

Asking the Right Questions | The User Experience

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"LET'S ASK PEOPLE WHAT THEY want from the library." I've heard this said in a few meetings, and I've seen related questions in surveys from libraries. I'm not so sure that this is the most productive way to think about creating a user-centered library.

Let me be clear. I wholeheartedly agree with the motivating sentiment behind this statement because it acknowledges a few important things:

- Users are important, and it is necessary to think about them.
- The library should tailor its services to what the community wants and needs.
- The library does not necessarily know what the people want and it should seek this information.



These ideas are completely noncontroversial at this point, but that hasn't always been the case. The recent passing of Charles W. Robinson (see [Blatant Berry](#)) reminded me of the controversy surrounding his "give 'em what they want" method of collection development embraced by the Baltimore County Public Library under his leadership—something that is now standard practice.

RETHINKING OUR APPROACH

So while "Let's ask people what they want from the library" certainly is a step in the right direction, and while it comes from a good place, I think it is a slightly misguided approach. I'll turn the tables for a minute.

- What would you like from a lawn care service?
- Invent a new way to do banking.
- What would make you go to the movies more?
- How could garbage collection be better for you?
- Create a way to improve filing your taxes.

After a bit of thought you might be able to come up with a few ideas about making these things more convenient, helpful, or interesting. Most of these ideas would be either generic, commonsense solutions (e.g., make it cheaper, make it faster) or wild, unrealistic notions (e.g., I want someone to take out my trash hourly).

Most of us probably know very little about any of the above subject domains, or peoples' behavior or needs surrounding those topics. It isn't our job to know much about this stuff. For the most part, we're on the consumer end of these transactions, and it is strange to think about being in charge of strategic planning for a bank, movie theater, or financial institution.

BETTER QUESTIONS

Likewise with libraries and civilians. Giving people a blank piece of paper and asking them to create new library services is unrealistic and unfair. Asking our communities the question, "What do you want from your library?" shifts the burden of design onto them. Creating meaningful and convenient library service shouldn't be their responsibility. That's our job. Our job is to figure out what problems our libraries can solve for our communities, and we can do this without asking them directly.

Both the asking of the "What do you want from your library?" question and the generally bland answers tend to make libraries feel like they're being user-centered. After all, asking the question checks the "get input from users" box, and as the responses are rarely shocking, the library can feel like it is doing an okay job.

Instead of asking people about libraries, we need to ask people about their lives.

PUBLIC PERCEPTION

Answers to the questions in OCLC's "Perceptions of Libraries" reports highlight the differences in approach. When the general public is asked what they think of when they think of the library, most people say "books." This answer isn't going to get us very far down the path to innovative services. Contrast this with answers you'd get if you asked people questions such as:

- What did you do this weekend?
- What is a hobby you wish you had more time for?
- Where do you like to travel?
- Tell me about a time when you were focused and lost track of time.

ADDED EFFORT

Asking a broad swath of community members these questions and processing the responses involve more than posing a simple question about library services, yes. But the rich results will expose patterns and help your library learn about the lives of the people it serves. Only with this information can you then brainstorm and prototype relevant and meaningful new library services.

So let's answer the question of what people want in their libraries, but let's go about it in this more oblique way. When we can then successfully answer this question, we can create library services that people had no idea they needed. Anticipating people's needs will surprise them, delight them, and make them feel welcome.
