

Chapter 1

UX Work in Libraries: How (and Why) to Do It

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ABSTRACT

The application of UX expertise is beneficial in all the areas and aspects of library services and products. All what a librarian needs is an understanding of those principles and some tools with which to practice them. The goal of this chapter, therefore, is to provide a guide for librarians, whether they are specifically in charge of UX work at their library or aspire to integrate UX into their work on other library services and products. This chapter provides some theoretical background on the traditional goal of library user satisfaction and introduces UX as an approach that benefits libraries and their users. It gives an overview of popular UX methodologies and describes real-life UX in libraries through the stories from three librarians in their respective institutions: the New York Public Library, New York University, and University of California, Riverside.

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INTRODUCTION

It is often assumed that libraries, like museums, are guarded strongholds of knowledge and history, kept alive (albeit cloistered) by specialized staff whose primary aim is to protect, preserve, and only occasionally reveal the valuable artifacts. It is true that many research libraries and specialized collections must protect fragile materials by requiring visiting scholars to wear gloves or employing low lighting—and only after proving their need to expose the artifact with a letter of introduction. But the modern library—and indeed any library—remains relevant when the knowledge it preserves is absorbed and disseminated by new readers. For the library, access to knowledge is its reason to exist.

So how to provide sufficient access to a modern readership that rapidly grows in number, alters in composition and variety of needs, and increasingly expects instant admittance? It's a boon to the mission of libraries that the web and other forms of digital information access have been successfully introduced. Digitization of finding aids and materials means faster access and more widespread availability. But digitization also means a certain level of technical sophistication on the part of both patrons and librarians. So the question becomes: how can librarians, who are not necessarily trained in computer science or software programming, make sure that digital tools are not a further impediment to access?

The answer, perhaps ironically, comes from a concept most often associated with software interface design: user experience (or UX). The emergence of publications such as *Weave Journal of Library User Experience*, conferences such as *Designing for Digital and User Experience in Libraries*, and the establishment of graduate degrees in Information Experience Design at library schools such as Pratt Institute all support the notion that UX is a serious element of modern librarianship. The more that access to information is digitized, the more important it is that the modern library provide the best tools for browsing and searching. Having a good user interface for digital library tools is like having a friendly, knowledgeable, trained reference librarian—both are crucial to serving patron needs.

The application of UX expertise is beneficial in all the areas and aspects of library services and products, not just electronic interfaces; UX principles can also be applied to the design of physical space. All you need is an understanding of those principles and some tools with which to practice them. The goal of this chapter, therefore, is to provide a guide for librarians, whether they are specifically in charge of UX work at their library or aspire to integrate UX into their work on other library services and products.

The first part of this chapter provides some theoretical background on the traditional goal of library user satisfaction. It will then introduce UX as an approach that benefits libraries and their users, and give an overview of popular UX methodologies. In the

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