Editorial Board Thoughts

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Editor's note: We have an excellent editorial board for this journal and with this issue we've decided to begin a new column. In each issue of ITAL, *one of our board members will reflect on some question related to technology and libraries. We hope you find this new feature thought-provoking. Enjoy!*

Any librarian who has been following the professional literature at all in the past ten years knows that there has been an increasing emphasis on user-centeredness in the design and creation of library services. Librarians are trying to understand and even anticipate the needs of users to a degree that's perhaps unprecedented in the history of our profession. It's no mystery as to why. We now live in a world where global computer networks link users directly with information in such a way that often, no middleman is required. Users are exploring information on their own terms, at their own convenience, sometimes even using technologies and systems that they themselves have designed or contributed to.

At the same time, most libraries are feeling a financial pinch. Resources are tight, and local governments, institutions of higher education, and corporations are all scrutinizing their library operations more closely, asking "what have you done for me lately?" The unspoken coda is "It better be something good, or I'm cutting your funding." The increasing need to justify our existence, together with our desire to build more relevant services, is driving an increased interest in assessment. How do we know when we've built a successful service? How do we define "success?" And, perhaps most importantly, in a world filled with technologies that are "here today, gone tomorrow," how do we decide which ones are appropriate to build into enduring and useful services?

As a library technologist, it's this last question that concerns me the most. I'm painfully aware of how quickly new technologies develop, mature, and fade silently into that good night with nary a trace. It's like watching protozoa under a microscope. Which of these can serve as the foundation for real, useful services? It's obvious to me that if I'm going to choose well, it's vital that I place these services in context—and not my context, the user context. In order to do that, I need to understand the users. How do they do their work? What are they most concerned with? How do they think about the library in relation to the research process? How do they use technology as part of that process? How does that process fit into the larger context of the assignment?

To answer questions like these, librarians often turn to basic marketing techniques such as the survey or the focus group. Whether we are aware of it or not, the emphasis on user-centered design is making librarians into marketers. This is a new role for us, and one that most of us have not had the training to cope with. Since most of us haven't been exposed to marketing as a discipline of study, we don't think of what we do as marketing, even when we use marketing techniques. But that's what it is. So whether we know it or not, marketing, particularly market research, is important to us.

Marketing as a discipline is in the process of undergoing some major changes right now. Recent research in sociology, psychology, and neuroscience has uncovered some new and often startling insights into how human beings think and make decisions. Marketers are struggling to incorporate these new models into their research methods, and to change their own thinking about how they discover what people want. I recently collided with this change when my own library decided to do a focus group to help us redesign our website. Since we have a school of business, I asked one of our marketing professors for help. Her advice? Don't do it. As she put it: "You and the users would just be trading ignorances." She then gave me a reading list, which included *How Customers Think* by Gerald Zaltman, which I now refer to as "the book that made marketing sexy."[1]

Zaltman's book pulls together a lot of the recent research on how people think, make choices, and remember. Some of it is pretty mind-blowing:

- 95% of human reasoning is unconscious. It happens at a level we are barely aware of.
- We think in images much more than we do in language
- Social context, emotion, and reason are all involved in the decision-making process. Without emotion, we literally are unable to make choices.
- All human beings use metaphors to explain and understand the world around them. Metaphor is the bridge between the rational and emotional parts of the decision-making process.
- Memory is not a collection of immutable snapshots we carry around in our heads. It's much more like a narrative or story—one that we change just by remembering it. Our experience of the past and present are inextricably linked—one is constantly influencing the other.

Heady stuff. If you follow many of these ideas to their logical conclusions, you end up questioning the value of many traditional marketing techniques, such as surveys and focus groups. For example, if the social context in

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which a decision is made is important, then surveys are often going to yield false data, since the context in which the person is deciding to tick off this or that box is very different from the context in which they actually decide to use or not use your service or product. Asking users "what services would be useful" in a focus group won't be effective because you are only interviewing the users' rational thought process—it's at least as important to find out how they feel about the service, your library, the task itself, and how they perceive other people's feelings on the subject.

Zaltman proposes a number of very different marketing techniques to get a more complete picture of user decision making:

- Use lengthy, one-on-one interviews. Interviewing the unconscious is tricky and takes trust, it's something you can't do in a traditional focus group setting.
- Use images. We think in images, and images are a richer field for bringing unconscious attitudes to the surface.
- Use metaphor. Invite interviewees to describe their feelings and experiences in metaphor. Explore the metaphors they come up with to more fully understand all the context.

If this sounds more like therapy than marketing to you, then your initial reaction is pretty similar to mine. But the techniques follow logically from the research Zaltman presents. How many of us have done user assessment and launched a new service, only to find a less than warm reception for it? How many of us have had users tell us they want something, only to see it go unused when it's implemented? Zaltman's model offers potential explanations for why this happens, and methods for avoiding it.

Lest you think this has nothing to do with technology, let me offer an example: library Facebook/Myspace profile pages. There's been a lot of debate on how effective and appropriate these are. It seems to me that we can't gauge how receptive users are to this unless we understand *how they feel about and think about those social spaces*. This is exactly the sort of insight that new marketing techniques purport to offer us. In fact, if the research is right, and there is a social and emotional component to every choice a person makes, then that applies to every choice a user makes with regard to the library, whether it's the choice to ask a question at the reference desk, the choice to use the library website, or the choice to vote on a library bond issue.

Librarians are doing a lot of things we never imagined we'd ever need or want to do. Web design. Archival digitization. Tagging. Perhaps it's also time to acknowledge that what we do has an important marketing component, and to think of ourselves as marketers (at least part time). I'm sold enough on Zaltman's ideas that I'm willing to try them out at my own institution, and I encourage you to do the same.

Reference

1. Zaltman, Gerald. *How customers think: Essential insights into the mind of the market* (Boston, Mass.: Harvard Business School Press, 2003.)