Book Section:

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Communicating the benefits of UX to everyone who needs to hear it (UXLibs7 workshop)

Ned Potter
University of York, UK

At the end of what was known at the University of York as the 'UX Study Space Project', we presented our final recommendations to management. Ten months of work had gone into it and we were proposing (or in some cases had already implemented) far-reaching and wide-spread changes: new study space booking rules; new zoning for food and noise; new signage throughout the library; increasing the number of accessible spaces; creating a new 'Zoom Room'; purchasing some interactive mapping software… We got some really useful input from the leadership team and they signed off on all the things we wanted to do – at which point it occurred to me: this was the single most impactful piece of work I'd ever done in librarianship.

Nothing else really came close – the fingerprints of our UX project were all over the actual, day-to-day *user experience* of our students and staff, simplifying and improving things in so many ways: it felt euphoric! But the 10 months of hard work that had made these changes possible could have been undone if we hadn't been able to effectively and meaningfully show the value of our proposals to the audience who could give them the green light.

UX is such a complex and messy business, and it can be easy to get lost in the processes of ethnography and design. We mustn't undervalue the comms; successful communication plays a huge part in helping our work achieve its goals, and it's worth breaking down the communications life cycle of a UX project to ensure we're making the most of each stage.

1. The Pitch
   This is where you communicate the value of your proposed project, to get the time and resources you require to do the work. The audience here is the managers who can release funds for incentives and release staff time for fieldwork and design, and your colleagues whose input you'd like on the project.

2. The Recruitment
   Now the audience are library users (and, ideally, non-users too) that you need to persuade to participate in the fieldwork, lending you their insight.
3. The Findings
   This is where you need to communicate the results in such a way that you're empowered to really act on them – it's not UX if all you do is diagnose problems… The audience here is not just the managers who need to approve your design proposals, but wider library staff too. Keep them in the loop and get them on board.
4. The Legacy
   Here the audience is *everyone.* Everyone needs to know what you've done, how brilliant it was, and what the ongoing impact is. Tell the participants. Then tell the world.

All in all, UX is a comms-heavy business, so let's explore each stage in more detail and look at some tips to enrich your UX and help make those user-centred changes your library needs.

The Pitch

> "UX should be everyone's responsibility… It's a mindset and a way of working."
> — Andy Priestner

How do we get everyone on board with UX? The first thing to consider is the level of ambition required. If you're at an institution where UX is happening all the time and everyone has adopted the UX mindset Andy talks of above, then The Pitch will probably go okay. Your audience is halfway there already.

But what if we're not at an institution like that? What if we have to persuade someone to do something they weren't planning to do anyway, to take a leap? That is a *big* ask. Think about what it takes to make you change your mind. Our ambition needs to be sky-high here, and we need to plan accordingly. So, what helps?

Make it personal

Targeted communication is absolutely essential. Speak to individuals to get them on board rather than putting out a generic call for input, and, if at all possible, do so in person. How often do you change your own mind based on an email? It happens, but it's rare; email proposals are very easy to say no to. If you need to change minds, the gold medal option is to chat face to face, over a coffee. You've got *way* more chance of getting the buy-in you require that way. The silver medal option is Zoom/ Teams because at least that's a proper conversation.

Benefits not features

Next up are two related issues: framing things in terms of benefits, and not talking about UX so much. 'Benefits not features' is something I talk about often in a marketing context – in libraries we spend far too much time just listing what we have rather than what it *does* for the people. Library marketing consultant Mary Ellen Bates gave a neat example once in a conference talk I attended: "The feature is we have databases. The benefit is we give you access to high-quality information that Google cannot find." In a sense, The Pitch is an exercise in marketing, so we need to stress the benefits of what the UX will do for the organisation – focus on the potential *results* of the work and not the process. When we spend too long

talking about UX it puts people off – they can find it intimidating, or confusing, or threatening. There's no need to blind people with science and list all the techniques you'll use; just say, "We're using proven methods for getting real insight into the experience of our users, that will allow us to make informed decisions about how to improve services." Cite previous projects that have worked using these methods, and if there aren't any at your library yet then cite other organisations who have used them and highlight successes they've enjoyed.

The Recruitment

There are UX methods that don't involve direct interaction with library users (Behavioural Mapping, for example), but in most projects you'll need to recruit people to talk to. We'll discuss how to recruit shortly, but first let's talk about *who* you recruit.

First come, first served is a huge missed opportunity

I have found it hugely valuable to recruit for diversity, rather than on a first-come, first-served basis. UX is nourished by multiple perspectives, in ways it's impossible to predict until you hear those perspectives from the users. I love hearing from as many different types of people as possible, and that's more likely to happen if you're proactive about it.

In the previous UXLibs Yearbook I wrote about the 'three rounds of five' approach we take to UX recruitment at my library (Potter and Harding, 2023) – we speak to five users initially, then do some prototyping and speak to five more, and finally we launch the service or product and speak to five more to evaluate and make final tweaks. So we recruit 15 people in total, and we try to include as many different voices as we can among that number.

In my university context that means I'm looking for undergraduates, taught postgraduates and researchers – and both academic and non-academic staff too if relevant. I'm looking for representation from all three Faculties. More than that though, I'm trying to recruit neurodivergent students, I'm trying to recruit disabled students, I'm trying to recruit international students, distance-learners, people of colour: in short, I want as many perspectives as is practically possible from the 15 recruits.

Don't fall into the trap of thinking a project needs to be about disability to benefit from a disabled user's input – it absolutely doesn't. The UX does not need to directly relate to gender in order for a non-binary user's input to be valuable. I guarantee you will learn more things you can use when you prioritise representation in your recruitment.

A mixture of channels

I always try to distribute calls for participants via relevant student societies – e.g. Disabled Students' Network, International Students' Society, BAME Society – and prioritise applications that come from these routes (because, to be clear, while I'm asking students about their UG/PG status and Department, I'm not asking applicants about their protected characteristics).

If you want undergraduates, Instagram is the one place they ALL are – post an ad on your Stories and you'll get lots of Direct Messages from applicants. Tell people what you're trying to achieve and why, and make it clear how their input is truly valuable. To reach postgraduates you can go via Departmental reps, or put a News item on the website or a link in email signatures. For academic staff, we tend to approach people directly rather than put out a general call.

Although almost everyone is online a lot of the time, there are still plenty who don't use social media at all. Flyers in the library, and other relevant buildings, with a simple message and a QR code for sign-up, are a good way to ensure wider participation.

Reward people for their time

The most important thing to ensure you recruit the number of people you need is incentives. At my library we pay £15 for an hour of someone's time; as mentioned, we aim to speak to 15 people, so we know before every major project that involves UX that we need to budget £225 for incentives. The fact that this expense is straightforward, consistent and predictable does seem to help with getting the budget we require. When we first started using UX techniques we had much smaller incentives – £5 library café vouchers for example – but UX-focused colleagues in the Computer Sciences Department essentially told us this wasn't really acceptable. 'Students are getting paid for their time at a higher rate in all other instances across campus, so you should do the same or you're devaluing their contributions' was the message, and we took this to heart and have paid the going rate ever since. As a result, we always get more applications for participants than we need, which allows us to be more picky and able to try to recruit as a great a cross-section of users as possible.

The Findings

This stage of the communications life cycle is a really big deal. Because almost everyone working in our field seems to have the same experience: it's easy to get permission to do the fieldwork; harder to get permission to make design changes. The way we tell people about what we've found is crucial to getting the buy-in to make the changes we need.

Obviously it's hard to discuss specific findings here – everyone will be doing different work with different outcomes. So let's look at some wider arguments you can employ to get everyone on board.

1. **Everything we're proposing will improve the student experience**.
   Speak the managers' language, and support their existing aims. Get hold of the library strategy and show how this UX work is not some sort of niche side-project but something which achieves our goals whilst making users happy.
2. **It's evidence based – and yes, 15 people IS enough evidence.**
   Many UX practitioners have run into scepticism about whether the small sample sizes involved are robust enough to constitute 'proof' that change is needed. I have a multilayered response to this and I will rebuff people with as many layers as needed! Firstly there's the Steve Krug quote, 'Testing with one user is 100% better than none' (Krug, 2000) – and an appalling amount of library decision-making happens with no user-consultation at all, often with costly consequences. Secondly there is Laura Faulkner's findings that with usability testing you find 85% of the problems with just 5 users, and 97% with 15 (Faulkner, 2003). Library problems are often more complex than app and website problems, hence I prefer the higher number of 15, but I often stop at 13 or 14 if I stop learning new things. Finally, there's the fact that ideally we are *prototyping* changes – we're letting a massively increased number of people try something out and feedback on it before we make it permanent. So: 15 people *is* enough evidence to make informed change.
3. **Let me tell you a story…**
   As Dr Arun Verna said in his UXLibs keynote, "narrative is imperative." Take your audience on a journey – a solution-then-problem narrative arc, where you talk about what you want to change before you establish why, is generally not great, but a problem-then-solution arc works very well. Good

stories often follow a three-act structure: keep in mind that UX often catalyses change that should have happened already, so position it as the middle act of a story that is already in progress, with the final act being the design changes leading to a happier ending for the library users. Finally, talking and writing in the first person is essential for good narrative. ‘Students say they want X’ is not emotive at all; direct quotes form a deeper connection. I once had a student say to me, “It’s so cold [in the library] I can’t work for more than an hour or two. I have to go home and come back. I’m writing my dissertation and it’s so stressful.” This was so much more powerful than ‘students are cold’ or ‘we can never satisfy everyone with the temperature of the library,’ and that quote among others was essential in ensuring we *did* something about the problem.

4. **[Competitor] is already doing this, very successfully.**
   This works in two ways: firstly it reassures the managers that you’re not doing anything wild and outlandish, without precedent. Secondly it can, at times, spark a little competitiveness…
5. **This is a collaborative, cross-team effort.**
   Remember your collaborators from The Pitch? Invoke them here! Directors like collaboration and often hear gripes about it when it isn’t working, so your cool idea that helps loads of different teams out is a welcome change from that…
6. **I can empathise with your caution.**
   Being a manager is hard because you have more to do than there is time to do it in. A confrontational approach can be useful sometimes in libraryland, but such approaches very rarely work with senior managers. Think about being a director and all that they have to juggle in that role – good UX is all about empathy; be empathetic to your bosses too.
7. **How you ‘chunk’ information is important. Different groups need a different level of detail.**
   UXLibs alumnus Rebecca Blakiston uses the framing of ‘bite, snack, meal’ which is really helpful. Staff on the ground often feel left out of the loop – they may want a whole meal of info about your findings and changes. Senior managers are so busy, they may only want a bite. The managers who can approve your spend are often in the middle – time-pressed but need some detail to release the funds – a snack can work well.

The Legacy

So here we are at the end of the cycle. We pitched successfully, we recruited well, and we shared the findings with such brilliance that we've made our design changes. The user experience improves. How do we cement the legacy of this excellent project?

1. **Tell the participants before you tell the world.**
   I'm a big fan of getting in touch with the fieldwork participants ahead of any wider announcements, and re-thanking them for their input whilst sharing the upcoming changes. Their insight is so useful, they deserve a personalised account of what the project has achieved.
2. **Then tell the world.**
   Write about the changes on the website; post pictures of the changes to Instagram; tell people about the changes via digital screens! And don't wait to be asked to write reports – proactively shout about your success to management.
3. **Show how you used UX to prevent bad choices as well as make good ones**.
   A hugely underrated part of the legacy of a UX project is not just what you did, but what you didn't do because the UX stopped you just in time… That furniture or software you didn't buy because the UX stopped you – that saving is worth shouting about!
4. **It's important UX gets the credit but isn't the focus.**
   UX should be the common thread which unites successful projects, not necessarily the defining characteristic of the projects themselves. Sell UX by doing it well.

In summary

Use all the empathy skills you've developed doing UX, to pitch and report back on UX. Tailor your messages and make people feel valued. The Why must precede the How.

UX is the *feature*; improved services (leading to happier users, leading to better feedback, leading to improved reputation, leading to *more* engagement and subsequent feedback) are the benefit.

Good luck with all your UX communication. The more we value it, the more likely we are to feel the euphoria of progressive change!

References

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