

Focus on the user

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The impetus to be more and more ‘customer driven’ or ‘consumer focussed’ seems almost universal and relentless. “Consumerization” has taken on a specific meaning in terms of information technology. It represents the growing tendency for new technology “to emerge first in the consumer market and then spread into business and government organizations”¹. The consumer market is seen as the *primary* driver of information technology innovation. It wasn’t always so. Indeed information technology typically focussed first on the ‘back end’ tasks and then evolved to meet consumer needs. Library systems evolved in this way with the public facing catalogue or “OPAC” coming along relatively late as a module.

It has become common place to see the Internet and specifically the web as the key technology driver in terms of this more consumerist approach. For example Amazon’s mission is to be: “Earth’s most customer-centric company”² Nevertheless many organisations have yet to match Amazon’s relentless consumer focus. In a recent blog Ben Thompson argued that: “The business buyer famously, does not care about the user experience. They are not the user, and so items that change how a product *feels* or that eliminate small annoyances simply don’t make it into their rational decision making process.”³ The ‘rational process’ he mentions is typically the tender/RFP/specification based method that many organisations, including libraries, use to acquire their systems. One of the problems, according to librarian Aaron Tay is that: “librarians want to have complicated features such as advanced searches in systems like Summon which is empirically shown to be little used”.⁴

We might debate what a good user experience means but surely it is worthwhile goal. Libraries are only too aware that they are in competition with services such as Google and that the user experience of library services compares unfavourably in certain circumstances. Ben Thompson makes the following point: “The attribute most valued by consumers,

assuming a product is at least in the general vicinity of a need, is ease-of-use....all things being equal, consumers prefer a superior user experience” He concludes: “It is impossible for a user experience to be too good.”

So how do we create a great user experience? I’m not going to describe exactly what constitutes a good user experience. The precise elements that constitute a good user experience for a first year undergraduate may differ from an experienced academic or researcher. However I believe there are some pragmatic and useful tools that libraries can use to help them develop better services and acquire better products to help deliver those services.

For example I have been using the *Jobs-To-Be-Done* (JTBD) methodology, which is well established in the business world, with academic libraries. This is an insightful and productive way of analysing customer ‘needs’. “Most companies segment their markets by customer demographics or product characteristics and differentiate their offerings by adding features and functions. But the consumer has a different view of the marketplace. He simply has a job to be done and is seeking to ‘hire’ the best product or service to do it.”⁵ So users don’t want a library discovery service, a VLE, an ebook or ‘easier access to e-resources’: they want to solve a *particular* problem.

Taking this ‘jobs’ or problem based approach provides insights and can help anyone design or acquire new products or services. For libraries It can be a helpful tool, for example, in evaluating a variety of new library system offerings. This is because it not only helps to identify the jobs that need to be done or problems that customers (library users and staff) need to solve, but also provides a way of analysing potential solutions. Instead (or perhaps alongside) scoring a system against a set of functional requirements the solution can be evaluated in terms of how far and easily it enables users to get their ‘jobs’ done. In particular it can highlight how existing offerings are not meeting important needs. This can be where libraries or service providers can create new and innovative solutions. At the core of this approach is a deceptively simple set of questions:

- (1) what is the problem to be solved-the ‘job-to-be-done’
- (2) Who needs to solve the problem?
- (3) What’s the circumstance of the problem?

This analysis produces a series of ‘Job-to-be-done’ statements like this: **{User}** wants to **{solve a problem}** in **{this circumstance}**

It is important to recognise that the jobs are completely neutral of the solutions (the products and services). While a customer JTBD remains generally stable over time, the products and services an organisation delivers will typically change. The change may take place, for example, when a library is reviewing its strategy or its technology infrastructure.

There is a hierarchy of jobs. For example a 'top level' job for an undergraduate may be to 'get a degree' (or get a first class degree). Along the way the student will have a number of specific jobs they need to get done- to complete an assignment or essay for example. The circumstance can be a critical element. Supposing the user is on a train with their iPad and the deadline is the next day. In this circumstance how well do library services stack up against Google? Clearly there will be key functional aspects to meet practical customer needs. But there will also be emotional aspects: the subjective customer needs related to feelings and perception. These are often ignored but can be critical. They can be how the user herself feels about the solution or indeed how the customer believes others perceive them while using the solution. How cool is it? The better a solution can fulfil all of these factors the better chance it has of being successful.

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REFERENCES

¹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consumerization>

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³ 'What Clayton Christensen Got Wrong'. By Ben Thompson. Stratechery [blog]. 22 September 2013
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⁴ Information literacy & improving user experience - is there a conflict? Aaron Tay Musings about Librarianship [blog] 17 August 2013
<http://musingsaboutlibrarianship.blogspot.co.uk/2013/08/information-literacy-improving-user.html#.UqZCkOK1v84>

⁵ Finding the Right Job For Your Product. By Clayton M. Christensen, Scott D. Anthony, Gerald Berstell and Denise Nitterhouse. MIT Sloan Management Review April 2007
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