

Editorial Board Thoughts

Halfway Home: User Centered Design and Library Websites

Mark Czyzk

Our Library Website has now gone through two major redesigns in the past five or so years. In both cases, a User Centered Design approach was used to plan the site.

In contrast to the Single Person Vision and Design by Committee approaches, User Centered Design focuses on the empirical study and eliciting of the needs of users. Great attention is paid to studying them, listening to them, and to exposing their needs as expressed. In both of our cases, the overall design, functionality, and content of the new site was then focused exclusively on the results of such study. If a proposed design element, a bit of functionality, or a chunk of content did not appear as an expressly desired feature for our users, it was considered clutter and did not make it onto the site. Both iterations of our Website redesign were strictly governed by this principle.

But User Centered Design has blind spots.

First, it may well be that what you take to be your comprehensive user base is not as comprehensive as you think. In my library, our primary users are our faculty and student researchers, so great attention was paid to them. This makes sense insofar as we are an academic library within a major research university. Faculty and student researchers will always be our primary user group. But they are not our *comprehensive* user group. We have staff, administrators, visitors, members of our Board of Trustees, members of our Friends, outside members of the profession, etc. — and they are all important constituencies in their own ways.

Second, unless your sample size of users is large enough to be statistically valid, you are merely playing a game of three blind men and the elephant. Each user individually will be expressing his or her own experience and perceived needs based on that experience, and yet none of them, even taken as a group, will be reporting on the whole beast. While personal testimony definitely counts as evidence, it also frequently and insidiously results in blind spots that would otherwise be exposed through having a statistically valid sample of study participants.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, User Centered Design discounts the expertise of librarians. Nobody knows a library's users and patrons as well as librarians. Knowing their users, eliciting their needs, is part of what librarians as one of the "helping professions" do; it is a central tenet of librarianship.

There is no substitute for experience and the expertise that follows from it.

In the art world, this is connoisseurship. Somehow, the art historian just knows that what is before him is not a genuine Rembrandt. The empirical evidence may ineluctably lead to a different conclusion — yet there remains something missing, something the connoisseur cannot fully elucidate. Similarly, in the medical world the radiologist somehow just knows that the subtle gradations on his screen indicate one type of malady and not another. Interestingly, in the poultry industry there is something called a "chicken sexer." This is a person who quickly and accurately sorts baby chicks by sex. Training for this vocation

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largely employs what the philosophers call “ostensive definition:” “*This* one is male; *that* one is female.” The differences are so small as to be imperceptible. And yet, experienced chicken sexers can accurately sort chicks at an astonishing rate. They just *know* through experience.

Such is the nature of tacit knowledge.

In the case of our most recent Website redesign, none of our users expressed any interest whatsoever, for example, in including floor maps as part of the new site. We were assured a demand for floor maps on the site was “not a thing.” So floor maps were initially excluded from the site. This was met with a slow crescendo of grumbling from the librarians, and rightly so. Librarians, and the graduate students at our Information Desk, know through long experience that researchers of varying types find floor maps of the building to be useful. That’s why we’ve handed out paper copies for years. The fact that this need was missed through our focus on User Centered Design points to a blind spot in that process.

Valuable experience and the expertise that follows from it should not be dismissed or otherwise diminished through dogmatic adherence to the core principle of User Centered Design.

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And yet, don’t get me wrong: Insofar as it’s the empirical study of select user groups and their expressed concerns and needs, User Centered Design as a design technique and foundational principle is crucially important and useful.

It gets us halfway home.