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Honors Thesis

Evaluation of Christian Record Products and Services for the Visually Impaired

Sarah Lee

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Abstract

Christian Record Services for the Blind (CRSB) offers free Christian publications and services to all who are legally blind. In order to help CRSB better understand the people they serve and plan how to meet the needs of their users, CRSB conducted a major survey through Andrews University that evaluated the products, services, and key ministry personnel of CRSB. The qualitative portion of the research was conducted through focus group interviews, which revealed themes of digital media accessibility, website quality, concerns of discrimination, disparities between Canadian and US services, and personal treatment and service of representatives.

Evaluation of Christian Record Products and Services for the Visually Impaired

Christian Record Services for the Blind (CRSB) is an organization that serves over 100,000 blind people in North America. CRSB provides free Christian publications and services to all who are blind, legally blind (20/200 with corrective lenses), or have physical impairments that prevent them from holding reading material. Free publications include subscription magazines, Bible study guides, and a lending library of over 2,000 volumes that are available in Braille, large print, and audio cassette. CRSB also operates free National Camps for the Blind throughout North America in the summer as well as winter and offers scholarship assistance on a limited basis to blind young people pursuing a college education. Christian Record Services is an international organization that serves blind and visually impaired individuals in approximately 80 countries worldwide and employs over 150 people throughout North America. Many of these employees include CRSB representatives, who directly serve the blind by acquainting them with the CRSB camps, library services, and Braille, large print, and audio publications. In addition, representatives fundraise for CRSB by inviting businesses, organizations, and individuals to provide support for these free services. Representatives not only acquaint the visually impaired with CRSB services but also assist them by ascertaining the reading interests of the clients and helping them order publications from the CRSB library that match their interests (“About Christian Record Services,” 2012).

CRSB provides services that could have an important impact on the quality of life of many blind or visually impaired people. Quality of vision is an integral part of quality of life, and loss of vision can have dramatic physical, emotional, social, and psychological effects on a person (Nutheti et al., 2006). Visual impairment leads to loss of functionality in many daily activities such as dressing, eating, writing, traveling, and simple communications or interactions

with others, which can lead to feelings of decreased self-efficacy (Stelmack, 2001). Studies have shown that loss of vision and its impact on self-efficacy can lead to several adverse effects such as depression, loneliness, increased anxiety, and overall decreased quality of life (Hinds, Sincalir, Suttie, Paterson, & Macdonald, 2003). Many visually impaired people experience an increased quality of life when they are given low-level vision aids or are taught techniques that help them to enhance residual vision and perform tasks without reliance on vision (Lamoureux et al., 2007). These results indicate that self-efficacy and functionality play a large role in the quality of life of visually impaired people.

The products and services provided by CRSB allow visually impaired users to read material without the aid of others, which could lead to increased feelings of self-efficacy since the inability to read is the chief complaint of visually impaired people (Margrain, 2000). Studies have also shown that spirituality plays a significant role in the lives of the disabled. Because of the spiritual content of CRSB materials, CRSB provides products and services that could potentially impact more than one aspect of the lives of the visually impaired (Boswell, Knight, & Hamer, 2001). In addition to the benefits of the publications they provide, CRSB also sponsors National Camps for Blind Children (NCBC) and National Camps for the Blind (NCB), which aim to help blind campers discover undeveloped potential, increase self-confidence, and improve physical vigor (“About Christian Record Services,” 2012).

Children with visual impairments have consistently exhibited lower levels of fitness than have their sighted peers, yet the need to be fit is even greater for individuals who are visually impaired because activities of daily living demand increased energy when performed with impaired vision (Lieberman & McHugh, 2001). Summer and winter campers of NCB and NCBC enjoy a variety of activities, including horseback riding, waterskiing, swimming, hiking,

rappelling, canoeing, backpacking, archery, skiing, sleighing, snowmobiling, and tubing, which promote the blind to engage in fitness activities that could have benefits for both physical and psychological health. Because CRSB provides products and services that affect such a variety of factors associated with increased quality of life for the blind, it is important that the organization periodically assesses how they are meeting the needs of their users to strategize how they can improve their services. Therefore, a study was undertaken to evaluate the products, services, and key ministry personnel of CRSB through quantitative surveys and qualitative focus group interviews. The major focus of this study was on the qualitative portion of the research.

Methodology

Rationale for Conducting a Qualitative Evaluation

The focus group questions were developed and outlined by the quantitative survey, which was written to assess clients' perceptions of products, contents, and quality of CRSB materials, the quality of service of CRSB representatives, and their experiences at NCBC or NCB if applicable. A focus group approach was chosen as the qualitative evaluation methodology because it is helpful in exploring attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and experiences that might not be fully expressed through quantitative surveying. One drawback of focus group interviews is unpredictable group interactions such as reluctance among quieter participants to share dissenting viewpoints; however, focus groups allow investigators to ask questions that explore the attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and experiences of individuals in a flexible way that does not limit participants to just a few answer choices. Although the group setting of focus groups can sometimes cause some discomfort in sharing if the topic is too sensitive, perceptions are often more likely to be revealed and reinforced in a group setting where other group members can support or contradict statements. As participants begin discussing their feelings and experiences

with CRSB products and services, other group members will be able to more easily recall their own feelings and experiences and build upon the discussion themes.

For the purposes of this study, the qualitative data from these interviews was able to provide a more vivid, dense, and full description of how CRSB users felt about the products and services they received that could not necessarily be obtained through the quantitative survey. Findings from qualitative research should ultimately complement the quantitative research to create a more complete understanding of the findings.

Procedure

The focus group interview guide was developed by Dr. Curtis VanderWaal, with assistance from Ms. Sarah Lee, Andrews University Honors student, and Dr. Duane McBride. The initial draft was reviewed by an administrative team at CRSB and final modifications resulted in the interview guide questions found in Appendix A. The research team received Andrews University Institutional Review Board approval on February 3, 2012.

Two focus group interviews were held at a National Camps for the Blind (NCB) winter event at Camp AuSable in Grayling, MI on February 8, 2012. A total of 14 campers participated in both groups, with seven persons per group. All participants were adult campers under the age of 65 who volunteered to participate in the focus group. Volunteers responded to a request from the NCB Director to participate in the groups. About half of each group was Canadian. Six male and eight female participants comprised both focus groups. Participants reviewed and signed informed consent statements prior to beginning both groups.

The groups were held during the lunch and dinner hour, with campers eating during the first part of the focus groups. Groups were held at tables in a quiet basement section of one of the residence areas. The added eating activity did not seem to deter participants from actively

participating in the groups, with each of the participants from both groups making at least three comments during the groups. Dr. VanderWaal facilitated the discussion with an interview guide to allow for organized yet open discussion. Ms. Lee operated the digital recorders, took notes on the interviews, and assisted participants with various needs throughout the sessions.

The first focus group interview was two hours long, and the second was one hour long. Both groups were asked all the questions on the interview guide, with the first group taking longer to get settled in. This group was also more verbal and opinionated, leading to a longer group discussion.

The weather at the camp was unseasonably warm, preventing campers from participating in the usual wide range of activities. Although this may have had some effect on the participants' moods and feelings about the camp experience, those feelings were not readily apparent, at least based on the strongly positive comments about their present camp experience. One other potential distraction to participants was the presence of the NCB Director. She helped to bring participants into the room and get them settled with food trays and then stayed for portions of the group. However, she did not participate in any of the discussions in any way and it did not appear to affect the candidness with which the participants spoke about a wide variety of issues.

Analysis

Following the focus group sessions, each interview was manually transcribed into password-protected computer files. Next, researchers reviewed the transcripts to identify broad themes and topic areas. These topics were then organized into a codebook of major and minor themes. The codebook categories were mutually agreed upon by both researchers. Next, both transcripts were coded, and all comments were categorized and sorted into the themes identified

in the codebook. When researchers came across a comment that did not fit into any of the codebook themes, they created a new mutually agreed upon coding category.

The content analysis was conducted using an analytical process known as the constant comparative method. This method allows researchers to consistently compare participants' comments across categories and group sessions. In addition, the prevalence and intensity of comments regarding certain themes can be noted.

Initial coding was conducted by Ms. Lee, with review and reliability analysis provided by Dr. VanderWaal. Researchers estimated a 90% reliability rate between coders. Ms. Lee then wrote an initial draft of findings, with review and edits provided by Dr. VanderWaal.

Results

All names used in this section are pseudonyms for the actual participants.

Satisfaction/Appreciation

Almost every participant from both focus groups expressed comments of satisfaction or appreciation with CRSB products and services. While there were some comments of appreciation for the content, quality, and variety of CRSB reading material, the majority of comments concerned the following categories:

Products. Although the quality, content, and variety of CRSB materials was generally described as satisfactory, comparisons to other organizations that provide similar products were favorable towards CRSB. One particularly outspoken participant, Ellen, said,

“CRS [Christian Record Services] blows CNIB [Canadian National Institute for the Blind] out of the water. I mean, honestly, as a Canadian who is also a Christian, who craves and loves to read, CRS’ large print materials – I love, love,

love. With CNIB, you rarely get things in large print, mostly audio, and I have a hearing impairment, so sometimes I can't hear the audio tape correctly."

Another participant commented on the quality of audio tapes from CRSB, saying, *"They sound great. I think they have good quality."* Caroline commented that she liked Braille and enjoyed the magazines she got on CD such as *Encounter* and *Vantage Point*, but *"As far as the library, I'd just rather sign up for the digital."* Other satisfactory comments about products pertained to repair services. If reading materials borrowed from the CRSB lending library are ever damaged, they can be repaired and sent back and returned to the user in a timely manner.

Representatives. Representatives often develop close, personal relationships with CRSB clients as they assist them with media selections as well as other daily living difficulties. One participant, Ellen, strongly expressed how much her representatives mean to her by affectionately calling them "Mom" and "Dad" and describing her experience with them as, *"If it wasn't for Mom and Dad, I wouldn't be here today. They've pulled me out of the fire more than once."* Other participants also commented on how they often felt that representatives were like family because of their kindness, warmth, and generosity. Because many of the participants do feel such strong sentiments of appreciation towards their representatives, several expressed concern regarding the workload of their representatives. One concerned participant said, when talking about their representative whose territory covers more than three states, *"He covers a lot more than he should."*

Financial. One of the most important aspects of CRSB is that they offer their services for free to all who are legally blind or physically unable to hold a book. Almost all participants were aware of the financial contributions made by the organization and various contributors, as well as the representatives' efforts. One participant, Gabby, said, *"We are lucky to have those books*

from Christian Record Service for free,” a comment that accurately summed up the sentiments of many of the participants. Just as the participants’ appreciation for their representatives manifested itself as concern over the representatives’ working conditions, appreciation for the financial generosity of CRSB often carried over into comments of frustration and suggestions on how to better fundraise or save money, a topic which will be discussed below.

National Camps for the Blind. Since all participants in these two focus groups were gathered during one National Camps for the Blind event, many of their comments of appreciations were particularly focused towards these camps. Nancy, a returning camper, said, *“One thing I love about the National Camps for the Blind is the experience of camaraderie, where we can experience fresh air and nature. It’s just more tailored for the blind.”* A few of the other participants either commented on their appreciation of the spiritual aspect of the camps or the offering of new camp activities. One participant expressed how impressed she was at the willingness of the volunteer camp staff to help the campers. Morgan’s attitude was shared by many when she said, *“The staff are wonderful. The friendly environment – so warm and welcoming. It’s nice to come to camp.”*¹

Personal. Overall, the experience of the campers with CRSB products and services seemed to be a personally beneficial and pleasant experience, with words such as “kind”, “friendly”, “warm”, “generous”, and “outstanding” used to describe the organization as a whole. One participant, Susan, expressed how impressed she was with CRSB and how she could tell that *“their hearts are in it.”* Ellen also described how CRSB has largely impacted her life by saying, *“I love CRS to bits. It is why I’m still around. It is why I survived.”*

¹ This was in reference to her experience at the NCB winter camp at Camp Au Sable.

Frustrations

Although there were many positive comments concerning CRSB, participants expressed some frustrations regarding the following topics:

Publication Contents. While most of the participants agreed that they enjoyed the contents of the publications from CRSB, one particular issue was raised in the first focus group regarding relevance of the content of their magazines. Dissatisfaction was expressed with the termination of a favored publication [Young and Alive] and the content of a newer publication [Lifeglow]. One participant articulated what several of the other participants agreed they liked about *Young and Alive*, saying:

“I could really relate to Young and Alive, and I really enjoyed it...I wish they would print more like that, more of them about people that are blind with multiple disabilities.”

Participants noted other frustrations with the quality and dated nature of some of the materials received, which will be further discussed below.

Desire to Move Towards Newer Media. One of the most prevalent themes across both focus groups was a desire to move away from more outdated modes of media such as audio-cassettes and towards newer digital media forms. This frustration with the old and desire for the new was expressed by multiple participants and can be seen in the following comments:

“I’d like to see Christian Record do a download service on the computer.”

“I really like CNIB’s audio collection because I like to be able to download my books, but I mean, I really would access Christian Record more if they would do that.”

“I would prefer the quality of the digital because it’s more sharp and clearer.

Sometimes the tapes you get from CRS, they drag.”

“It would be amazing if they came up with an app to search their database and update.”

Although almost all of the participants expressed a desire to move towards digital media, many still acknowledged that there are visually impaired users who lack access to computers or digital media players because of location or finances. In addition, several of the older participants noted that they were not highly computer literate and so could not take advantage of the newer media options.

Website. Frustrations regarding the CRSB website (christianrecord.org) dealt with content and functionality. For content, one participant expressed frustration over the availability of information regarding how to become a representative.

“I’m more than willing to help out with CRS, and I know many people in San Antonio and Dallas and Fort Worth and these big cities like Detroit and New York who want to help, but they’re shut out because they don’t get the information on how to be a rep. We need that access on the website.”

Many of the Canadian participants also expressed particular discontent with regards to the overall content of the Canadian Christian Record website. This was apparent in comments like, *“The Canadian website is just a couple of things, and then you have to go to the American one, and that’s not even compatible.”*

Compatibility issues with software for the blind² was also an important aspect of the discussion regarding the website. Participants shared that anything on the CRSB website should be JAWS compatible. Another important frustration regarding the CRSB website was that camp applications cannot be filled out online. Susan expressed that the ability to fill out camp applications online *“would make things so much easier.”* Ellen said, *“Doing it online would make it easier for those who want to do our own forms and don’t have sighted people to rely on.”* Many participants also expressed a desire to have camp applications have a section where degree of visual impairment or multiple disabilities can be indicated or described. Ross was affirmed by many of the other participants when he said, *“I think another thing is, too, when they fill out the application, they should learn to what degree of blindness a person has.”*

Representatives. As mentioned earlier, some of the participants’ CRSB representatives are overworked; therefore, some naturally consequential frustrations include lack of representatives or lack of personal care from representatives. Ross expressed his dissatisfaction when he said,

“When I first joined CRS, he [Ross’ representative] would call me and ask how I was doing, but I hardly ever hear from him anymore...I think they should communicate more, at least make a phone call.”

A few others added that representatives should know how to deal with those who have multiple disabilities since that is an issue for many visually impaired people. Two participants also shared their frustration with feelings that representatives were showing favoritism to certain people, while others were being taken advantage of. For example, Ellen shared how:

² Visually impaired internet users may utilize software programs such as ZoomText, which enlarges and enhances everything on the computer screen for easier reading. Another software program commonly used is JAWS (Job Access with Speech), which is a computer screen reader program in Microsoft Windows that allows blind or visually impaired users to read the screen either with a text-to-speech output or by a Refreshable Braille display.

“It’s always the same people doing the same things. The same people getting up. And it’s like...there is certain favoritism toward certain blind people and it’s really frustrating, and some CRS reps do it.”

Nancy, on the other hand, feels underappreciated for the tasks she is asked to do at meetings:

“During the meetings in Toronto, ever afternoon pretty much I’m picked to – which is fine, I like doing the support groups – but I’ve been told basically ‘well we need you, no you can’t take a day off’. And I’m not even getting paid for this, and I don’t get a token of appreciation.”

Another issue that frustrated some of the participants was that CRSB does not allow non-Seventh Day Adventists to become representatives. Ellen shared, *“I have done so much for this camp, but I cannot be a rep because I am not Seventh-day Adventist.”* Susan also said, *“I think there are people who would be willing to help out, but we’re not Seventh-day Adventist.”*

National Camps for the Blind. Many of the frustrations participants had regarding representatives was also applicable to camp staff. Participants felt that camp staff should know how to treat the visually impaired, know the extent of their visual impairment, and know who has multiple disabilities and how to interact with those who do. One participant expressed her annoyance with staff, who did not know the extent of her vision ability when she said, *“Having someone grab me and drag me, oh my God I hate that.”*

Another main frustration regarding the camps was ambiguity about pick up times and locations in order to get to the camps. Morgan described the situation as,

“One of the big issues is, every year before winter camp or summer camp, it is a struggle to find out where the pick up is going to be and what time because you talk to one person and it’s this, and the other person says something else. If we

could meet at one location and that be the location for the summer and winter camps, that would make it easier and more accessible for some of us.”

A few of the participants also expressed frustration with the fact that they had to pay an additional fee in order to have an accessible cabin at one of the NCB camps. Ellen described the issue in her comment, *“In Canada, the Christian Record camp I was going to go to last year [Camp Frenda] wanted an extra \$100 from me for me to be in an accessible chalet.”* Danielle added to Ellen’s comment by saying, *“Whatever happened to it being accessible to everybody? Why is it that we have to put in more money to get an accessible cabin?”*³

Concerns were also raised regarding the safety and accessibility conditions of Camp Frenda:

“I love the ropes design here [Camp AuSable]. Camp Frenda took their full bathrooms out of the chalets, so those of us with mobility impairments, those steps up to those cabins are not fun, and the railings sometimes are falling apart...and if you go down to the docks, you have to almost hop from rock to rock. And it’s not just about the mobility, it’s a safety issue.”

Camp AuSable uses a ropes design to help blind campers get to the bathrooms from the cabins. Caroline expressed that she would prefer it if there was a way she could access the bathrooms without the ropes, but feelings about this issue were ambivalent as some campers felt that the ropes were necessary to guide campers from place to place.

Suggestions/Ideas

Many of the participants suggested their own creative ideas or solutions to some of their frustrations. Eve suggested that CRSB work with other libraries so they could have a wider

³ Although all NCBC and NCB camps are claimed to be free by CRSB, a nonrefundable \$35 processing fee is required upon submission of application. Campers are also responsible for all transportation costs to and from camp.

database and multiple access points for media materials. Ellen, when discussing new modes of media, suggested that *“it would be absolutely amazing if they [CRSB] came up with an app to search their database and update.”* Several others echoed this request. Susan was unhappy that there was an age limit to some of the camps, making her ineligible to attend, so she suggested *“the idea of having blind mentors for camps. I could still go to camp and do the activities, but I could be a mentor.”* Nancy came up with the idea of having high school students put their volunteer hours towards working with CRSB to help users travel on the subway or perform other daily activities. Finally, it was suggested that camp staff have a file on each of the campers, or just be trained to ask, so that they know the extent of the campers’ vision disability or other disabilities

Recommendations

Whether fueled by their appreciation or frustration with CRSB, the participants of the focus groups had several suggestions for the organization that covered a wide range of topics. As this is an evaluation initiated by CRSB to understand ways in which it can improve as an organization, recommendations for CRSB will include suggestions directly from participants as well as suggestions drawn from analysis of the comments overall.

- **Create a digital download service for materials on website.** As mentioned before, many of the participants felt that *“If they [CRSB] had downloadable books, it would make a huge difference.”*
- **Consider reviving *Young and Alive* or changing current publications to contain more articles relevant to readers.** The general sentiment of almost all participants from the first focus group was that they really enjoyed and missed receiving *Young and Alive*.

- **Create an application for smartphones or tablets.** An app that allows users to check CRSB information or search their database online was advocated for by a few of the participants in discussion.
- **Make website capable of filling out and submitting camp applications online.** It was said that, *“It would be nice for me to be able to fill out camp applications myself,”* indicating that having that capability on their website would add to the self-efficacy of the users.
- **Ensure that all pages on website are compatible with JAWS and ZoomText.** Participants expressed concerns that incompatible pages would slow down or freeze their computers.
- **Provide information on website on how to become a representative.** Several participants shared that they knew individuals who would be interested in becoming a representative but did not know how to go about the process of becoming one.
- **Work with other organizations or individuals that are not Seventh-day Adventist.** Many participants felt that nondenominational individuals and organizations or other denominational churches and organizations would be interested in helping CRSB if they were willing to work with non Seventh-day Adventists. These suggestions were mainly motivated by a desire to increase the number of representatives and volunteers and alleviate the burden on some of the current representatives.
- **Hold sensitivity training for volunteers and staff.** Training should include teaching staff to be comfortable around the visually impaired, but also knowing how to interact and treat the visually impaired, especially those with multiple disabilities. Volunteers

and staff should also be made aware of avoiding favoritism or asking too much of any one CRSB user.

- **Have one consistent pick-up time and location for both summer and winter camps.** Participants expressed frustration that communication was inconsistent and confusing at times regarding the pick up time and location for camps.
- **Look into accessibility of Camp Frenda and consider making changes to improve accessibility.** Many participants felt that the conditions of Camp Frenda were unsuitably difficult for blind and mobility impaired campers and bordered on unsafe.
- **Inform camp staff of the extent of vision impairment of campers.** Participants suggested that camp staff be made aware of each campers' vision disability in order to treat campers with a certain level of independence and capability. It was suggested that staff be trained to simply ask campers what the extent of their visual impairment is, or it was also suggested that there be a place on the camp applications where vision loss could be described.

Despite the number of suggestions and frustrations raised during the interviews, though, the majority of the participants were still extremely thankful to the organization as a whole, and felt that they were doing an excellent job. The concluding consensus from the second focus group was, "Keep up the good work, and we're very thankful. We love them all, and God bless every one of them."

Limitations and Next Steps

Having multiple independent coders that analyze the data and then meet to reconcile contrasting coding decisions usually reinforces reliability of qualitative analysis of this nature. However, due to certain time constraints, only one coder was available to analyze the data, and

only two focus groups could be held. Another limitation was that sampling for the focus groups was a convenience sampling taken at one of the National Camps for the Blind, so not all participants were necessarily acquainted with other CRSB products and services. Further steps in this research should include having more focus groups and independent coding to increase reliability. Qualitative results from this research should then be compared to results from the quantitative survey to see in what ways they complement or contradict those results.

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Appendix A

Christian Record Services for the Blind

Focus Group Interview Protocols

QUESTIONS ABOUT CHRISTIAN RECORD'S PUBLICATIONS

1. What do you think of the overall variety of publications (number of topics) available from Christian Record?
2. How does Christian Record's services and publications compare with those you receive from other organizations?
 - a. Specifically compare
 - i. The quality of the audio
 - ii. The quality of the braille publications
 - iii. The quality of the large print

QUESTIONS ABOUT CHRISTIAN RECORD'S WEBSITE/INTERNET PRESENCE

3. How has the Internet changed how you use Christian Record's publications and services?
 - a. Do you use Christian Record more or less?
 - b. Differently than you used to?
4. How do you think Christian Record could improve its Internet website and service?
 - c. How much content they are currently getting from the web/cloud?
 - i. What is that content? (audio, text, digital, braille)
 - i. How are they getting it? (computer, tablet, smart phone)
 - ii. From whom are they getting it. (Christian Record, the National Library Service (local library), Public Library, Audible.com, Other)

CHRISTIAN RECORD'S REPRESENTATIVE

5. What is your opinion of your Christian Record representative?
 - a. What has been most helpful?
 - b. Least helpful?

THE CLIENT'S EXPERIENCE WITH CHRISTIAN RECORD

6. What do you like best about Christian Record? (e.g. service, quality of publications, camps, Missionaries of the Blind (volunteer visitation), etc)
7. What frustrations have you experienced with Christian Record?
8. How do you think Christian Record could make your experience easier and more efficient?
9. What areas of Christian Record need the most improvement? (e.g. service, quality of products, updated publications, range of materials, etc) How would you suggest that they make the improvements? (Similar in scope to question #5)
10. Are there other services or products that Christian Record should consider adding?
11. Do you have any additional comments about Christian Record or its services?

NATIONAL CAMPS FOR THE BLIND – SUMMER AND WINTER CAMPS

12. What do you like best or least about summer/winter National Camps for the Blind camp?
13. What would you change about National Camps for the Blind summer camp?