

THE USABLE LIBRARY...

...DOESN'T MAKE PEOPLE FEEL STUPID

There are a number of ways libraries can make people feel stupid.

- librarianspeak
- bad/inaccurate/no signage
- confusing websites
- staff (not user) centered policies

All of these things must go.

...IS INTERESTED IN ITS PATRONS

A library isn't (and can't be) successful unless it wants to learn things about its patrons. There's just no other way for a library to know how it can best meet the needs of patrons without learning about them.

...IS GENUINE

Being helpful, curious, and empathetic can't be faked. Hire accordingly.

...LIMITS ITS OWN CHOICES

Libraries have limited resources. It follows that they can't do everything they'd like to do. A limitation? Perhaps, but also an opportunity. Limitations should focus libraries on what's most important and allow them to cut away unimportant services/features.

Taking away services? Won't people be angry? Maybe, but with adequate research a library should be able to figure out its least popular service and start there.

By doing this a library can free up as much time, effort and money as possible for what really matters to its patrons. Only then can it do as good of a job as it should be doing.

It is far better to make 50% of your patrons ecstatic than it is to make 100% of your patrons barely satisfied.

...HAS SANE POLICIES

No cellphone policy? No food or drinks? Mean and ugly signs enforcing those rules? Insanity, all of it. The library is a growing organism, right? Let's grow.

Start by keeping a list of every time you say "no" to a patron. Review that list weekly. Some policies are enforced for no better reason than "we've always done it that way."

If you must ban something and must have a sign attempting to enforce the ban, make sure it isn't disrespectful and that it looks nice.

...PROTOTYPES AND TESTS

Practice. It makes perfect. It is pretty unlikely that your library can optimize a service on the first try. Do you know what Apple computers did before launching its first retail store? They built one in a warehouse to see if it worked. After observing people use the store they were able to iron out the problems before exposing the public to them.

You can do similar experiments in your library even without a spare warehouse laying around. Bring in people before or after hours and watch them interact with a new collection or furniture arrangement. Learn from them, make it better and try it again. Test a new webpage design (even just on paper) with some Library Friends. Improve the page and test again to see if it is easier for people. Devote one reference shift per librarian per week to never sitting behind a desk and report back after a month.

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