Developing and marketing patent information services to small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in Birmingham, UK

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Abstract

The Patent Information Service of Birmingham Central Library was re-assessed in the light of changing customer requirements and new opportunities to better meet those needs. A substantial funding injection enabled research to be carried out and the results put into practice, e.g., in expanding the range of services – with particular emphasis on helping small and medium enterprise (SME) businesses, and in positive marketing of the services, rather than the previous passive provision of services. The resulting integrated business and intellectual property service was then re-branded as 'Business Insight' and given wide promotion in the Birmingham area. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten zwei Jahren erhielt die Birmingham Central Library aus dem Europäischen Fonds für regionale Entwicklung Finanzmittel in Höhe von £537 000, um ihre Unternehmensinformationsdienste zu verbessern und auszubauen. Diese Unterstützung und die Erweiterung des Dienstleistungsangebots für kleine und mittlere Unternehmen (KMU) betreffen vor allem die Patentsammlung und die Abteilung Unternehmensinformation der Central Library. Ziel des Projekts ist es, alle von der Library für die KMU bereitgestellten Ressourcen und Dienstleistungen enger und sinnvoller miteinander zu verknüpfen, ihren Bekanntheitsgrad zu erhöhen und die KMU zu ihrer verstärkten Inanspruchnahme anzuregen. Um diese Ziele zu verwirklichen, wurde eine eigenständige Auskunftstelle für Patentinformationen und geistiges Eigentum geschaffen und zusätzlich zu den Bibliotheksmitarbeitern ein Informationsbeauftragter eingestellt, der für die Entwicklung der Dienstleistungen zuständig ist. Ferner wurde im Rahmen des Projekts ein Marketing- und Entwicklungsbeauftragter beschäftigt, der dazu beitragen soll, die Patentinformationsdienste in den KMU bekannt zu machen. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Résumé

Au cours des deux dernières années, la bibliothèque centrale de Birmingham a reçu du Fonds européen de développement régional £537 000 pour renforcer et élargir ses services d'informations commerciales. Ce financement et le développement de services destinés aux PME concernent essentiellement la collection brevets et la section d'informations commerciales de la bibliothèque centrale. Le projet vise à créer une structure plus homogène et cohésive pour toutes les ressources et tous les services de la bibliothèque centrale destinés aux PME, à sensibiliser davantage le public aux ressources et services disponibles, et à inciter les PME à en faire un plus grand usage. Afin de permettre la réalisation de ces objectifs, un service de recherches distinct pour l'Information en matiére de brevets et de propriété intellectuelle a été créé, et un agent spécialiste de l'Information, chargé de développer les services, a été nommé pour travailler aux côtés du personnel de bibliothèque en poste. Le projet a également désigné un agent de commercialisation et de développement pour aider au lancement sur le marché du service d'information brevets. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Birmingham Central Library provides a regional patent service as one of the participants in the UK Patent Information Network. In the last 2 years there have been a number of developments and enhancements to

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Birmingham's service. Before examining some of these changes it is useful to examine the context of the service and some salient issues.

2. Birmingham Central Library – general information

The present Birmingham Central Library opened in 1974 and is probably the largest public library in Europe. It has a floor area of almost 25 000 m^2 with seven floors accessible by users. The collections comprise both reference and lending materials. These collections of material are not discrete and users frequently have to use material on a number of floors. In 1998 the Central Library had over one million visitors.

3. Patent Information Service: background

Until the beginning of 1999 Birmingham Library's Patent Information Service was delivered as one of the services and resources offered by the Science, Technology and Management Section of the Central Library. Although one member of staff had responsibility for the patent collection for some of their time, in practice any of the 17 staff would deal with enquiries and assist with the patent copying service. Patents were just one collection among many others including Medicine, Natural Sciences, Computing and Engineering. The staff were unable to spend more than a few minutes with each customer due to the demands of operating a busy enquiry desk.

This library service provided:

- access to patent specifications (a mixture of paper, CD ROM and microfilm);
- information and advice on taking out a patent, design or trade mark;
- an enquiry service tracing patents;
- copying service;
- weekly Patent Advice Clinic provided at the library in partnership with local patent agents offering potential inventors a free confidential introductory consultation.

The patent service had evolved over the years with no planned development in terms of targeting the service to businesses. The staff responded to whoever came through the door or telephoned. There was no marketing or promotional activity. The service was used primarily by potential individual inventors and individuals undertaking patent research. These made up 80% of enquiries. The exceptions were a few patent agents and businesses that used the copying service. Increasingly patent agents had access to patent documentation via the Internet or CD ROM in their offices and did not need to use these library resources. The use they made of the library service was largely for historical documents. The service did not have money to invest in new technology. Access to patents on CD ROM was available through one PC supplied by the British Patent Office and this was sited in a locked office. Users had to ask staff for access.

4. Funding opportunities for business and patent information services

In 1997, I was the Manager of the Business Information section at Birmingham Central Library. With other colleagues I began to explore the potential for acquiring European funding to enhance and expand the existing Business Information section. It soon became clear that a bid for European funding could also be used to give more emphasis and priority to the existing patent service. Such a bid, using existing resources as match funding, was submitted in September 1997 to the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). This would create the Birmingham Business Information and Intellectual Property Service (BBI-IPS). The project aimed to create a more seamless and cohesive structure to all the Birmingham Central Library's resources and services for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), individuals starting their own business and innovators. The project aimed to raise awareness of the range of resources and services available, to target the identified groups and to increase usage by them.

In June 1998, a grant of £350 000 was offered to run the project until the end of 2000. In December 1999 a further grant offer of £187 518 was made and this extends the project until the end of 2001.

5. BBIIPS project

Birmingham Central Library was already the leading UK public business information resource outside London, but few SMEs, individuals starting their own business and innovators were aware of the resources and services. They also did not realise that the information could be consulted without charge.

The European funding has been used in part to employ a team of staff to work with the existing staff in both sections. The additional project staff consist of:

- Marketing and Development Officer;
- Information and Communications Technology Officer;
- Information Officer – Business Information;
- Information Officer – Patents Information;
- Administrative Assistant (from January 2000 onwards).