The Visibility and Invisibility of Librarians

By James LaRue

To deliver a user experience that really has meaning, librarians must provide deeply personal and private value, as well as demonstrate larger social need. There is much labor to be done at both ends of this continuum. But first, we ought to lay out all the dimensions of “reference user experience.”

Let’s describe the first dimension as the quality of the library’s customer service. How is the user treated? The issue here is courtesy.

The second dimension is the competence of staff and the depth of library resources. How effectively are the user’s reference needs met? This is all about content.

There is a third dimension. In a time when we are grappling more deeply with the nature of securing support for libraries, we need to think more carefully about the continuum of librarian visibility.

Valuing visibility

I recently worked up a chart that sketches a range of user experience based on this third factor (see illustration this page). On the side of subtle librarian presence I suggest that we are the servants who wait. We design systems to assist our users in ways that don’t require a lot of intervention. We step in only when our systems fail.

We have a ways to go to realize this vision. A reference user experience that depends on thoughtful design requires a much more integrated and direct approach than what we offer today.

A virtual example: the first use of a library website might trigger a few questions to build a user profile. It might ask: What are your interests, hobbies, current classes, professional needs? What kind of alerts or reports would you like to receive in your mailbox? How would you like to set up some virtual workspace to keep track of previous searches and discoveries? This profile would drive, behind the scenes, an assortment of databases and displays that were tailored to the user.

Most libraries, now, either don’t aggregate or poorly aggregate various information resources. That design decision, that user paradigm, forces the user either to conduct the same search multiple times in different locations (and using different interfaces), or seek professional assistance. A more elegant design would handle those searches, and their delivery to the user, in the background. A truly professional approach doesn’t make the user work so hard.

On the side of invisibility, the user experience is one of privacy, almost anonymity. There’s nothing wrong with that. When the librarian is invisible and the design works, expect this: nobody worries about what goes right. A silently successful library lives in the background. In one respect, that unquestioned support could represent a triumph. The money flows to our cause, and no further statement is needed.

Suppose library resources falter? At that point our silence, our invisibility, is also our failure.

At the other end of the continuum is a transparent library that highlights both the presence and the value of the librarian.

Promoting expertise

This profession is all about connection. One level of that connection is the shift from servant to leader. Visible librarians link a bustling central hub to the community. They are readily available (friendly, polite, responsive) and highly expert. The in-depth reference interview is paired with technical savvy.

This librarian is as comfortable in front of a classroom as at the computer keyboard.

Whereas the invisible librarian offers the user an experience that is highly private, the visible librarian is engaged, actively managing the relationship between institution and user to assure the highest quality results.

The visible librarian has a prominent seat at the community decision-making table, actively clarifies choices, provides reputable and relevant information, and through every action trumpets the unique contribution of the professional.

What is the user experience here? Users are involved in a profound and continuing conversation. They understand inherently that quality service has a price.

It is not possible to deliver an excellent reference user experience without a librarian somewhere, whether in the projection room or on the screen. But we need to be far more strategic about both the application and the presentation of the librarian—the user needs us across the continuum.