Stockholm Public Library. Photo © Andy Priestner

UX Research & Design

Trust the process: why UX research and design always works

For those who have been paying attention I've been writing this column for the last 16 issues of this publication. That's a lot of words, almost enough for a book. I've covered a lot of the key methods, talked about embedding UX, and the design work that should follow. I've offered many tips, tricks and anecdotes along the way that I hope have helped you get started either with baby steps or beyond.

Now, as 2020 dawns it just feels like the right time to stop, before I either run out of steam in terms of content or, worse still, end up sounding like a broken record. I hope over this time to have communicated that I am truly passionate about the value and approach of UX and, moreover, that this stuff really works. I should add here that it really does work provided you trust in the process and I think it is this point, more than any other, that I am most keen to underline as I sign off.

The UX mindset

Back in October 2019 I was working with 20 senior managers from across Stockholm's 40-plus public libraries leading a week-long training programme devised to properly embed and inspire a UX research and design mindset. The idea was that this programme would be a catalyst for change: intended to transform that organisation from a hyper-traditional, slow-moving, hierarchical bureaucracy into an agile, innovative, brave and truly user-centred concern.

Despite this rather daunting proposition I was not a bit anxious. I stopped to ask myself why. For one thing, I had faith in my abilities as a trainer and teacher, but that was only a small part of my confidence. The largest part was due to the fact that the UX process has never failed me. It has never once let me down.

On one particular day of this programme, I arguably had very good reason to be nervous. UX research with users the previous day had led us to generate a raft of truly radical prototype ideas to implement in the central Stockholm Public Library building, such as: devising a newspaper section that was more appealing to women than men, offering triage support on iPads for all visitors, temporarily re-purposing the audiobooks department due to its low use, and, most memorably, playing music into the building's main rotunda reading room that was traditionally reserved for quiet study.

I was asked that morning by one of the programme's attendees whether they should be concerned about the likely fall-out of the day's activity. I responded by warning them that despite the fact that the library staff working in the building had been fully warned about the prototyping, there was still likely to be some upset and anger, but that in terms of the user response we simply needed to trust in the process.

Putting data to the test

The ideas for prototypes were all directly generated from attitudinal and behavioural user data, after all. Besides, we were just testing – finding out if we were on the right track before we iterated on-the-fly. Despite the temporary nature of the prototyping there was some inevitable anger from staff, but the response from the users was more affirmative than I could have ever imagined. Nearly all of the prototypes were enthusiastically welcomed, especially as they were developed in response to user behaviour and feedback in real time. There was a genuine buzz of excitement in the air as library users happily engaged with the new services and spaces and it quickly dawned on the senior managers that this UX work was really something.

Andy Priestner (info@andypriestnertraining.com @andypriestner) is a freelance UX trainer and consultant and Chair of the UX in Libraries conference andypriestnertraining.com uxlib.org.

I have seen the process work time and again. It starts with researching with users, continues with user testing and ends with services that have been developed with the user. You can always trust the UX research and design process because the user is always at the centre of your endeavours. What comes out of the process is always, real, true, and better still, actionable. So yes, if I have one piece of advice to end these columns on, it's this: stop wasting time speculating and talking, stop having endless meetings about what users might or might not want, and stop devising services in isolation from your users. You don't know better. Implement a UX research and design process and trust it, because it will put your users at the heart of your library service.

If you want to find out more about UX you can attend the annual UX in Libraries (UXLibs) conference or one of the upcoming UXLibs day-long training courses. Find out more at: http://uxlib.org

You can also sign up to a CILIP Cymru Wales sponsored webinar with Andy, taking place on 5 February at 12.30pm by visiting https://bit.ly/2t06Uha **IP**