



UX in Libraries

Love letters straight to your library

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HOW do people really feel about your library? What elements of your service are perceived as barriers or turn-offs? Which particular experiences have even prompted some to decide to never return? A UX research method that can simply and eloquently reveal all of the above, and more, is the love or break-up letter. However, out of all the techniques available, it is easily both the most poorly executed and underestimated.

Essentially, it involves asking users or non-users to write a love or break-up letter to the library, or a specific library service, as if it is a person. To execute the method well, it is best employed within the confines of a workshop. The task requires detailed explanation, quiet reflective writing time, and several participants so that the admittedly odd nature of the task is somewhat dissipated by the shared experience.

If you have time, start by asking for love letters, as some people need to work up to being negative about libraries. If you only have time for one, try break-up letters. It’s always nice to hear why people love aspects of your service, but UX research should really be about uncovering hidden problems.

When I ask for break-up letters I usually say: “OK, so this is going to feel a little strange, but I want you to imagine that the library is a boy/girlfriend that you have broken up with and you’re going to write a letter to explain why that is.” As library staff are often present with me, I always add a comment such as: “Remember, you can’t offend anyone here. There’s an amnesty, we want to read cold hard truths otherwise we can’t change what isn’t working.”

Letter writing: a medium that works

On first hearing about this method, many library workers assume it will not work: younger library users don’t write anymore, they use Snapchat instead; in HE, only Arts students will be able to write letters; and the concern that people from non-Western cultures will struggle with the task.

Happily, I can refute all three. In my experience, neither age, subjects studied, nor culture are barriers. Almost without fail, I typically receive a full A4 handwritten page from everyone present, be they teenagers, science students, or Chinese grandmothers. Letter-writing is still a medium that works for most people, regardless of age or experience.

An emotional response

The main reason these letters work so well is that they ask the writer to anthropomorphise library services, allowing them (and by extension, us) to access the sort of emotional responses about libraries that would otherwise only be reserved for people. Also, as with cognitive mapping, the creative nature of the task involves use of a different part of their brain.

Of the letters I’ve collected, my favourites include: a visiting student at a UK university library politely complaining about the cold, requesting the provision of library blankets; a PhD student in Darwin, Australia, explaining why library opening hours did not fit her schedule as a working mother; a Singaporean woman requesting inter-generational reading sections so she could sit and read alongside her grandson; and a young child from a public library bemoaning the lack of graphic novels available. Their letters were incredibly detailed and offered actionable insights into issues that surveys or alternative UX techniques would not have uncovered.



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I can ask groups to fill out sticky notes about their library likes and dislikes, or interview them individually about their preferences, but it is often only when I request a break-up letter that I access the most honest picture of their library experience.

Ooh er missus

I’ll end with a warning about this method: a creative writer can employ the medium to hilarious, and often saucy, effect, populating them with euphemisms. One of my favourite examples simply read: “Dear library stairs, I love you... because you’re so dirty!” You have been warned.

The 5th annual UX in Libraries conference will take place at Royal Holloway, University of London between 17-19 June 2019. If you want to learn more about the user experience of your library, then this is the conference for you. Bookings will open in January at <http://uxlib.org>. **IP**