



From Gatekeepers to Gate-Openers

Our future lies in designing meaningful library user experiences

by Steven Bell

Do you want to be a gatekeeper or a gate opener? Library workers have long held the position of gatekeeper, historically determining what books, media, and other materials to acquire, and then creating the structures that allow our community members to access them. In more recent times we design websites that allow those same users to choose from an array of resources and services, but as gatekeepers we decide the what, where, and how of presentation. How well or poorly we accomplish the gatekeeping task determines end users' success or failure in achieving their learning or research outcomes.

As gatekeepers we can aspire to only a limited professional role: making information accessible.

But in today's crowded information-provider landscape, that role fails to distinguish the many great assets libraries bring to their communities. Our future may depend on our ability to differentiate what libraries offer and what library workers contribute to communities. The library profession should consider an alternate vision for our future: the library worker as gate-opener. In that role we shift from a focus on creating access to resources to creating meaningful relationships with community members—both those who use and those who don't use our libraries. One way to differentiate ourselves while building these relationships is by designing great library user experiences.

Last year, I attended a presentation to librarians by author and entrepreneur Seth Godin, a leading authority on non-traditional marketing methods. One thing Godin said stood out in my mind as a critical piece of advice for library workers: "You need to stop being gatekeepers and start being gate-openers." He gave examples of profit and nonprofit organizations that created loyal and dedicated followers, groups he described as "tribes" that emerged as these organizations transformed their core purpose from gatekeeping to gate-opening.

Godin explained that people join tribes, whether as leader or follower, because it offers them something in their lives that provides meaning. In other words, they seek and find a unique experience. Likewise, Godin urged the audience of librarians to better understand what their community members need to accomplish, and to then open up the gates in order to deliver the resources they need for their learning, their research, their lifestyle, and their well-being, and to invite them to discover meaning through personalized relationships with library workers.

Our nation is still reeling from the shockwaves of a severe recession. As homes, jobs, and invested savings were lost, our country experienced a cultural shift. In the years leading up to the global economic crisis Americans were on a buying spree, much of it fueled by easy credit. Individual meaning was often found in the acquisition of material objects. In the aftermath of the economic meltdown both consumer confidence and spending took a nosedive. Americans ended their buying binge, which ended the culture of "stuff" in which accumulating goods was highly valued, but failed to end people's need to find meaning in their lives. That's where the cultural shift happened.

On his Marketing Knowhow blog, Harvard Business School marketing professor John Quelch observed a new type of consumer emerging from the collapse of mass consumption, whom he called "Simplifiers." One of the four characteristics of the Simplifiers is of particular relevance: "They want to collect experiences, not possessions," Quelch noted, adding that experiences "do not tie you down, require no maintenance, and permit variety-seeking instincts to be quickly satisfied." A growing school of thought in the field

of user-experience design promotes the idea of the experience as being about creating something meaningful for people, something that gives them intrinsic value for leading a better life.

The notion that libraries enhance the quality of life in their communities was central to the creation of www.atyourlibrary.org, launched this year by the American Library Association with funding from Carnegie Corporation of New York. Emphasizing services to families, youth, and job seekers, the @ your library website for the public encourages consultation, exploration, and multimedia as intrinsic parts of library use.

Delivering meaning

If Godin and Quelch are accurate in their perception of the shift from consumerism to experience-seeking, that bodes well for libraries. Libraries are organizations dedicated to enabling citizens to prosper from the accumulation of knowledge, and to leverage that knowledge for personal satisfaction, advancement, or to help others. Libraries of all types are well positioned to design the type of experience that delivers meaning. But business-as-usual thinking is not likely to get us there.

During a presentation about user experience a few months ago, a librarian spoke up and explained how students came by her office seeking assistance with research; nothing that unusual, but she related how that made the students feel good about having someone provide them with personal, caring help. From her perspective, that was how she created meaning in their lives. My observation was that *she* was the library experience; the user community derived meaning from her support. She didn't create or give "stuff"; she delivered a meaningful experience. The profession's new mandate is to capture the essence of that experience and design it into the totality of library organization.

Our lives are a series of experiences. Some are memorable, others not so much. Think about your own experiences. In my workshops on user experience, librarians' personal examples include great dining experiences, shopping at retail establishments that make them feel special, and visits to resort settings such as Disneyland. Great experiences are memorable, special, and make us want to return for more.

What you might not know is that many of these great experiences are not left to chance or random possibilities.

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Organizations with reputations for delivering great experiences succeed at it because of significant investments in experience design. But some experiences grow out of a confluence of circumstances such as location and a unique activity; then it is up to organizations to capitalize and build the experience. Think of the Pike Place Fish Market in Seattle, where the vendors wildly toss the fish that customers have purchased. How can the mundane act of buying fish be made into an experience so great that people from around the globe want to bask in the good feeling? When I encourage library workers to think about the design of a great library experience they express doubt or cynicism about the possibility. How can libraries deliver an experience? Well, if a fish market can do it why, can't a library?

Designing the experience

So what would constitute a great library experience? The obvious answer is great customer service. People like being

treated well. When they get poor customer service they will likely go elsewhere.

You know your library offers great reference desk service or access services. Patrons tell you so. But what *aren't* they telling you? A great experience reaches beyond one or two desks and extends to each and every touchpoint in the

library organization. That means anyplace where community members come into contact with your library—service stacks, the website, the OPAC, and even that student worker in the stacks.

It would be unrealistic to think we could engineer the experience in our libraries as well as Disney does at its theme parks, but perhaps we can be more like the fish market. Start by recognizing your library's core values. According to William Gribbons, business professor at Bentley College, user-experience design starts by understanding these values and making sure they are well articulated to everyone in the organization.

Information is available from too many sources, and to the casual user all information is the same in terms of quality. That's why differentiating the library is a critical part of user-experience design. If users perceive all information sources as the same then it really doesn't matter where they go for it. Experiences can be created around differentiation. That's largely how Starbucks achieved its incredible success. Pre-Starbucks there was no coffee experience; most retailers sold nearly identical or indistinguishable coffee products

at a similar price. Starbucks created an entirely different approach to selling coffee that focused on the quality of the beverage and the ambience of the location. Certainly offering new coffee drinks to the American public created some differentiation, but the crucial factor was the experience of the Starbucks store: It was about more than just buying coffee.

Viva la difference

Now here's the hard part. How can libraries achieve differentiation? In what ways can libraries offer a uniquely different information experience? That's where meaning comes into play. Libraries have always been about providing meaning to people, and now people in search of meaning could be looking to libraries to find a different information experience. In *Making Meaning: How Successful Businesses Deliver Meaningful Customer Experiences* (New Riders Press, 2005), authors Steve Diller, Nathan Shedroff, and Darrel Rhea describe 15 dimensions of meaning based on interviews with thousands of individuals who shared what matters to them, what they most value, and what is memorable. The list certainly will resonate with any library worker because libraries are all about delivering these types of meaning, among them:

- *Accomplishment*. Library workers help students and others achieve academic success, they help community members develop new skills and talents, and the act of reading a book is itself an accomplishment.

- *Beauty*. Libraries are places where community members can indulge in the appreciation of the arts.

- *Creation*. Libraries provide the raw materials that stimulate creativity, but unlike other information providers it offers real people with whom creative individuals can establish relationships.

The list goes on, encompassing *Community*, *Freedom*, *Enlightenment*, and *Truth*. It's clear that libraries can offer meaning across the entire spectrum of what is important to people. That is the answer to the "How can libraries design a differentiated user experience" question. Begin by designing a library user experience that focuses on creating meaning for people, and deliver it through personalized relationships and across all of the library's touchpoints.

Just as there is no single user experience for retailers, resorts, or cafés, each library's user experience will be as different as its history, community, and culture is from all other libraries. The library's workers, in defining their gate-opener role, must identify what will make its user experience unique. As with all new ventures, the hardest part is getting started. The first step is to be clear about what business the library is in. For too long the general assumption is that the library is in the information business, or the community's perception is that the library is in the book business. In seeking the answer to the "What business are we in" ques-

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tion, we need to think less about the goods, services, and content libraries provide, and focus instead on the value that our user communities derive from the services and content.

Consider a staff exercise in which the question is framed as “The library isn’t in the business of connecting people with information, the library -----.” What comes next helps to define the library’s true business. And we can look to business for some examples. Harley-Davidson isn’t in the business of selling motorcycles; it sells the concept of freedom to middle-aged men. Black and Decker doesn’t sell drills; it sells holes in the wall. Again, focus on the value delivered, not the product or service.

As technology-based organizations, libraries may be particularly susceptible to disruptive technologies that hasten obsolescence. You’ve heard statements such as “They thought they were in the telegraph business, but they were really in the communication business” to describe companies that became obsolete because they poorly understood the nature of their business. It’s up to us to prevent libraries from becoming one more example of an industry that was disrupted by new technologies because it thought it was in the information business but failed to understand what people really valued about its services. So start with the

people in your community. Ask them why they use the library. Ask those who don’t use it why they don’t. Consider just observing how your community members use what the library offers. It should provide new insights into your library’s real business, and ideas for a truly gate-opening library experience.

In his closing remarks, Godin said that there was little any of us could do to convince those who thought they no longer needed libraries that they were wrong. Instead, he advised, we needed to humanize the library, to get out into the community and make the library not about the resources and the technology but about us. We needed to open the gates to ourselves. That, he stressed, lays the foundation for relationships to develop; then the community, even the naysayers, would seek us out. The library worker as gate-opener, I believe, is the essence of the 21st-century library user experience. ■

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