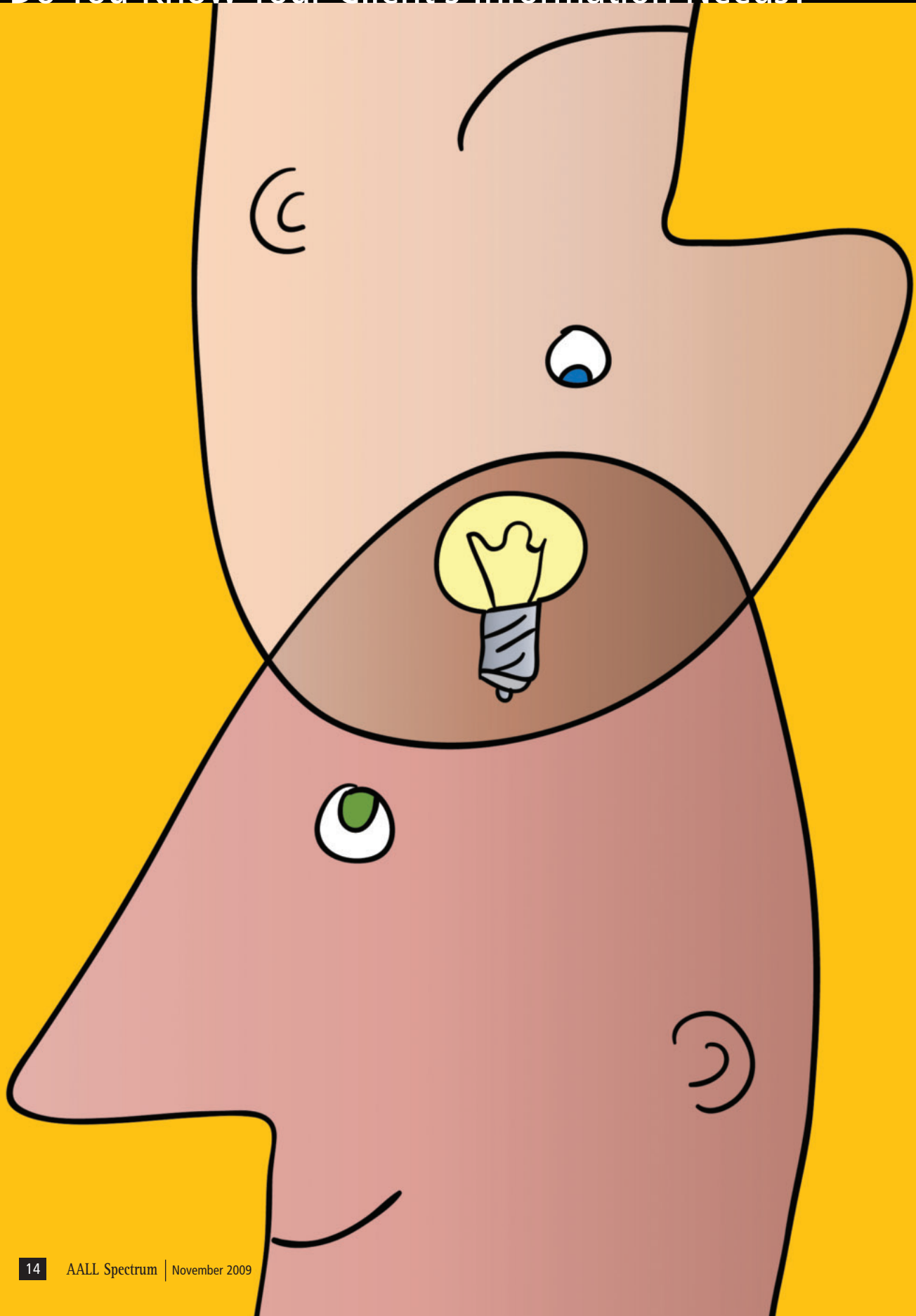


# It's 10 a.m.:

Do You Know Your Client's Information Needs?



# How user needs surveys can help law librarians offer personalized service

By Barbara Fritschel

PricewaterhouseCoopers is running a series of commercials highlighting parallels between life experience and how one conducts business. For example, one ad mentions getting to know the client by spending 10 minutes at the water cooler listening to his or her “real” concerns. The implication is that PricewaterhouseCoopers is different because they will find out your needs, rather than sell you a package deal.

Like financial and management services companies, law librarians are service providers. And just as other service providers are discovering in these bad economic times, many clients, even internal clients such as associates, law clerks, and faculty, are shifting to cheaper service providers or sources of information. For librarians, this means reduced budgets, staff layoffs, or closure. Librarians need to remain sensitive to their client’s changing information needs in order to remain relevant.

When a company develops a new product, it often conducts marketing research to see if there is a demand, what features the product should contain, and how much people would be willing to pay. Successful companies constantly develop new products and improve older products in order to keep market share.

The situation changes, however, when your primary product is a service. A service is only as good as the person providing it. Clients may not recognize the complexity of the service you are providing, e.g., the number of databases used to answer a question. Also, clients may be able to do the service themselves, e.g., by conducting their own research on the Internet, even though the library is spending thousands of dollars on databases and intranets/portals. Thus, providers must constantly remind clients of the value of their service by regularly reselling or marketing.

## Do You Know Your Clients?

People combat “information overload” by looking for resources directed at their niche or interests. As a result, clients expect services to be customized. Amazon.com meets this expectation by greeting people with suggested readings based on books purchased. As a service provider, one sure way to lose clients is by failing to distinguish between the different and sometimes competing groups you serve.

Perhaps the biggest competition for law librarians is our clients who have

legal training, because their skills and knowledge are similar to those of librarians. As more data is moved to their desktops, they do more research on their own, reducing the need for law librarians. This may be one reason law firm librarians have branched off into competitive intelligence and business research, areas of research that are normally not taught at law school.

Attorneys, judges, and law clerks are not going to stop doing legal research, so how do we remain relevant? Market research is one way to find out the unmet information needs of our clients. I have to admit my reaction the first time I saw the PricewaterhouseCoopers commercial was, “Duh, why *wouldn’t* you be doing that?” Then I realized that while I know some of my clients very well, I do not know them all as well across the board. I can see general statistics for database usage, but it doesn’t tell me who is using the databases. If people are not using them, is it because they are unaware of their existence or what content they contain, or is it because they are not helpful for individual research needs?

Do we really know what our clients need? We know how they should do research, but do we know how they really do it? Do different users have different needs and expectations? There are several ways to conduct market research to answer these questions. One could extend the reference interview to determine if a particular resource is helpful. However, this approach does not get information from nonusers or people using library portals/intranets. Focus groups are another possible method, but, especially in the legal field, it can be difficult to get a group of attorneys or judges to take the time to participate.

A third method is a user needs survey that can be completed at a person’s convenience and can target both users and nonusers. User needs surveys can identify unmet needs, help clients use resources more efficiently, and identify potential new opportunities. They can also help with strategic planning. Ideally, a user needs survey will reach out to those who are not using library services as well as to library users. The survey does not focus on promoting what the library offers but rather on the customers and how they do things or what resources they use.

I decided to see if any law libraries were conducting user needs surveys by sending out a query on the State Court

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## Essential Steps for Conducting a User Needs Survey

- 1. Focus your survey.** Determine what information you need. Short surveys get better responses, so determine the priority of the information you are seeking. If necessary, do different surveys at different times. Note that the Alaska Supreme Court Library uses several different surveys, each with a different focus.
- 2. Target your audience.** Break up your users into stakeholder groups or other segments. While attorneys, paralegals, partners, judges, and law clerks are obvious groups, perhaps there are groups of nonusers who might also be addressed. What are the information needs of clerk’s office personnel or the probation department? Is your information technology team using the library’s resources? For nonuser groups, it might be helpful to do a selected interview with one or two people to get an idea of their concerns/needs before developing the questionnaire.
- 3. Develop your questions.** Online tools allow you to ask for a variety of different response methods, from multiple choice to ranking or even essay. Short and simple questions work best. Test drive your questions and avoid library jargon—use “law reviews” rather than “legal periodicals,” for example. Think about follow up questions—if someone does not use a resource, how will you discover why they do not use it?
- 4. Distribute the survey.** Online tools make it easy and will help you analyze the results. If distributing by print, you need to include a method of return.
- 5. Analyze the results.** Analyze both the survey method and results. How was the rate of return? If the return size is small, what might be the reasons be? What answers are surprising? Is the focus of your resources and services in line with usage? If resources are not being used, is the reason lack of knowledge of the resource, lack of training, or because a different resource is being used to get the information?
- 6. Follow up.** What actions are you going to take on the basis of the results? If you do strategic planning, how will you incorporate the results?

and County Law Libraries and Private Law Libraries online discussion lists. Bryon Hill of Bowditch and Dewey sent a similar question to the law-lib online discussion list. We received a total of four responses. The Alaska Supreme Court Library system and the San Diego County Law Library (SDCLL) had both administered surveys, while neither of the two responding private law firms had done so. One law firm library that requested anonymity responded that they had started to do a survey on computer-assisted legal research services, but discontinued it when management decided which service to use.

Both the Alaska Supreme Court Library and SDCLL have a history of doing market research. According to Charles Dyer, retired director of the SDCLL, past market research activities included hiring a marketing research team in the late 1990s for a telephone survey and using focus groups of users up until 2004. The Alaska Supreme Court Library did a market surveys for strategic planning in 2005 with over 400 respondents, as well as a web design survey and ongoing annual surveys of law clerks.

The surveys included several similar types of questions and, with the exception of the outgoing law clerk survey, were offered to the general public/attorneys. Both courts used [www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com) to design and

tabulate the results, and both had high response rates. (The SDCLL's response rate exceeded the amount available for a free account with surveymonkey.) Both courts asked about unmet needs and future services. One of Alaska's questions was a visioning question—"What would the best law library offer you?" Both library systems have used the results for strategic planning purposes.

## Successful Surveying

Dividing your respondents by categories, or market segmentation, provides the customization people expect and saves respondents from skipping a lot of questions that do not apply to them. The Alaskan survey of outgoing law clerks is one example of such segmentation. Likewise, the SDCLL survey broke out questions depending on whether a person was a member or not. Nonmembers were asked a series of awareness questions regarding services.

To be useful, a survey must also find out why sources are not being used. In the Alaskan strategic planning survey, in order to help determine why an electronic resource might not be used, response options included "don't know what it is." The Alaskan outgoing law clerks survey also asked, "If you used the Internet for legal research, please tell us what kind of information you were looking for."

It is important to remember that the value-added services of libraries come from the professional training and abilities of the librarians. It is easy to ask people if they use print or electronic resources, but it is also important to highlight librarian services as well. The SCCLL survey did this by asking nonmembers, "Are you aware that the SDCLL library has a staff of reference librarians with JDs who can answer your research questions and assist you in locating materials at no cost to you?" Likewise, the Alaskan strategic planning survey asked "What proportion of research do you delegate to others?"

One major surprise that came out of the SDCLL survey was the number of people requesting services that the library already offered, especially in terms of interlibrary loan and document delivery services. SDCLL has since created a task force to evaluate these services and their marketing to help provide better awareness of their existence. This seems to support the understanding that one must continually market both new *and* existing services. One change the SDCLL made as a result of this survey was to offer more continuing legal education programs at a branch library. Other changes may come as the task force continues to analyze the results.

Benita Ghura, reference librarian at SDCLL, noted that surveymonkey was

“an extremely user-friendly tool.” It made the process easy in terms of both survey design and answering. The high response rate also seems to indicate its ease of use.

Remember, when you focus primarily on providing services, you must constantly prove the value of those services or users will go elsewhere. To test our relevance to our stakeholders, we must test our

assumptions and presuppositions about our users' information needs. To stay relevant, we must listen to our clients to determine not only what needs we are meeting but also those we are missing. Fortunately, online tools make it easier to collect this information and allow even a solo librarian to create a professional-looking survey. User needs surveys are one

way to help ensure that we are spending library resources wisely and keeping current with our clients' changing information needs. ■

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