

## Strategic combination of electronic and traditional services

*Ellen Fleurbaay* (\*)

(\*) Amsterdam Municipal Archives, the Netherlands

[www.gemeentearchief.amsterdam.nl](http://www.gemeentearchief.amsterdam.nl)

E-mail: [efleurbaay@gaaweb.nl](mailto:efleurbaay@gaaweb.nl)

### ABSTRACT

Two years ago the Amsterdam Municipal Archives launched a new website. The aim of the site was to increase the Archives' clientele. This objective has been pursued by stimulating traditional services via the website, as well as electronic services. To date we are extremely satisfied with the results: the number of hits has exceeded our expectations, while 2000 saw a reversal of the decline in the number of visitors to the exhibitions and reading room of previous years. We believe that it was our analysis of our clients' questions and the products we provide prior to the construction of the website that laid the groundwork for this excellent result. In this brief article I shall attempt to describe how the Amsterdam Archives came to choose a combination of electronic and traditional services in order to achieve the objective of increasing the clientele. First, I shall examine the Amsterdam Municipal Archive a little more closely. Then I shall outline the results of the research into our products and clients. Finally, I shall conclude by showing how we put theory into practice with two selections from the website.

**KEYWORDS:** product – client - internet strategy

### THE AMSTERDAM ARCHIVES

The Amsterdam Municipal Archives are a historical documentation centre in the widest sense. It houses the archives of the local authority departments, but also of countless private institutions, companies and families. In addition, it has long kept a substantial library and many collections of images, including photographs, drawings, maps, posters, as well as recent acquisitions of audio products and moving images, including gramophone records, cds, film and video. The Archives, which has existed more than 150 years, has been called Amsterdam's memory. In terms more appropriate to today's digital age, the Amsterdam Archives is the content manager of Amsterdam's history. Around 45,000 people visit the Archives each year.

The above is the classic description of our institution, emphasising our **cultural-historical value** to our **visitors**. Today, however, government institutions are viewed increasingly as businesses, that is from an economic perspective. To achieve the objective outlined in my introduction - that is, to increase the clientele - it is necessary to approach a cultural institution as a business. What follows is therefore a description of the Amsterdam Archives as a company delivering **products** to **clients**.

## PRODUCTS

The products delivered by the Amsterdam Archives fit into two categories: demand-oriented and supply-oriented.

**Demand-oriented products** are (a) historical information and (b) reproductions of documents in archives and collections. Clients are able to collect historical information themselves by consulting the archives and collections in the reading room free of charge. For an hourly fee staff are also available to do historical research on request. Reproductions of documents can be obtained in the reading room for a basic fee. But reproductions can also be delivered to order, although the cost is considerably higher.

The Archives' **supply-oriented products** include all kinds of events, exhibitions, educational activities and various types of publication. The aim is to disseminate knowledge about the history of Amsterdam among as wide a range of people as possible. Today the accent is on reaching new target groups, especially among Amsterdam's more recent arrivals from abroad.

## CLIENTS

The **clients** who currently consume archival products are not particularly diverse in age, social status or geographical origin. Most of our clients are middle-aged (between 40 and 70), college or university trained and born in or near to Amsterdam. An expansion of the clientele could either focus on attracting more of the same or on finding new clients from other sections of society: younger, less highly-educated or born elsewhere in Europe or further afield.

To make the right choices it is essential to discover the **reasons** why clients want archival products. To this end it is

necessary to establish which **values** clients attach to our products, preferably related to turnover per product. Although each client has his or her own personal reasons, analysis brought to light that there is one value all clients in common attach to an archival visit: they visit the Archives for pleasure.

## VALUES

What pleasure do clients derive from these products? Firstly, of course, there is the actual **possession of the product**. Supplying demand-oriented products that consist of information clearly satisfies a client's desire for historical knowledge if the question relates to a family matter, the home or any subject about which information is required. When the product we supply is a reproduction, f.i. a photograph, the client feels satisfied when it is framed and displayed on the wall at home.

But apart from possession of a product, other aspects also play a role. For clients in the reading room **the search itself** can be part of the enjoyment: certainly if the search is difficult and unexpectedly brings more or new information to light than originally anticipated. In the reading room clients can communicate with fellow-clients and more important: there is trained staff that offers assistance free of charge.

Another kind of pleasure is enjoyed by clients being able to examine **authentic historical documents** either in exhibitions or personally in the reading room. Imagine the emotion you feel when you open an old book and find a letter, even a brief note in the handwriting of an admired or a beloved deceased person. Or the emotion evoked when viewing a fine exhibition. Indeed a visit to an Archive exhibition

is often part of a day out, or a weekend in Amsterdam. This too can be part of the pleasure of recreation.

### INTERNET-STRATEGY

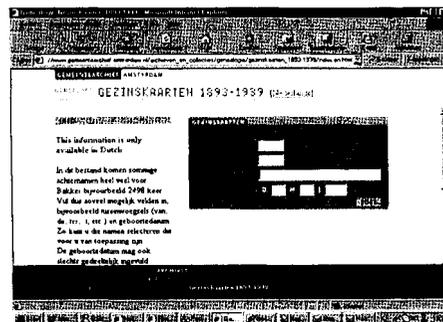
The principal conclusion drawn by the Amsterdam Archives from this analysis regarding the Archives' Internet strategy was that the Internet, as a new medium, would never be able to replace a visit to the Archives' reading room or exhibition gallery. Indeed, the desire to hunt for treasure and the enjoyment of a genuine, authentic product cannot be communicated through the Internet. So we decided, on the one hand, to use the Internet to facilitate a quick and efficient delivery of products to clients, and on the other hand, to use the Internet to stimulate the use of traditional services.

A quick and efficient delivery of products to clients contributes considerably to the client's pleasure in possessing the product. That is why the Amsterdam Archives has decided, wherever possible, to couple an **order function** linked to the products offered at every section of the site. Accordingly, the site has a webshop selling books and videos, and all the photographs (those not subject to copyright) are linked to an order button, as is the search system in the databases. At this moment we are building an image database that shall contain 20,000 photographs next year, and it will be possible to order all photographs in different formats.

To **facilitate the traditional services**, of course the Internet can contribute to the provision of correct information and communication with clients. The most obvious information is of course opening times, parking facilities, tariffs, an events diary and a news service. Information about our archives and

collections is another key aspect. The Survey of Archives and Collections provides primary information about the archives and collections we store, what clients can find in them and whether they are accessible and open to the public. This allows clients to prepare their visit to the reading room. The next step, for which preparations are now in full swing, is the provision of secondary access to the archives and collections, for example linking inventories and catalogues to the option to reserve items via the Internet so that they are already in the reading room when the client arrives.

Finally, the Internet can be used to **promote** the use of **traditional services**. For example, to encourage people to visit the reading room, exhibitions or other events at the Archive complex on the Amsteldijk in Amsterdam. The following example demonstrates how we have designed this both for demand-oriented and supply-oriented products.



### THE FAMILY CARD INDEX: A DEMAND-ORIENTED PRODUCT

Genealogical research is without doubt the most commonly practised form of historical research in our reading room. For many people, finding out about their background is vitally important. And, to judge from the genealogists in

our reading room, family-tree research is addictive. So we have made a major archive source available on the Internet to this, the largest group of clients - a group with a potential for enormous growth.

This is the register of all the families living in Amsterdam between 1893 and 1939 (in all some 600,000 families). A small database of names on the website allows clients to find out whether we have information about their family, although this data is not itself available through the Internet. Clients are advised in the accompanying explanation to consult the data in our reading room. Here we can help them decipher the difficult handwriting and show them how to pursue their research. Clients can make their own copies of their family's registration in the reading room at € 0,34 a copy. Access to the reading room and the assistance of our staff is all free of charge. In fact clients can also order copies of archive items relating to their family via the website. This costs € 7,94 (almost twenty times as much).

As we expected, this section became the most popular part of the whole site. Around 80,000 visitors to the site viewed a total of around 1,200,000 pages, and an average of 28.9 per cent of these page views were in the family card section. Over 5,000 clients ordered prints of family cards via the site to a total value of around € 18,500. We were also surprised that these orders were not limited to clients living outside Amsterdam. Many residents of the city used the Internet service too. In fact, one client lived only four doors away from the Archive! Many clients subsequently consulted the family cards in the reading room after having ordered them via or read about them on the

Internet. Exact figures are not available because the databases consulted by visitors to the reading room are not recorded. I do know, however, that the total number of visitors to the reading room rose last year and that after the introduction of the family card database we were forced to increase the number of computers in the reading room. The sale of prints in the reading room grew last year by fifteen per cent.

We therefore conclude that the clients we have been able to supply via the Internet have largely been those who wished to acquire a print quickly, while we have also managed to reach new clients via the website who have discovered the pleasures of treasure hunting in the archives, the joy of doing their own historical research.



#### **THE JACOB OLIE-EXHIBITION: A SUPPLY-ORIENTED PRODUCT**

A similar tale attaches to the organisation of a simultaneous photograph presentation on the Internet and an exhibition of original prints at the Archives' exhibition gallery. The exhibits were unique photographs of Amsterdam taken in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Of course it is always delightful to be able to see these old views of the city with a single click on the screen, and even more fun, a few clicks further, to be able to order a

photograph of the street where your parents or grandparents once lived. However, for the connoisseur of nineteenth-century photography, nothing can replace the original prints. In this case, these were small pictures, printed in a light-brown tint with a crisp sharpness showing all the details.

Again, the electronic and traditional services pertaining to this supply-oriented product turned out each to attract their own clients, yet both types of service exercised a positive influence on the other. Clients surprised by a preview of the exhibition on the website subsequently visited the show itself, while others ordered a print of a photograph via the Internet after having seen the exhibition, since searching and comparing on screen makes selecting far easier. These are examples I heard of by chance. Unfortunately, no accurate statistics are available since no research has been done on the subject. Perhaps next time.

### CONCLUSIONS

The aim of the new website of the Amsterdam Archives was to increase the Archives' clientele. The website counted in 2000 more than 1,200,000 hits and more than 5,000 clients ordered reproductions via the site to a total value of around € 18,500. The same year saw a reversal of the decline of visitors to the reading room of previous years, and an increase of 13 % reproductions sold in the reading room's self-service.

The website has proved to be an invaluable medium to get new clients interested in archival products. 'Virtual' clients are prepared to pay a relatively high price for efficient delivery of products via electronic services. At the same time more 'traditional' clients are

attracted to the exhibition gallery and reading room, where the authentic documents can be seen, where products are sold for a basic fee and where trained staff offers free advice.

After a careful analysis of our own products and of our clients' wishes the Amsterdam Archives planned its internet-strategy of strategic combination of electronic and traditional services. We think the success of the website has proved this to be the right thing to do.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Ellen Fleurbaay** is Head of the Division of Public Services and Deputy-director of the Amsterdam Municipal Archives.  
E-mail: [efleurbaay@gaaweb.nl](mailto:efleurbaay@gaaweb.nl)