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LEADing the Way: UX IRL @ OSU

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VALERY KING

Valery King has worked at OSU Libraries since 1987, first as a library technician in cataloging and maps, and currently as Government Information and Business Librarian, which includes duties as the Federal Depository Library Program coordinator since 2002. She has been active in OLA for many years, particularly in DIGOR. Her writing and presentations focus on reference and virtual reference service, and government information resources.

Introduction

Oregon State University Libraries and Press has reorganized its circulation, reference and building management services into a new department, focusing directly on the experience of library users. The Library Experience and Access Department (LEAD) was designed to meet evolving needs with access to user-focused, proactive, and flexible services and spaces that enrich learning, teaching and research. Our new organization gives us the opportunity to explore user experience in a comprehensive, holistic way that includes our physical space. In our first year, LEAD has investigated ways of evaluating and revitalizing in-person services, through signage and concierge service projects and collaboration with students in the OSU Department of Design and Human Experience.

Inception

The ways that students use the library have changed significantly over the years, and traditional academic library service models and how we present and organize our public spaces

have become less relevant to our users. For us to be true to our core values of access and service, we need to address these changes proactively.

In 2015, The Valley Library at Oregon State University took a major step in this direction when it formed a new department: the Library Experience and Access Department. LEAD was designed and charged to meet the evolving needs of our patrons with access to user-focused, proactive, and flexible services and spaces that enrich learning, teaching and research. As its name suggests, LEAD primarily addresses services and issues affecting user experiences in the Valley Library and includes the Circulation Desk, Information Desk (reference and informational services), and Building Maintenance. The formation of LEAD was in many ways a break with tradition, as these services had previously been located in three separate departments.

The LEAD configuration grew out of several strategic issues identified in the Oregon State University Libraries and Press Strategic Plan 2012–2017. The very first goal of the plan called for us to "Reimagine the Learning and Service Environment." The new arrangement would encourage greater cooperation and collaboration between our public-facing library services while striving to meet the vision of "engaging spaces, exceptional service, superior access."

Methodology

The library has for several years been using various methods to measure patron satisfaction, such as patron surveys, focus groups, and user experience studies. The approach used by LEAD built upon much of the information already gathered through these methods. We reviewed what progress we had already made on the Strategic Plan goal so that we could determine where to place our energy in developing our services.

Soon after the department's formation, LEAD staff members participated in an exercise used by marketers and UX designers: identifying the "touchpoints" (where and how people interact) between the library and the users. The staff broke into small groups to identify the places where we and our patrons "encounter" each other and look for ways to improve these interactions. We came together to compare our lists, and we were amazed at the dozens of touchpoints we were able to identify.

We found that many of our touchpoints involved wayfinding, or how users find their way through a space. Like many academic libraries, the Valley Library is a large, multi-level structure, encompassing approximately 305,000 square feet. Due to the size, complexity, and the number of dedicated spaces available, navigating the building poses a challenge for patrons and visitors. The building's existing signage was installed during a remodel in 1999. As our library spaces have evolved away from their prior uses, the signage can now potentially hinder our patrons in successful wayfinding. Desk staff shared that many users seem confused by the current signage and that our service counters spend a considerable amount of time helping users with finding locations in the library; a review of our desk statistics found that both the Information Desk and Circulation Desk field a large proportion of directional questions.

First-Year Projects

Based on this exercise and information collection, several touchpoint issues were identified at the library. Most could be successfully addressed by smaller teams rather than requiring the attention of the whole department. However, wayfinding emerged as the primary focus for LEAD as a department in its first year.

At about this time we connected with Professor Seunghae Lee of Oregon State University's School of Design and Human Environment (DHE) in the College of Business, an expert on wayfinding. She had recently published a case study on interactive maps that identified common wayfinding challenges, using the Valley Library as her subject (Lee, Kim, & Platosh, 2015). Professor Lee made a presentation to library staff and provided us with a fresh take on the wayfinding challenges in our building. She also offered ideas for cost-free or inexpensive changes that could provide immediate improvement to our users and gave some indications of more large-scale options.

SIGNAGE & WAYFINDING

The new LEAD Signage and Wayfinding working group was charged with exploring wayfinding in relation to the environment and to individual characteristics of patrons, such as their familiarity with the building. The ultimate goal of the workgroup is to determine the main issues users have in finding their way in our library and come up with some ideas to address them. So far, the process has included reviewing literature, holding group discussions, talking to stakeholders, investigating other campus buildings to discover how they handle their signage, and visiting other libraries as the opportunity presents. User testing of our signage is the goal for the future.

The working group conducted a signage inventory and began a phased approach of replacing inaccurate or misleading signs with temporary ones. More permanent signage will coincide with other upcoming changes being considered for the main floor public spaces. The group is currently working with a Senior Computer Sciences Capstone course to develop an Interactive Study Space Map and Wayfinding Tool.

CONCIERGE SERVICE

One idea that came up in the LEAD touchpoint sessions and staff retreat was a "concierge service," which involved setting up a temporary station in a prominent place to help orient new users to their library. Staffed during the busiest hours at the library (determined by statistics from the previous year), the concierge could help users with quick directional or technical questions while referring circulation and reference questions on to the appropriate desk. A concierge service offered the possibility of solving multiple issues with wayfinding in the Valley Library. A staff member posted just inside the entrance would be an obvious first touchpoint for users, while also reducing the number of users that might be bounced between service desks after standing in the wrong line. This would be a low-cost, low-effort solution with a potentially high impact.

Library Administration gave the go-ahead to set up the concierge service as a pilot project to coincide with the first three weeks of classes in September 2015. An old podium was repurposed, with the addition of wheels, brochure racks, and an "ASK HERE" sign, as a mobile concierge station. Because of the nature of the concierge service as a directional and referral touchpoint, we proposed that library employees from any department would be able to staff the service with little or no training. An email was sent out to all library employees asking for volunteers to sign up for one-hour shifts during the first three weeks of classes, and staff response was positive and enthusiastic.

Frequently used informational handouts from the Circulation and Information Desks (campus maps, printing instructions, and the like) were provided at the concierge station,

as well as a clicker for recording the number of questions and pen and paper for recording questions and comments from users. The majority of transactions were simple directional information or questions about printing; more involved questions were referred to an appropriate service point (generally the Circulation Desk, Info Desk, or Computer Help Desk).

By the end of week three, the concierge service had answered 1382 questions. Not only was the concierge a useful service to new library users, but it also gave LEAD a clearer vision of what people were looking for and having difficulty finding. The questions from users recorded by the volunteers are being reviewed and used to inform our department's continued work on wayfinding in the library.

DHE Collaboration

Our association with Professor Lee has led to further UX opportunities for the library. At her suggestion, and with our enthusiastic approval, the library became the subject for a case study by her DHE students. Small groups of students were assigned to one of four categories of library service or spaces. After an orientation and classroom discussion with the head of LEAD, Beth Filar-Williams, the student groups conducted interviews with library staff and studied the spaces and how they were being used.

Their final reports, including their informed and researched recommendations and suggestions for improvements, were made available to us. These reports are an invaluable resource for the LEAD department, in large part because they are authored by our primary user group: our students. The Signage & Wayfinding working group members are using the DHE student reports to identify problems in the library and potential solutions, as well as prioritizing student suggestions through a high effort/low effort, high impact/low impact evaluation. Suggestions from the DHE students are also being considered in the library's current renovation of the Information Desk and Learning Commons area.

Before: the large Information Desk from the library's 1999 renovation.

After: remodel completed with new custom desks that are smaller and more accessible than the original.

Next Steps for LEAD

We've learned a lot over the past year! We're looking forward to applying what we've learned about our users' needs and what they would like from the library, as well as additional ways of using UX techniques in our work. Among things already in the works for the coming year:

CREATION OF A CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL UX EXPLORATORY TEAM

A UX Exploratory Team was formed to determine what projects would benefit from collaboration across library departments, identify what other usability testing is being performed within the library, and investigate what is happening across campus. This team will also look at the usability of the library website.

RENOVATION OF THE INFORMATION DESK AND LEARNING COMMONS

With a gift from a generous donor, it has been possible for us to replace our large, intimidating information desk with a smaller one that allows for easier collaboration between staff and users. We have completed demolition and are waiting for the new desk to arrive. Requests from Professor Lee's DHE students for more whiteboards and collaborative work areas were considered when picking out the new Learning Commons furniture.

CO-LOCATION OF THE CIRCULATION DESK AND INFORMATION DESK

This could go a long way toward solving one of our most common wayfinding issues. We are currently gathering information from staff and library users to identify what would be involved with providing reference and circulation services from one spot.

SIGNAGE IMPROVEMENTS

The original design of the Valley Library had signs hung from the ceiling, which are often missed by users. There are also many support columns throughout the building that often block visibility. We are trying out using these columns as signposts by applying vertical, easy-to-read text to them, which turns an issue into a feature.

COLOR COORDINATING LIBRARY FLOORS

Using color as an aid to wayfinding has been a focus of designers for some time, with studies showing that people naturally use color to sort and group objects. We are currently investigating ways to color coordinate our six floor building, to make it easier for our users to identify where to find services, collections, and each other! This is another suggestion from the DHE class teams.

CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL PARTNERSHIPS

Our underused newspaper room on the main floor is being repurposed for a Current Issues Reading Room, in partnership with the Teaching and Engagement Department and Collections librarians. LEAD members are also working with M. Brooke Robertshaw, OSU's Assessment Librarian, on the evaluation of various projects (one collaboration being a poster session at the recent OLA Conference on the Concierge pilot).

Conclusion

With student needs and preferences changing fast, university libraries must also evolve to stay useful and relevant. New services are being considered as old services are re-evaluated. The Learning Experience and Access Department seeks to meet our users' needs in meaningful ways, using all the various communications and data-gathering tools at our disposal. The usability of our physical spaces is one large piece of the UX puzzle that we are excited to be putting together as OSU Valley Library's LEAD department.

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