

Design



A design approach to the delivery of outstanding services can help library professionals become strategizers and problem-solvers who put the user experience first.

by Steven J. Bell

Design matters. Be it your office chair, the suit you put on in the morning, the car you drive, or your computer's interface, the influence of design surrounds us. Certainly building design is crucial to the delivery of outstanding library services, but design also has the potential to influence our professional practice in many more ways beyond the layout, look, and feel of our facilities. Design can and should influence how we think and act in identifying problems and developing the appropriate solutions. Put simply: We should be design thinkers.

Thinking

Many professions outside traditional design fields recognize the value in understanding how designers think and work, and then applying design methods and strategies to their own work environments. This movement is particularly prevalent in business.

The interest in and exploration of design thinking may be traced back to the publication of the book *The Art of Innovation*. Author Tom Kelley, then general manager of the Silicon Valley-based IDEO, provided unique insights into the world of product design. IDEO is one of the world's leading design firms and is perhaps best known for designing the Apple mouse and the Palm handheld, along with hundreds of other cutting-edge products and services.

Business readily grasped Kelley's book because of its messages about fostering cultures and processes for continuous improvement and innovation. The Apple mouse is a good example. IDEO didn't invent it, they simply created an innovative, next-generation version. The question everyone had was "How do they do it?" The answer: design thinking.

Can design thinking help librarians? As a profession that mediates information from source to user—not unlike newspapers and travel agents—our future challenge is avoiding marginalization. We must determine how we fit into a world that defines an exceptional user experience as memorable, unique, and exquisitely simple. Identifying appropriate solutions will to some extent depend on our ability to adapt the IDEO method of design thinking into creating another emerging, for us at least, concept: the library user experience.

What is it?

The Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto is a leading center for transforming the core of business education from management to design. Leading that process is Roger Martin, the school's dean. He provides what might be the simplest yet most robust definition of design thinking when he writes that it is "a way of approaching business problems in the same way that the designer approaches a design problem." At the heart of design

thinking is the designer's unique work process, one that begins by fully understanding the problem before thinking about possible solutions. One way to examine that process is through a closer look at the five parts of the IDEO method: understand, observe, visualize, evaluate and refine, and implement (see box below).

Librarians familiar with instructional design—a field of design that uses similar constructs to create instructional products—may find that the IDEO method has more than a few commonalities with the ADDIE (analyze, design, develop, implement, and evaluate) model. What both ADDIE and the IDEO method share is their emphasis on first understanding users and their problems, and then developing thoughtful and creative solutions that are capable of being evaluated. Compare this to the process used in your library to solve problems.

Whether it is owing to a lack of time, a desire to quickly implement new technologies, or allowing a bandwagon mentality to rule, rarely do most of us allow sufficient time to carefully design a strategy for technology innovation. Not only do we likely fail to conduct an analysis to first determine the feasibility of a new technology application, but we rarely take the time to adequately determine if our users would value the new service. In a nutshell, our approach is to identify a solution before we fully understand the problem. We can do better. Design thinking can offer a new way of thinking about, acting on, and implementing our resources and services with a more thoughtful and creative approach that is focused on the design of the best possible library user experience.

@ your library

My first encounter with the application of design thinking in a library setting was the Maya Design firm's renovation and remodeling of the main branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh. Maya's approach was to begin learning about the users and their work processes before making any attempt at rethinking the building. For example, Maya would shadow users to see what they actually do in the library, or observe them as they use electronic resources. One of the

DESIGN THINKING THE IDEO METHOD IN FIVE STEPS

- **Understand:** Get to know the needs and challenges of your user population, and how they perceive your products and services.
- **Observe:** Watch real people in real-life situations to find out how they work, what confuses them, what they like and dislike, and where their needs can be better served.
- **Visualize:** Think about new ideas and concepts and how the people who use your library will use them. Kelley dedicates an entire chapter to IDEO's brainstorming process for visualizing new designs.
- **Evaluate/Refine:** IDEO invests heavily in the prototyping process in order to test ideas and then improve them. Prototyping is also an important part of the instructional design process, as is formative evaluation.
- **Implement:** Often the longest and most difficult part of the process, but this is how any new product or service goes public for user consumption.

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things they discovered was the “environmental complexity” (information overload of sights, sounds, and signs) of the library and how it confused and intimidated users.

My second encounter further developed my knowledge of ethnographic research as I learned about work-practice studies being conducted at the library of the University of Rochester in New York. These studies are designed to reveal the practices of users as they conduct their work. The goal is not to identify ways to improve user satisfaction, but rather to help users to accomplish their work by removing barriers or inefficiencies in the workflow. Visits to students’ dorm rooms yield information on their research practices and their electronic devices. Students use single-use cameras to record different aspects of daily life. Researchers observe students doing research, and they conduct interviews to further delve into the students’ thought processes as they conduct their research.

The difficult part of these research projects is the analysis stage. It can take hundreds of hours to review transcripts and notes, and then turn the trends that emerge into some-

thing tangible that can help the library develop a better user experience. But librarians can still make use of design thinking in re-engineering how users navigate the

library and its electronic resources.

In a recent presentation for the Library Association of the City University of New York, Nancy Fried Foster, lead anthropologist at the University of Rochester, encouraged attendees to take steps to implement the work-practice study at their own libraries to whatever degree possible. Even with limited resources (and how many of our libraries have an anthropologist on staff?), there are ways to gather useful information about library users. By observing their research practices or engaging them in discussion about the library and how they use it, any librarian can take the first step in the design thinking practice: identifying the problem.

Whether it is the introduction of a new technology, a shift in the organizational structure, or a new promotional campaign, we may be too quick to formulate the solution without adequately understanding the problem. That’s not how designers think. Kelly of IDEO has said that design is largely about identifying problems, not solutions. If the problems

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are well understood, the solutions will present themselves from the available possibilities. Perhaps the best way to better understand this thought process is to get to know a designer, be it an architect or an instructional design specialist. You will notice that he or she spends a great deal of time at the beginning of any project simply talking to people and attempting to recognize patterns. The designer's effort to assess the gap between what exists and what needs to change helps to inform the process of targeting the appropriate solution. Design thinkers take a much more deliberate and thoughtful approach to problem resolution; they rarely jump on bandwagons.

Better library user experiences

Where design thinking can really help librarians make a difference is in creating better library user experiences. The idea of a "user experience" may strike some librarians as somewhat superficial in that it may imply an effort to deliver style over substance. Yes, a library may need to work at developing an experience for its users, but the goal is to engage the people who use our libraries, and connect with them in a personal and memorable way. Consider the possibilities of creating library users who are passionate about the library. Organizations that achieve success in this way do so by giving users great experiences. They want to come back again and again. That's why certain food and beverage outlets, theme entertainment companies, and even information providers create highly sustainable services. To emulate such practices, for a start, as a profession we need to move beyond thinking of our primary product as just a commodity to which we offer access.

In the book *The Experience Economy*, B. Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore identify the four stages of the user experience. It's similar to a hierarchy with the goal being to achieve the highest level of user interaction – the experience. At the lowest level is the commodity.


For example, a coffee bean is a commodity. A cup of coffee requires about five cents worth of coffee beans, but making the coffee requires the user to do all the work. At the next level is a good. A cup of coffee is the good that comes from the commodity. Making a cup of coffee from a package of ground coffee purchased in a store costs about 25 cents a cup. It's more convenient than starting with beans so there's an added cost. The next level is service. Buy a cup of coffee at an average restaurant or coffee outlet and you save time and hopefully get a better good, but it costs more. At the top of the hierarchy is the experience. All of these other modes resulted in a cup of coffee, but none of them is truly memorable. Now go to a highly evolved and specialized coffee café where you can socialize, connect to the internet, purchase gourmet beverages and food, and, of course, pay perhaps 100% more for a cup of coffee. But people will pay the premium because they want the experi-

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ence. And they will come back again and again because they like and desire the experience.

Libraries are tremendously challenged to provide memorable user experiences. For a start, we tend to focus on the commodity. Our commodity is information and when we allow ourselves to be identified primarily as an outlet for books and e-content we condemn ourselves to the lower rungs of the user experience. One way in which we can do better is to improve the quality of service by encouraging all staff to perform at high levels and do all they can to give users more than content. We know our library users can obtain content from other outlets, and will even pay to do so if they perceive value in the convenience and cachet of those other sources.

But what can librarians do to create experiences that are memorable? That's where design thinking may help by providing a framework for identifying the problems that prevent the delivery of great user experiences. There is no need for libraries to provide the Disney World or Las Vegas Strip experience. But consider the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle. If they can turn buying fish into an experience, then surely there must be some hope that librarians can create a memorable experience for seekers of knowledge.

The solutions may be as simple as fixing things that are broken, identifying procedures that create barriers for users, developing treasured social and cultural programs, or establishing community recognition for technology leadership and support. Observing the best practices of libraries that are creating passionate users who return again and again may help. It must begin by taking the slower, more thoughtful path of studying the work practices of users and understanding a great library user experience from their perspective.

Want to be a design thinker?

There is more to learn. A good start is to begin with some basic reading about design thinking in order to better grasp its inner workings. Books and articles by and about design thinkers, such as the *The Art of Innovation*, can provide greater detail and more concrete examples of how design thinking is applied to the creation of products and services. Another prominent design thinker, Tim Brown, also of IDEO, has written articles and recorded presentations with insight into how it works.

What about design thinking in libraries? Is there anything specific about applications in our profession? As with other non-design fields that are just now examining design thinking more closely, the migration of these ideas to new territory is too new to yield much that is specific in nature. But there are two ways that librarians can begin to learn more about design thinking in library settings. First, join the Blended Librarians Online Learning Community. Blended librarianship is the integration of instructional design and technology skills into practice. As a form of design there are

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elements of design thinking in instructional design. The Blended Librarians Online Learning Community at blendedlibrarian.org is a free community open to all that is just beginning to explore ways in which design thinking can be applied to further collaboration with community partners and help students achieve academic success. Those interested in design thinking may wish to participate in future programs, discussions, and information exchange supported by the Blended Librarians community.

Second, consider becoming a regular reader of *Designing Better Libraries*, a relatively new blog dedicated to exploring how design thinking can be applied to improve library user experiences. Found at dbl.ishost.org, this blog regularly reports and discusses new sources for learning about design thinking, user experiences, and other aspects of how to better apply creativity and innovation in libraries. The writers are all librarians who share their thoughts on how design thinking can be applied in library environments. Typical posts cover ethnographic research methods, the design and assessment of user experiences, and new ideas for generating innovation in organizations.

All of the above may help librarians to better understand and appreciate the value of design thinking. The essential question to ask in undertaking any new endeavor is "What's in it for me?" Perhaps this passage from

Maya Design's report on the changes at Carnegie Public Library may help to convince you:

"Librarians and library staff devote more of their time to more high-value, high-reward efforts. Changed perceptions have attracted new customers who would have otherwise avoided the library. Existing customers find it easier to accomplish their goals and, along the way, discover new things that they might have otherwise missed."

Sounds like the type of library where many of us would wish to find ourselves working. Those who decide there is little to gain from these new ideas may find that even some exposure to design thinking concepts and practices can help librarians imagine new ways to identify solutions to vexing problems or improve their users' experiences. Together, librarians who wish to learn more about design thinking can work together as they journey the path to becoming design thinkers. ■



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