

Keeping men comfortable

John Stanley

In my work with libraries I am a great believer that creating specific zones for demographic groups is critical in creating the correct experience for those groups. Children, young adults and specific ethnic groups require their own zones, but a men, as a group are often neglected.

In the retail world, more and more stores are being designed to attract women, as it is easier to increase sales per square metre by targeting this group. Men are therefore finding it more difficult to find public spaces where they can feel at ease.

In the library, the newspaper zone is the preferred 'male zone', especially for men on their own — and it is an area that should be developed to encourage more males into the library.

Some libraries, such as Fairfield City Library in New South Wales, do an excellent job and one could argue that this is a man's library: when I worked at the library it was difficult to find a spare seat in the library newspaper zone.

The key to success is to reduce 'male stress' so that men feel comfortable in the newspaper zone and want to linger longer in this area.

I have now worked with and studied libraries in the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa, and the following observations may help keep men more comfortable:

1. Position the newspaper zone well away from the young adult and children zones. The newspaper zone is ideal for a quieter part of the library as long as it is clearly signed and visible. Toronto library in Canada has positioned their newspaper zone in the basement and the local newspaper company has become a major sponsor. It is highly visible and works effectively.
2. Provide comfortable chairs and small round tables. Men on their own prefer to maintain their private territory. They will feel more comfortable at round tables rather than square ones. I know of some libraries that don't provide seating in the newspaper zone. If you are going to maximise this area then comfortable seating is essential.

3. This is a browse zone and therefore you need to provide patrons with space. Don't position this area in a major thoroughfare in the library.
4. Keep signage to a minimum. Men can only cope with three things at once. Don't give them any more signage — they will not read it! Whilst on signage, don't put negative signs up, the 'don't do' signs often suggest the idea to do it.
5. Depending on the location and size of your library, a coffee facility in the newspaper zone would be ideal. Some libraries have already picked this up as an incentive. In Brisbane Library, staff actually bring the coffee to patrons. The key is to provide good quality coffee in china. Coffee in polystyrene cups could result in excessive coffee spillage.
6. Keep the signage graphics and colours more masculine in this area. It often helps to use colour to signify that this zone is different from other areas.
7. Encourage other activities relating to men in this area. Why is Fairfield Library so successful? They encourage men to play chess, draughts and board games in the newspaper zone.

In the future, I believe that this area could become a more important category in the library. It is an area where there should be input to ensure that it is a prime social area.

If you make it comfortable for men, women will also use it, but the key is male comfort if you are to maximise the potential of this valuable library category.

John Stanley is a conference speaker and retail consultant with more than twenty years experience in fifteen countries. John works with libraries around the world assisting them with their merchandising, staff and management training, customer flow, customer service and image. John Stanley Associates produce an e-newsletter specific to library retail, including innovative ideas and advice to help grow your library. If you would like to receive a regular copy please visit <http://www.jstanley.com.au> or e-mail newsletter@johnstanley.cc.

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