

Introduction - What is Patron for a Day (PFAD)?

The concept for Patron for a Day (PFAD) was generated in one of the first meetings of the User Experience group. The discussion focused on how empathy is a key ingredient in “design thinking”¹ and we wanted to find a way to help our staff build empathy for our users.

Technically speaking, PFAD is a collection of three different tests, taken by staff volunteers at one of our four different locations (Dewey, Hayden, Barker, Rotch). Practically speaking, it is an opportunity for staff to learn what it is like to be a user by performing a series of tasks patrons regularly perform in our physical spaces.

While designing a series of tests to develop empathy – we realized we were also designing usability tests of our physical spaces. Some tasks required interaction with technology, such as scanners and computers while others just required interaction with the physical space and collections. Some tasks were easy - “find the restroom”; others were harder – “scan pages from book X and send to your email.”

In most cases, staff members visited libraries they were less familiar with to complete their “test”. They were asked to take notes about their experience (good and bad) and after completion, were asked to rate each task and enter their comments into an established web form. We had twenty volunteers complete one of three different tests at one of four locations.

What we learned

The results were as varied as the people and the tasks – but themes definitely emerged. Some libraries are harder to navigate than others and many of the tasks we thought were representative of “ordinary” tasks patrons regularly perform were hard for library staff.

Technology

Technology wasn't always difficult to use, but it was often hard to find or make sense of.

Scanners, copiers, “MIT-only” computers and other technology often not visibly labeled, or on the library maps.

- One comment read, “There were two microfiche reader/printers on a table. They were not labeled to indicate that one scans and the other prints.”
- When trying to find an “MIT-only” computer, one patron commented, “This was more complicated than it had any right to be, most of the computers I stumbled upon weren't labeled in anyway.”

Equipment instructions are not standardized across libraries

- If there were instructions posted – some people commented they were not the same instructions they were familiar with at another library.

Collections

The way we organize collections sometimes confused our volunteers.

- One comment read, “The bound journals were incredibly hard to find (took 15 minutes!). There were no signs near the current journals indicating where to find older journals.”
- Issues surrounding non-standardization of certain collections came up, again. On finding theses in one library, “I thought they'd be filed by department, and they were all just filed by last name. (No sign that told me how they were filed.)”
- And another, “...the journals are in alphabetical order--unlike some of the other libraries...”

Conclusion

Two common themes run throughout the above and accompanying comments.

- First, there are issues around signage and documentation. In some cases no signage exists, in others the signage is outdated and/or confusing. Odds are our patrons deal with this every day, but often say nothing. We lament “sign blindness” and sometimes think that there are already too many signs in our spaces, but from these comments it is clear that some signage is needed to make our spaces and our technology more usable.
- The second common theme showed a need for standardization. This standardization includes signage, equipment documentation/instructions and collections organization.

Next steps

- Share the information with appropriate people/groups and work together to improve our spaces for our users.

¹ For a good, brief article about design thinking see: <http://roanyong.wordpress.com/2010/10/24/design-thinking-according-to-tim-brown/>.