consider offering Digitization on Demand, Purchase on Demand, Buy instead of Borrow options. Rather than sending users to Amazon to buy the second hand book, make it possible for them to buy it through the library using a linked PayPal account. Rather than downloading the audio book from audible.com, make it possible to get it through the user's library account (perhaps even getting a discount in the process, or perhaps a kick-back for the library).

Rather than leaving the user's request unfulfilled, libraries need to find a way to expand their fulfillment service offerings and keep their customers satisfied. While a basic level of service must continue to be free (especially in public libraries), there is no reason that some of these premium or convenience-based services must be free. Users make fulfillment decisions in all aspects of their retail life and they are comfortable finding their own balance between cost and convenience.

The Future of Libraries

It is a turning point for libraries. Libraries are making their catalog holdings discoverable in more and more places. Shared catalogs are increasing across library systems and regions. A few statewide catalogs are now available. Using OCLC's Worldcat Yahoo and Google plug-ins, sophisticated users can discover items from all over the country. These tools provide critical opportunities for libraries to reach out to new users and expand the role of the library in the public's life. Libraries could be far more than community centers with public access computers, free videos and free fiction. They could become the primary service outlet for information.

To compete with other information providers, libraries need to adopt the philosophies and techniques used by Amazon and NetFlix, which make it easy for customers to find interesting items and provide convenient options for fulfilling their orders.

Fulfillment:

- the act or state of fulfilling: to witness the fulfillment of a dream; to achieve fulfillment of one's hopes.
- the state or quality of being fulfilled; completion; realization: a vague plan that had no hope of fulfillment.
- the process or business of handling and executing customer orders, as packing, shipping, or processing checks.

Source: <http://dictionary.com>

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