Chapter One

The Case for Service Design in Libraries, or Libraries as Systems

More than fifty years ago, famed industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss wrote the following:

It must constantly be borne in mind that the object being worked on is going to be ridden in, sat upon, looked at, talked into, activated, operated, or in some way used by people individually or en masse. If the point of contact between the product and people becomes a point of friction, then the designer has failed. If, on the other hand, people are made safer, more comfortable, more desirous of purchase, more efficient—or just plain happier—by contact with the product, then the designer has succeeded.¹

Dreyfuss knew his business. As a designer, he focused on the human element and the necessity of designing for people. His work ranged from designing phones, thermostats, and alarm clocks to tractors, trains, and even stationary. He created an international sourcebook of more than twenty thousand symbols that are the standard symbols used by industrial designers throughout the world even today. Dreyfuss’s innovative, yet simple and user-friendly, designs still impact how we work and live. The lessons he taught designers are just as relevant now as they were fifty years ago, and they are equally relevant to the work libraries are doing to try to make and keep their services useful, relevant, and meaningful for users. As a user-centered service profession, librarianship has a lot to learn from Dreyfuss. Our role as service providers should be to eliminate those “points of friction” that appear between our users and our library systems, services, and people. While this is not a book about Henry Dreyfuss or his work per se, the lessons he taught

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serve as inspiration for our work in researching, designing, and maintaining core and innovative services in libraries.

Service design is unique in that it looks at everything we do and provide in the library as a service. It not only looks at how space and resources are allocated and integrated into the library ecology, but also how they are consumed by the user. Because libraries and the objects contained therein are constantly “ridden in, sat upon, looked at, talked into, activated, operated . . . [and] used by people,” it is incumbent on librarians to ensure that we locate and eliminate points of friction and find ways to delight our users. Creating user-centered services in libraries is not new; however, in the last decade, we have seen a fundamental shift in user demand, “from the expectation of functional performance to a more broadly satisfying experience.” As our economy moves away from being based on manufacturing to services (and experiences), there is an increasing need to ensure that users are satisfied with the products and services they interact with. Service design can help us do that by providing tools and a pathway for understanding what users want, expect, and need from a specific library so we can properly assess our services.

Service design is unique in that it is a holistic, user-centered, systems-based approach that involves actual users throughout the entire process of designing, implementing, and assessing services. It is an especially powerful and useful methodology for librarians because it is grounded in systems thinking, which demands that we look at the entire library ecology when designing services. It also requires that we take the typical objects and products we provide to users and look at them as services, which suddenly gives tables, lamps, outlets, collections, computers, and other objects more meaning. This view of how resources are used provides insight into how our users experience the library. Finally, service design helps library workers break down the silos that not only hurt the quality of service users experience, but also can damage morale and limit the ability of managers to develop a happy, cohesive, and satisfied staff.

This book is an overview of and manual on how to begin using service design in your library. In this chapter, we make the case for service design as a powerful and meaningful method for creating, refining, and assessing library services.

THE LIBRARY IS A SYSTEM

Libraries are composed of interconnected elements (see figure 1.1) that work to fulfill the purpose of helping users meet their information needs. Like all systems, libraries consist of a “set of elements that [are] coherently organized in a way that achieves something.” But those of us working in libraries...
not usually think of the entire library system when we do our work because to create manageable departments, libraries have been broken down by task and function, which often results in the feeling that we work in silos and a loss of our “intrinsic sense of connection to a larger whole.”

Users are also not aware that the library is a system because they experience it as a physical building that houses books, tables, and staff that they know as librarians or an online hub with databases, ebooks, and other electronic resources. They see and experience the library as a whole. They often don’t realize that the library is divided into smaller departments formed around staff job duties. The departments, which are named similarly to the
tasks or duties they perform, appear on the organization chart in small boxes. These boxes often become the silos of the library. The employees in a silo focus only on their tasks and don’t look at the other silos unless a user’s need forces them to refer a patron elsewhere. This is typical of how most organizations work. Each person is assigned tasks, they do them, and that’s it. Unfortunately (or fortunately), library users are removed enough from library employees’ work tasks that they don’t usually see them. But the bad news is they often experience the result of this siloing, even if they don’t realize it is impacting them.

To avoid users being negatively affected by our division of labor, we need to begin thinking of the library as a system, with its associated elements and interconnections. From this perspective, it is clear that the function or purpose of the various pieces working together creates the overall user experience. For example, just within the simple task of finding and checking out a book, a user experiences the wholeness of the library—the elements that work together to create a single experience: They use the catalog that catalogers have created and maintain, which has been embedded on a website created by public services staff; they speak to a reference librarian about how to find the book; they wander the stacks and pull the book from neatly organized shelves; and they check the book out from a staff member working at the circulation desk. While completing this process, the user experiences the library as a whole, taking advantage of the work of many to find and check out a book. They do not see the invisible lines that divide the library by task and function.

Viewing the library as a system provides us with a total view of the experience and reminds us of the original purpose and nature of the library, rather than what it has become for management purposes. Services do not function inside a vacuum, but are tightly coupled with other services created by the library. Looking at the library from a systems perspective puts the emphasis back on the user’s total experience rather than focusing on the siloed completion of tasks. For staff members, the compartmentalized tasks may still be in the forefront of things to be done behind the scenes, but from the user’s perspective, completing each task plays just one part in creating their overall experience.