

Academic libraries

Boutique libraries at your service

Andy Priestner and **Elizabeth Tilley** examine the potential for the application of the hotel industry's boutique model, with its focus on personalised and specialist service, to academic subject libraries.



DURING THE 1980s a new way of thinking about customers, services and facilities began to emerge in the hotel industry. Starting in a small way in London and San Francisco,¹ it grew to have a huge impact on the sector around the world. The catalyst was the recognition that individuality and uniqueness could and should be prized above uniformity and consistency, and the result was the boutique hotel. Boutique hotels ventured to provide a customer experience that couldn't be matched by the homogenous large hotel chains such as the Hiltons and the Radissons. Although every boutique hotel seeks to be different, there is general agreement on their key characteristics. Most significantly, they offer a highly personalised service focusing on every detail of the guest's stay. Architecture and design also play a significant part, with much made of either the history of the hotel, the luxurious nature of the hotel environment, or the theme reflected throughout the decor.

Perhaps the best-known example of a boutique hotel is New York's Library Hotel, which dedicates each of its 10 floors to the major categories of the Dewey Decimal System, decorating rooms with related book collections and artwork. Most boutique hoteliers insist that size matters and that their connection with their customers and the overall guest experience would be unduly affected if the hotel grew too large. However, such is the success of the boutique concept that many of the large hotel chains now offer hotels which they describe as boutique but which are nevertheless chain establishments which cater to many guests, e.g. the Radisson Edwardian chain.

Ten years ago the value of the boutique approach began to be recognised by another customer-focused industry: the library and information sector. As the millennium approached, Singapore's National Library Board, which was seeking to reinvent the concept of their public libraries, was the first to seize upon the idea of the boutique library, and in 1999 the library@

orchard opened its doors, immediately winning rave reviews from visitors and the media.² Library@ orchard was specifically aimed at young adults, with its specialised collections, location (in a shopping district frequented by the target market), hip facilities (e.g. music booths) and overall ambience cited as key attractions. Other boutique libraries began to spring up, such as the 450 sq m Parklands Library in Christchurch, New Zealand, which sought to work 'on every aspect of the library building and service' to make it stand out from 'larger and less intimate libraries'.³

However, the boutique library, or at the least the definition of specialist libraries as boutique, did not catch on in a way that these highly successful endeavours suggested it might. Nevertheless, in library buildings literature it did receive some recognition, being cited as a viable alternative to monolithic central libraries and as specialised facilities that 'should be housed close to those who would make most use of them'.⁴ Thus far, the term has largely been reserved for discussion of public libraries, and in particular brand new public libraries, but there is obvious potential for its broader application to existing libraries in the academic sector, especially given its greater number of specialist subject libraries.

In recent years academic subject librarians have arguably suffered the bleakest period in their history, as library posts have largely been cut due to a combination of institutional budget deficits and fundamental ignorance of role function and value. Restructuring at Bangor University Library in 2005 resulted in the loss of four subject librarians and four other key professional posts. What we learned from Bangor was that subject librarians could no longer afford to be out of line with institutional goals, devoid of an information skills strategy or, worst of all, effectively invisible to their employers. As detailed in the 2009 issue of *Sconul Focus*,⁵ progress seems to have been made since, with many subject libraries now

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Opposite page: Judge Business School Library, Cambridge.
Below: English Faculty Library, Cambridge.

offering services that extend well beyond traditional collection management aspects. Many subject librarians now embrace the importance of not only e-learning and curriculum-embedded information literacy, but also marketing strategies to ensure that resource usage is optimised and services are valued and understood. However, despite this perception of progress, which may be dangerously internal to the profession, subject librarians continue to suffer job cuts, most recently at London Met, King’s and London Business School. LBS’s Head Librarian has gone, not to be replaced, and nine other professional and para-professional staff have been made redundant. Perhaps the most significant threat is the increasingly touted assertion that ‘digital natives’ don’t require the same level of assistance from librarians with databases and search techniques as previous generations of students, despite the categorical debunking of this view by the *Researcher of the Future* report.⁶

Other threats to subject librarians have come from within the profession itself as the emergence of large, anonymous, centralised services has continued to prove fashionable. Starting in 2000 Oxford University’s diverse and numerous subject libraries were gradually federalised, with the moniker Oxford University Library Services (OULS) eventually being adopted. The process reportedly presented many problems to Oxford’s subject librarians. One such librarian who has since left the institution recalls: ‘We all felt completely undermined and de-motivated by the imposition of a set of centralised procedures from senior managers who failed to appreciate local differences and were overwhelmingly concerned with financial cost-cutting measures rather than maintaining world-class library

services.’⁷ Another, who has now retired, says: ‘After becoming part of OULS, it was a real struggle to maintain a focus on the needs of our users and aims of our department as the new organisation’s main objective seemed to be to serve the needs of the lowest common denominator. Specialised services to unique groups of users were not encouraged, and all efforts were concentrated on providing standardised services to the general user.’⁸

As Cambridge University embarks on its own federalisation project there appears to be a genuine desire to ensure that the same mistakes are not made, with University Librarian Anne Jarvis, appointed last year, openly advocating a ‘one-size-does-not-fit-all’ policy.

Given the varied threats, perhaps it is time for subject librarians to seek some stability and security by adopting a new model of excellence. The boutique approach is an obvious candidate; it may only be a question of developing a model.

If, as we have seen in the boutique hotel, the customer appreciates a personalised service, that is what they should experience from a subject library. However, as with the Radisson Edwardian boutique hotel, there will be unseen collaborative and centrally managed activities in support (see Figure 1). Collaboration can be between areas of the service or libraries, or between other sectors of the university. The boutique library service benefits from being distinct and separate enough from other parts of the model to allow autonomous service development, but sufficiently integrated into the whole to provide a coherent environment. The synergy created by this model comes from recognising the value of each component

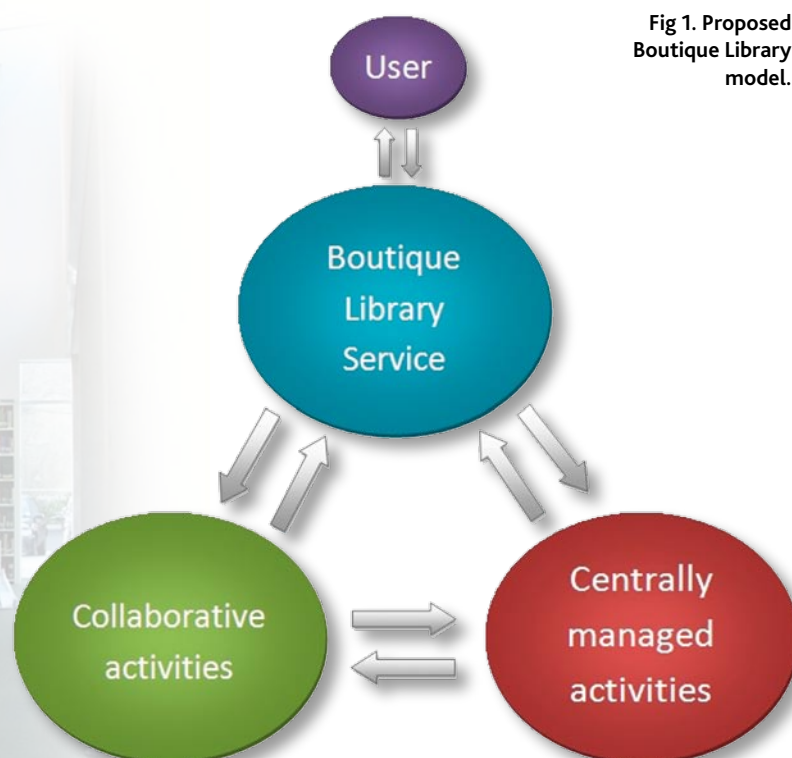


Fig 1. Proposed Boutique Library model.



Judge Business School

Some quotes from last year's student survey results:

'Highly efficient in responding to enquiries.'

'The Library team is really dedicated, knowledgeable and student-focused.'

'You are a great support to PhD students. If I didn't ask more questions it was because you provided all that I needed.'

'Easily the best Library in Cambridge.'

part and establishing the right environment within which services flourish and attract their customers. The purpose of the collections of an academic library, at whatever level of specialism, is research and learning, fulfilling the mission of the institution. The key is focusing on the service provided for the people who make use of these resources, rather than the collections per se. Subject specialists know that, at the heart of successful service delivery, are the relationships that they build with academics and students alike. They are vital in understanding the needs, and wants, of the user and in evaluating the impact of service development. The boutique library service model hinges on the subject librarian role having a significant degree of autonomy, such that, through the relationships they build, they can develop a service specifically tailored to their user group. Within a library service contemplating federalised change, decisions on the nuts and bolts of a model such as this can only be made locally. There are, however, features that would be recognisable for each sector.

A pro-active boutique service will spot needs and trends first and apply techniques used elsewhere

quickly and easily. Such a service quickly becomes a landmark to a new student anxious to establish themselves. Creative staff are at the core of the boutique service, and they should be able to demonstrate service impact and a significant return on financial investment, particularly in the current financial climate. Figure 2 summarises the features of the boutique service. For examples of specific features in the Judge Business School Library Service and the English Faculty Library at the University of Cambridge, see Table 1.

Centrally managed activities are essential for effective and efficient services. In the case of electronic provision there is often no other option and, providing effective two-way communication is in place, they can enhance resources and services. The boutique service needs to recognise and work with such activities. Partnerships that develop through recognising that co-operation and collaboration will enhance service excellence form a third element to the model. Collaborative activities may depend on goodwill, and often ebb and flow according to personalities and service focus. A boutique service model sees collaborative ventures (both internal and



Fig 2. Boutique service features.

References

- 1 L. Anhar, 2001. *The Definition of Boutique Hotels* (www.hospitalitynet.org/news/4010409.print).
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- 3 S. Thompson. 'The Parklands Boutique Library.' *Australasian Public Libraries and Information Services*, June 2006.
- 4 M. Dewe. *Planning Public Library Buildings: concepts and issues for the librarian*. Ashgate, 2006, p. 68.
- 5 *Sconul Focus* 45, 2009 (www.sconul.ac.uk/publications/newsletter/45/).
- 6 I. Rowlands and D. Nicholas. *Information Behaviour of the Researcher of the Future*. University College London Ciber Group, 2008 (www.bl.uk/news/pdf/googlegen.pdf).
- 7 Former OULS librarian (who wishes to remain anonymous).
- 8 Fiona Richardson, Information Services Manager, Said Business School, 1999-2008.
- 9 R. Milne. 'From "Boutique" to Mass Digitization: the Google Library Project at Oxford.' In R. A. Earnshaw and J. Vince (eds), *Digital Convergence: libraries of the future*, Springer, 2008.



English Faculty Library

Quotes from survey results and unprompted emails March-June 2009:
'A space in which to find fantastic resources and to work.'

'Its collections are so useful as a resource that, for convenience of accessing them, I choose to base my research in this building.'

'Faculty Library staff - always friendly, helpful & informed.'

...and with reference to recent introduction of late night staffed openings:

'I'm so pleased about this!!'

'My evening work is frustrated by a lack of access to secondary material, so the longer opening hours provide an opportunity to make the evenings useful.'

'[I like]... all the small thoughtful details such as the changing displays, the poem of the week, and the helpful notices.'

Boutique Library	Judge Business School Library Services	English Faculty Library
Subject specialism	Highly specialised collection of electronic and printed materials in the field of business and management; professional staff with considerable subject expertise	Collection development for those studying English; staff employed with specific subject specialisms, e.g. contemporary poetry
Customer-focused	Service-level agreement in operation committing the library to a high level of customer care; almost immediate enquiry turnaround; regular student surveys to determine service direction and development; faculty and student consultation exercises to check information needs are met and services known; excellence in remote support	Faculty Librarian sits on all Faculty Committees including Student Consultative C'tee, allowing constant networking with library stakeholders and users. Library surveys regularly carried out; impact of skills training research undertaken to understand needs of freshers
Highly tailored	Support for MBA projects via teaching alongside academics e.g. market analysis lectures; article-linking in all reading lists; direct and timely support in the classroom – library teaching on plagiarism and referencing, going beyond Google, and key research resources	Borrowing periods set to fit the needs of students; teaching on understanding of English reading lists; teaching grads on use of Endnote for Faculty's specific referencing style; late-night opening during period of dissertation hand-ins
Trend-setting & reactive	24/7 access for members outside staffed hours; constantly evolving exploitation of Web 2.0; ad hoc classroom database training to support specific coursework	Tea@three during exam term; film of current undergraduates for new freshers; newsletter with student & faculty input; open AND staffed on Sunday (unheard of in university)
High degree of autonomy	High level of autonomy for Head Librarian, allowing quick decision making and significant investment in resources and services	Faculty Librarian controls library budget and trust funds, hires own staff and manages all aspects of service delivery and access to collections; changes can be made instantaneously; books purchased and made available within 24 hours
Unique services & resources	In-house business information portal serving as a one-stop shop to a world-class suite of business databases; SMS text alerting for book requests; RSS feed for acquisitions; second-hand bookshop (selling fiction and non-fiction); citation tracking for faculty	DVDs for loan; VLE resources and services tailored to English courses; library blog used for news service with RSS feed; ability to liaise with students and produce sessions for university's Festival of Ideas
Personalised	Service actively taken to the students by meeting them outside the library – physically (in syndicate and common rooms) and via social networking (portal forum, Twitter, Facebook); small enough to know many of the students' names; one-to-one training always available	Services developed for specific academic Subject Group Convenors; interactive displays; space provided to promote student writing and academic publications; library merchandise for sale; constant liaison with the academics to whom the students are most likely to listen
Convenient location	A minute away from the School's offices, lecture theatres and common rooms	Same building as seminar rooms, social space and administrative assistance

Table 1. Boutique services, Cambridge.

external to the institution) as equally important, to be fostered and encouraged at all levels of management.

Many specialist subject libraries, in Cambridge and elsewhere, will already be providing boutique services; this model would provide a framework within which current best practice would be given the recognition it deserves. In applying this model, establishing distinct boundaries between constituent parts would be the most complex task. Clear definitions of roles with clear avenues for information to flow would be vital. The model challenges the current thinking of how to manage university libraries in this time of financial crisis. It is a distinct paradigm shift, and it would take vision to embark on embedding it within an institution. It is possible that the boutique library model proposed will

have its critics; certainly there is a danger that it could be seen within a wider federalised system as a piecemeal approach. Prior to the creation of Oxford University Library Services, Ronald Milne described the 'boutiquization' of libraries as a negative development.⁹ This assessment ignored the fact that many of these libraries had evolved independently and uniquely for a good reason, essentially in order to offer specialised services to their local users. In the model presented, there is no piecemeal development. Each part of the model is distinct and yet part of a whole, dependent on, but contributing to, the whole. A boutique library service model gives us the ability to provide specialist, personalised services not possible in an anonymous, centralised system. It is partnership in action. [1]