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UX Research & Design

Touchstone tours

How many library tours have you given in the past year? How many during your career? Tens? Hundreds? However many it is, I’m willing to bet you’re great at them! Deftly guiding your users around your library spaces and collections, being sure to stop at various key locations to explain a process, show off an impressive design feature, or a particularly good view. And I imagine that the majority of the people you show around are grateful for your introduction too, given that every new library means different layouts, resources and rules. No doubt you’re a guide with excellent knowledge too, not able to help yourself from embellishing the basic information with useful detail and tips, adding value as you go.

So, your tour is professional and informative, but just how much of what you show and tell them do you think actually goes in? How much is inwardly digested? Well, one of the best ways of finding out is quickly becoming the most popular user experience research technique of them all: the touchstone tour.

Ask the user to show you around

With a touchstone tour (I’ll come back to the strange name later), you are essentially flipping a traditional library tour on its head. Rather than you giving the tour, you ask the user to show you around instead. They may be surprised at first, unwilling even, telling you that they’re not the right person to ask as they don’t know enough, but the beauty of this research approach is that it’s as

much about discovering what users don’t know as what they do know. Once you have reassured them that you want their tour regardless of their knowledge, your aim is to explore: where they go, where they don’t go; what they find confusing and what, conversely, they consider to be valuable; and, perhaps most interesting, what they actually call things. Obviously, as you’re trying to explore the experience of library users, you can’t try this approach with a new visitor; the subject needs to have visited before.

The search thingy

The very first set of touchstone tours I was involved with revealed that: the library users in question all called the library catalogue “the search thingy” or “the thing you search on”; that the library guide and signage which we thought to be simplistic and easy to understand was regarded to be complex and full of impenetrable jargon; and that specific desks and areas were chosen due to surprising factors such as the presence of specific collections nearby, the availability of natural light, or simply because their friends would or wouldn’t find and distract them there. Crucially, these were all aspects of library experience that they would not have related to us through surveys or regular interviews. A touchstone tour is unique and invaluable because it is a walk around the user’s actual routine, with contextual reactions to spaces and furniture, as the environment prompts the user to recall specific problems and/or explain their preferences.

Revelatory

Recently I led a UX research day at Nuremberg public library, where the touchstone tour quickly became the



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most popular technique at the disposal of course participants, with as many as six different library users simultaneously taking staff on comprehensive tours of the space. In that library, as is so often the case, it was the layout, signage and navigation that was foxing users and in ways that had simply not occurred to us library-savvy experts. It was, as is often the case with UX research methods, completely revelatory.

Touchstone

As to where that peculiar name comes from, well a “touchstone” is simply an example used to judge the excellence or quality of something: in this case, user-led tours offer data on the usability of a library space.

If you want to discover how your users really view and operate in your library then I can’t recommend touchstone tours highly enough. Go on, ask a user for a tour of your library today. You might be disappointed and surprised by what they don’t know, but you will definitely be more informed.

The 5th annual UX in Libraries conference will take place at Royal Holloway, University of London between 17-19 June 2019. Book your place at: <http://uxlib.org> **IP**