

An Outsider's View

A Tour of the Public Spaces in the Academic Library

This questionnaire provides an opportunity to look at your library as a student or faculty member might. You may wish to use it as the basis for a staff workshop, but it's a good idea to include at least a few of your customers when making the tour.

Begin by dividing the group into teams consisting of three to six members each. Although all teams need not complete all parts of the questionnaire, there should be enough overlap to stimulate discussion and even argument in later work sessions.

PART 1: OUTSIDE THE LIBRARY BUILDING

1. Begin at the street or most frequently used parking structure and approach the library. Is convenient parking available for library customers? Of course, this is a campus-wide decision, but inconvenient parking can dissuade many customers from using the library. If customers are simply returning materials, is there a way they can do so quickly? Can they drive up to the library, deposit materials, and drive away? Can customers with disabilities be dropped off at the library entrance?

Recommendations

Sample Follow-up Activities

If parking is a major problem, find out how you can make your needs known. Is there a campus-wide parking committee? What department makes decisions about parking, and which higher-level administrators can impact parking decisions? How might they be approached?

Other Follow-up Activities

2. Are there campus signs directing students to the library from other parts of the campus? Can new students easily find their way to the library's main entrance? Are signs sufficiently numerous and well-designed for this purpose?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

3. From what distance can you see the "Library" sign (in other words, the sign that identifies the building)? Does it stand out or simply blend in with the architecture? Is it lighted after dark? Is there a way to accommodate temporary signage outside the library, like advertising for special events?

Recommendations

Sample Follow-up Activities

Learn more about campus signage policies. Who must approve signage? Is it okay to hang large banner-type signs? What about electric or electronic message signs? Marquee signs? Backlit awning signs? Reader board signs? How much would such signs cost?

Other Follow-up Activities

4. Do you see any trash around the library entrance? Is there trash in the foliage? Who is responsible for keeping the area around the library litter-free? Do library staff members report problems? Is there good communication with the grounds supervisor?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

5. Take a good look at the landscaping. Is it attractive? Does it enhance the library building? Is it trimmed and pruned regularly? Are problems reported to the grounds supervisor or another appropriate person? Who reports problems? When was the last time there was communication with this person or department?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

6. Is the library's main entrance obvious? Is it indicated with a large sign, and can the sign be seen from a distance? Are emergency exits also clearly marked so customers do not waste their time walking around the building looking for the entrance?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

7. You're standing in front of the main entrance to the library. Do you see a bike rack? Is it large enough to accommodate all the bikes? Is it in good condition?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

8. Are patrons protected from the rain when they are standing outside the entrance, waiting for rides, and so on?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

9. Is the door hard to open? If you were on crutches, would you have difficulty? Is there an automatic door opener and button for the wheelchair-bound customer?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

PART 2: THE CENTRAL PUBLIC SPACE

10. Enter the library and stop. Do you see signs that lead you into the library, give you a general idea of where things are located, and point you in the right direction?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

11. Are all signs and literature racks intended specifically for customers entering the library? Is the amount of available information scaled to the needs of arriving customers? Has a conscious attempt been made to avoid information overload?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

12. Does the area look well-lighted, bright, and welcoming? Is there enough natural and artificial light to convey a positive impression and make it easy to see what lies ahead? Are light fixtures equipped with full-spectrum lamps, or is the light glaring and unpleasant?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

13. Are there comfortable chairs near the entry where customers can rest and get their bearings?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

14. Are there restrooms conveniently near the entry? Can they be readily observed by staff members working at nearby service desks? Might predators lurk unobserved?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

15. How does this area smell? You can often detect odors more easily when you've just come from outside. After a while, you may no longer be aware of them. Are you aware of pleasant smells like coffee or unpleasant ones like "essence of restroom"?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

16. Do you see an "events" board that tells you what's happening in the library today, this week, this month? Do you see other indications that the library actively advertises services and events?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

17. Are there spaces near the entry that are designed to bring customers into the library and give them a pleasant experience? Is there a small section with new or popular books to encourage browsing and leisure reading? Are there comfortable chairs nearby?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

18. Is there a service desk within sight of the entry? Is it clearly marked with a large overhead sign? If the only service desk in sight is the circulation desk, are staff members trained to orient new arrivals?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

19. If you can't see a service desk from the entry, do you see a sign that clearly leads customers to a service desk? Is the sign obscured by library furnishings or other customers?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

20. If you're wearing a coat, take it off so you'll be better able to judge the temperature later in this questionnaire. Does the area feel cluttered or are traffic lanes obvious? This is the part of the library that gets the heaviest traffic. Does the floor plan take this into consideration? Is it convenient for some customers to pause to get their bearings while others stride quickly toward other areas, or do they get in one another's way?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

21. Walk toward the middle of the large open space. The idea here is to be able to get a 360-degree impression of the library. What are the dominant colors you see? Are they attractive and inviting? Do you have a generally positive impression or is everything kind of blah? Do you see nothing but neutrals? Does the building convey an “institutional” feel with a lot of stone, steel, and concrete?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

22. Are the colors out of date? Were they trendy twenty years ago? Is the paint fresh or is it worn and grayish? Has the library ever hired a decorator to make recommendations (apart from construction/renovation projects)? Are color decisions made by a decorator or by the campus building and grounds department?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

23. Do you see wood paneling? Does it make the room look dark and uninviting? Does it look like the 1970s? Do you see architectural features that make the space look outdated?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

PART 3: COLLECTIONS SPACES

24. Is signage readily visible and professional looking? Do you see any temporary handwritten paper signs? Are signs placed where customers are most likely to look for them? Are they high enough?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

25. Are stairs and elevators clearly marked? Is it clear to customers what they will find on each level? Is this information presented to customers as they are entering elevators? When customers exit elevators, are they greeted with informative signage?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

26. Sit down by a sunny window. Is the glare annoying? Is there a shade or blind to control glare?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

27. Look at areas distant from windows. Does the whole space seem light and bright? Does the lighting seem to warm up the furniture and carpet, or is it cold and clinical?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

28. Look at the faces of the people around you. If the lighting is warm, their faces will look pinker, not yellowish. Do you see darker areas that aren't getting enough light? The carpet and furniture will look darker.

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

29. Are heavily used materials shelved closer to the central part of the library? Are infrequently used resources kept out of the way, ideally in high-density storage? If you were a customer seeking recently published books and journals, would you need to travel to the far reaches of the library? To another wing? To the fourth floor?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

30. Move to a stack area with full-height shelving (90 inches). Choose a stack section in the middle of a range. Can you read the titles on the spines of the books on the bottom shelf? Can you read them while standing? Do you have to get down on your knees to see the spines? Do you have to pull the books out to read titles?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

31. Run your fingers along the tops of some books. Are your fingertips covered with dust? Are the shelves themselves dusty or dirty? Are cleaning problems regularly reported to custodians? Who reports problems? When was a problem last reported?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

32. Pull out and examine the oldest books from this shelving unit. Are book covers or jackets grungy and in need of cleaning? Do the books have a “beaten up” look? Do they contain coffee spills? Are they water damaged?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

33. Does it look as if there are many materials that are out-of-date and have no particular research value? Is the collection weeded on a regular schedule? Are weeding policies and procedures in place?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

34. Smell some of the older books. Do they smell moldy? Mold is a health hazard. It is not something that can be tolerated just because it's traditional. If materials smell moldy, have you tested some of them? Do you have a program in place to eliminate mold from both the collection and the library building itself?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

PART 4: STUDY AREAS

35. Go to a reading area with tables or study carrels. Customers may spend considerable time on reading and research. Is this a comfortable place in which to spend time? Are chairs well-designed? Do they take individual differences into account? Are there some seats that better accommodate short people, and some that tall basketball players will find comfortable? Is there a combination of soft and hard seating to meet different needs?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

36. Take a good look at the carpeting. Does it look dirty? Is it stained? Are carpet stains reported to custodians immediately? Do staff members accept responsibility for their buildings? Are they proactive about problems?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

37. What about carpet color? Does it look faded and worn in some areas? The last time the library was recarpeted, were the leftovers kept for future repairs? Do you know where they're stored? Would it be possible for particularly worn areas to be replaced?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

38. Sit quietly for a moment. What do you hear? How loud is the heating or air conditioning system? Quiet background noise is fine. If you're immediately aware of the noise, it's too loud for customers to concentrate. Are sounds muffled or amplified? Carpet and acoustic tile ceilings muffle noise. High, vaulted ceilings magnify it.

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

39. If it's cold outside, sit down beside a window. Do you feel a draft? Is heat evenly distributed, or are there hot and cold spots? (You'll need to check several areas.)

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

40. If it's hot outside, is the library comfortably air-conditioned? (Check different areas.) Are there hot and cold spots?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

41. Does the air conditioning make the library feel damp? Have you included dehumidifiers in your climate control system? Have you encountered blasts of cold air coming from ducts? Run your finger along the grille or register. Is it gooey and moldy?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

PART 5: DISTANT, INFREQUENTLY USED SPACES

42. Find a distant corner on an upper floor. Does it seem that distant areas have been neglected? Do you see graffiti on the tables? Are there any broken chair legs? Has an OPAC station been vandalized? Take a good whiff. What do you smell? Do you detect the faint smell of urine? Does it smell dusty, or damp with mildew? Does it appear that custodians pay less attention to these distant areas because no one is likely to notice?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

43. Library staff rarely have a need to visit these remote areas, so a plan is needed to inspect them regularly. Who will do this? Will different areas be assigned to different staff members?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

44. Has the library's oldest and most worn furniture been relegated to these distant spaces? Are there ancient globs of gum stuck to the undersides of tables, carrels, and chairs? If both the staff and the custodians have been assuming that it doesn't matter anyway because nobody ever comes up here, you might ask yourself what right the library has to be wasting useful space. Faculty might vote to use the space for offices or classrooms; students might prefer individual or group study rooms. How might the space be better used?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

45. Go to the most distant restroom. Choose one on the top floor. Stop just outside the door. Can you smell unpleasant restroom odors? Enter the restroom. Has it been cleaned recently? Look at the floor. Are there places where dirt collects? Between cracked tiles? Where grout is missing or crumbling? Check the corners. Has dirt accumulated where the floor and wall meet? If so, you may want to install edging tile that curves up walls. Have fixtures become so grime-encrusted that they cannot easily be cleaned?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

46. Is there a sewer odor coming from the floor drain? It is amazing how many libraries cannot rid themselves of an unpleasant odor. If staff members have ever reported a lingering sewer odor, what happened? Were they told that it was fixed, but customers continued to notice it? Were they told that nothing could be done? Something can always be done, but it may involve a significant plumbing project. If the library can't get action on a problem that has so much impact on customer satisfaction, something must be done. Analyze past experience. What departments or high-level administrators might be able to apply some clout? Is this symptomatic of the library's relations with other campus departments? Is there fence-mending that needs to be done?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities

47. As you've walked through the library, have you noted any other problems? Does it seem to you that the library is as heavily used as you'd like it to be? Are there areas that customers avoid? Are there others that are more heavily used? Of course computer areas are usually well used, but are there other reasons why customers should avoid or be attracted to different areas? If you were a student who needed to use the library, what would make your experience more or less enjoyable?

Recommendations

Possible Follow-up Activities