

Exploring Service Philosophy Statements Using Qualitative Content Analysis

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Abstract: This paper will describe a study in which we examined service philosophy statements at a diverse group of North American academic libraries. We used qualitative content analysis to examine their form and content to identify common themes, trends, and ideas.

Public services librarians spend much of their time wrestling with nebulous topics such as service quality, customer satisfaction, and user experience. Improvements in these areas necessitate strengthening the quality of the service and the culture in which it's delivered. One approach to establish standards for consistent service delivery is for libraries to implement service philosophy statements. A service philosophy statement also communicates directly with users what they can—and should—expect from the library. Before we could develop and implement a service philosophy statement at our respective libraries, we wanted to understand the specific ways that service philosophy statements communicate service expectations to users. We will describe the series of steps we followed to conduct our research, such as creating the coding frame, segmenting the data, pilot coding, evaluating and modifying the coding frame, analyzing the data, and interpreting the findings. Finally, we will review the challenges we encountered during this process, as well as lessons we learned about qualitative content analysis.

Keywords: Qualitative Research, Qualitative Content Analysis, Service Philosophy Statements, Customer Service, Service Quality, Public Services, Academic Libraries

1. Introduction

In this paper we will describe the research method we employed in a study examining service philosophy statements at a diverse group of academic libraries in North America. A service philosophy statement communicates to users what they can—and should—expect from library services. The goal of the study was to understand the impact that a service philosophy statement can have on the service quality at a public service desk. To answer our research question we employed qualitative content analysis to better understand the form and content of service philosophy statements in order to discover their themes and

trends. The results of our efforts were published in an article entitled “Service Philosophy Statements in Academic Libraries: A Qualitative Content Analysis” (Moffett & Weare, 2018). We have also written about qualitative content analysis describing the challenges we faced and lessons learned as novice researchers applying a method with which we were unfamiliar (Moffett & Weare, in press).

2. Context

Before describing our experience with qualitative content analysis, we will briefly provide some background to facilitate understanding of our project.

2.1 Service Philosophy Statements

Service philosophy statements are separate from mission, vision, values, and goals. These statements are most commonly found in retail, hospitality, and other service organizations, and can appear under a variety of names. These statements are also used by libraries that share a customer service focus. Whether called customer service principles, customer service values, or a customer service pledge, they deliver a similar message: they speak directly to the user about how services and resources will be delivered during everyday interactions with library staff.

Some examples include:

- Library staff will acknowledge all telephone, email, and in-person requests in a timely manner.
- We will communicate on the level of the customer—avoiding all jargon and explaining concepts clearly.
- We will be mobile in helping customers, providing seamless service whenever possible.

2.2 Motivation

We decided to study service philosophy statements because we both hold public services positions at our respective libraries where we strive to provide excellent customer service. We recognize that the customer experience can vary depending on who provides the services, how well the staff has been trained, and what day and time the customer visits the library. One way to develop a more consistent service experience is to implement a shared customer service philosophy. A service philosophy statement provides a set of standards for service that benefits both users and staff. The standards also communicate clear expectations for users as a pledge or a promise, and provide accountability for staff.

We were interested to learn how a service philosophy statement could improve service quality at our public service desks. We decided to study them in a formal way to identify important concepts of service as well as aspects of their structure

and language. We wanted to understand the specific ways that service philosophy statements communicate service expectations to users.

2.3 Qualitative Content Analysis

Having considered a number of approaches, we chose qualitative content analysis to conduct our study. Qualitative content analysis is “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data through the systematic classification process of coding and identifying themes or patterns” (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005, p. 1277). This method allows us to identify relevant information within a set of documents, and organize that information in order to compare it, understand it, and interpret meaning from it.

3. Literature Review

While we were familiar with content analysis (e.g., studies of position announcements for library and information science that illustrate changing expectations for professionals), neither of us had used it in practice. Therefore, we conducted a search to find methods texts or other resources that would help us better understand this approach. First, we found *Content Analysis: An Introduction to Its Methodology* (Krippendorff, 2013) and *The Content Analysis Guidebook* (Neuendorf, 2017). Both are guides for conducting quantitative content analysis, which focuses on frequency, amount, intensity, or other quantitative measurements.

We also found *Practical Research Methods for Librarians and Information Professionals* (Beck & Manuel, 2008). It describes how content analysis is used in library science research.

Ultimately, we found two works by Schreier, *Qualitative Content Analysis in Practice* (2012) and “Qualitative Content Analysis,” a chapter from the *SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis* (2014), to be especially helpful. Schreier’s description of how to conduct qualitative content analysis provided guidance for our study, and it helped us see that this approach was appropriate for answering our research question.

Later, we consulted *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers* (Saldana, 2016) to provide us with further understanding of the coding process.

4. Method

Schreier (2012, 2014) provided the framework that we used to conduct our research. Her eight-step process directs users to:

1. Determine the research question
2. Select material for inclusion
3. Build a coding frame
4. Segment the material

5. Test the coding frame
6. Evaluate and modify the coding frame
7. Analyze the data
8. Communicate findings

We used this process to examine and compare the statements and identify themes, trends, and ideas.

4.1. Determining the Research Question

We began our project by deciding what specifically we wanted to learn about service philosophy statements. Based on service philosophy statements we had found in retail, hospitality, and other service organizations, we were curious whether we could identify aspects of these statements that made some more effective than others. Were there common structural or linguistic choices that made some statements better? Ultimately, we decided that we would try to determine what specific elements of form and content in service philosophy statements made them more effective at communicating service expectations to users.

4.2. Selecting Material

The next step was to select documents to include in our study. Up to now, our exposure to service philosophy statements had been those we found through open web searching. For a formal study, we wanted to focus on academic libraries. At the time, both authors worked at Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), a member of the Coalition of Urban and Metropolitan Universities (CUMU). This coalition is “an international affiliate organization of universities in large metropolitan areas that share common understandings of their institutional missions and values” (“About CUMU,” 2017). We decided to use these ninety member institutions as our study group.

It is not particularly common for a library to have a service philosophy statement. Of the libraries at the ninety CUMU institutions, we found only fourteen documents that focused in part on the library’s effort to communicate to users what they can expect in a routine library visit. That said, none of these were actually called *Service Philosophy Statements*. They were given other titles, such as *Customer Service Standards*, *Customer Service Values*, *Guiding Principles and Objectives*, and *User Rights and Responsibilities*.

Because of variability of this sort, we developed criteria to help us identify which documents shared a sufficient number of characteristics to be considered for analysis. Specifically, we were looking for documents that delivered a promise or pledge to library users, spoke directly to users, addressed user needs, focused on how service is delivered, or appeared to be written by staff delivering the service. Reviewing these documents, we found that none included

all five of the criteria we had in mind; ultimately, we concluded that eight included at least some combination of these characteristics.

4.3. Building the Coding Frame

Next we built a coding frame, which is a hierarchical arrangement that, as Schreier (2014) explains, “consists of at least one main category and at least two subcategories” (p. 174). The frame organizes codes (a word or phrase describing the text) that will be assigned to concepts and ideas found in the text. We also developed short descriptions for each subcategory so that when we recognized these attributes in the text, they would be assigned the appropriate code. For example, if we found text that described friendliness or approachability of staff, we would code it as *courtesy*.

Our coding frame had two main categories, *form*—the way that material is presented to users, and *content*—the concepts and ideas present in the text. We included five subcategories under form, and twelve under content.

FIGURE 1 The Coding Frame

Form	Content	
	[Concept-Driven]	[Data-Driven]
Author	Continuous Improvement	Access
Commissive Modality	Courtesy	Accommodation
Intended Audience	Dignity/Respect	Attentive/Listening
Person	Effectiveness	Confidentiality
Presentation	Efficiency	Environment
	Safety/Security	Focus/Priority

Five of the form subcategories and six of the content subcategories were derived prior to examining the statements; these were concept-driven subcategories based on what we anticipated would be found. Six additional content subcategories were added following trial coding, explained below.

4.4. Segmenting the Material

After building the coding frame, we next turned to segmentation. Schreier (2014) explains that segmentation “involves dividing the material into units in such a way that each unit fits into exactly one (sub)category of the coding frame” (p. 178). In our study, segmentation only applied to content (again, the ideas presented in the text). For form, we coded for structural elements, such as person (e.g., first or third person) and presentation (e.g., a bulleted list).

An important concept in segmentation is that each segment contains only one idea. To illustrate this point, consider the following example from a sentence in one of the statements we examined:

Library users have a right to expect courteous, efficient, and effective service in all circumstances and at all times.

Within this sentence we identified three separate ideas, and thus isolated each into a separate segment which could then be coded individually.

Library users have a right to expect ~~courteous, efficient, and effective~~ service in all circumstances and at all times.

Library users have a right to expect ~~courteous, efficient, and effective~~ service in all circumstances and at all times.

Library users have a right to expect ~~courteous, efficient, and effective~~ service in all circumstances and at all times.

Each of the three examples has been isolated to communicate one idea, and can now be assigned one unique code. We segmented the text jointly so that when we later coded the material we would be working with identical pieces of text.

4.5. Testing the Coding Frame

We chose two of the eight service philosophy statements to use as a pilot to test the coding frame and identify any unanticipated issues that would complicate the coding process. Each of us independently coded the segments from the two pilot statements. We worked separately to assign codes so that we would not influence each other. Then, we met to determine if we had coded the segments the same way. A high level of agreement between coders suggests we had achieved greater objectivity and validity. The pilot helped us to establish a shared understanding of how we should code the segments in the six remaining statements.

In those instances where we found that we had coded a segment differently, we discussed why, and followed with an effort to reach agreement. In some cases, we each recognized that our original subcategories did not appropriately describe a segment, and that we would need to revise the coding frame to add additional subcategories.

4.6. Modifying the Coding Frame

In the two service philosophy statements we used to test our coding frame, we coded thirty segments; six of those did not fit into any of our concept-driven subcategories. Rather than assign these to a subcategory where they did not fit

well, we decided to revise the coding frame. The example segment below illustrates this point:

The library will investigate and act to resolve all questions, concerns, or complaints in a constructive, positive manner.

Coder 1: Courtesy
 Coder 2: Dignity/Respect
 NEW: Attentive/Listening

In this example coder 1 assigned the code *courtesy* to this segment, while coder 2 assigned the code *dignity/respect*. After discussion, we agreed that an entirely new subcategory was more appropriate, and so we coded it as *attentive/listening*. This was one of six new data-driven subcategories, derived from the material being coded. Regarding form (the way material is presented to users), no modification was made to the coding frame.

We coded the remaining six statements using the revised coding frame, which included both the concept-driven and data-driven subcategories. As with the pilot, when we finished coding we met to discuss the segments we had coded differently and resolve discrepancies.

4.7. Data Analysis

At this stage, we were now ready to compile the data from the coding process and begin our analysis. Ultimately, we analyzed our data in three different ways. First, we created a spreadsheet to organize our data. The spreadsheet included the names of each institution, the categories and subcategories, and the code that was assigned to each segment. Figure 2 shows the range of possible codes used for *form*, while Figure 3 represents the way that segments were coded for *content* (both figures use examples, not actual data).

FIGURE 2 Form

	Institution A	Institution B	Institution C
Author	Administration	Frontline Staff	Multiple
Commissive Modality	Necessity	Not Present	Possibility
Intended Audience	All Users	All Users	Students
Person	Third Person Plural	First Person Plural	Third Person Plural
Presentation	Bulleted	Bulleted	Narrative

FIGURE 3 Content

Segment Number	Institution A							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Continuous Improvement								
Courtesy	X							
Dignity/Respect		X						
Effectiveness							X	
Efficiency			X		X			
Safety/Security								
Access						X		
Accommodation								
Attentive/Listening								X
Confidentiality				X				
Environment			X					
Focus/Priority	X							

For example, the first segment “Our customers are shown courteous and concerned attention to their unique needs” was coded as courtesy.

Despite the fact that our primary focus was qualitative, a spreadsheet made it possible for us to identify some trends based on frequency. It helped us to see that some aspects of these statements, such as access (to the collection or services) and efficiency (promptness or responsiveness of service staff), were the most common.

As suggested by Schreier (2012), we also attempted to “move beyond the individual unit of coding and beyond [the] results for individual categories” to instead focus on the relationship between the subcategories (p. 225). Following this suggestion, we next used cards (Figure 4) printed with the names of subcategories which gave us the freedom to physically manipulate and arrange them into other combinations. We could then look for connections between subcategories that we might not have discovered otherwise. For example, we determined that *courtesy*, *effectiveness*, and *efficiency* are all attributes of service, provided directly by frontline staff.

FIGURE 4 Card Exercise

<p>Courtesy</p> <p>Approachability</p> <p>Friendliness</p> <p>Welcoming</p>	<p>Effectiveness</p> <p>Accuracy</p> <p>Knowledgeability</p> <p>Non-Library Language</p>	<p>Efficiency</p> <p>Promptness</p> <p>Timeliness</p> <p>Responsiveness</p> <p>Flexibility</p>
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In our third attempt at analysis, we built upon the previous exercise and examined all of the content codes as a whole. We noticed that two overarching themes emerged: (1) services provided by the staff and (2) references to the library environments or collections—factors largely beyond the control of front line staff. Statements primarily describing amenities or resources was an unanticipated finding because our prior exposure to service philosophy statements led us to believe that they would describe service provision as the purview of staff. For instance, “We will display empathy in our treatment of others—considering and respecting their points of view” met our expectation, while “A clean, safe, and reasonably quiet facility” placed far greater emphasis on the library environment.

4.8. Communicating Findings

The final stage in our research project was to compile our results from the analysis process, discuss the themes, trends, and ideas we identified using the coding frame, and summarize what we had learned and communicate our findings. We first presented our work as a poster (Weare & Moffett, 2017) which gave us an opportunity to synthesize and present our most salient findings in a succinct format. We included graphic representations of our quantitative data, as well as excerpts from service philosophy statements that we examined. The graphics seemed to pique the interest of attendees, which often led to detailed discussions about our qualitative findings. Presenting our research as a poster made us think more deeply about how we communicate findings to others, and proved useful when we later composed a full account of our research project as a journal article.

As we wrote the article describing our research, we recognized that there were several instances where word choice could be confusing. It was apparent that we needed to be intentional and consistent in our selection and use of language to ensure that we would be understood by our reading audience. For example, we initially used terms such as *document* and *statement* interchangeably, but realized that we needed to differentiate between terms that could have multiple meanings. This led to the following decisions regarding nomenclature:

- *Document* was used for the entire document including the text that came before and after the service philosophy statement;
- *Statement* referred to only the service philosophy statement;
- *Sentence* was a single line in the statement;
- *Segment* was a portion of the sentence expressing a single idea.

It was important to come to agreement on the nomenclature necessary to accurately communicate all aspects of our research with one another and with the reader.

5. Conclusion

This research project was the first time that either of us had employed qualitative content analysis. It was not completed without some difficulty. We found both learning and applying a method simultaneously to be challenging. There was no prior study of service philosophy statements in academic libraries to draw from or build on. The undefined nature of our topic, as well as the many variations in the documents such as titles, form, and content, added an additional layer of difficulty. These difficulties prompted us to constantly rethink our process and refine our approach.

Despite these challenges and a host of others, we answered our research question to our satisfaction and gained valuable experience with a method we can apply to future projects. Employing the eight-step process of qualitative content analysis outlined by Schreier (2012, 2014) helped us understand how to build a coding frame, segment and code data, and analyze text-based material.

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