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"Going Where the Questions Are":

Using Media to Maintain Personalized Contact in Reference

Service in Medium-Sized Academic Libraries

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SUMMARY

Different approaches to reference service have been added over the years, but the basic premise of the service has not changed–the desire to assist and educate users in locating information. As new technologies are added, such as desktop conferencing and web access, it is important that the personalized contact which is the heart of reference service be preserved. The human touch in the reference process is very important to the success of the reference transaction. Media can be useful in assisting reference librarians in "Going Where the Questions Are" while still maintaining the personal element in creating real-time reference transactions in a technological environment.

KEYWORDS. Reference service, video conferencing, reference interview, electronic resources

INTRODUCTION

Reference librarians need to consider ways to be more accessible to all users and maintain personalized contact. Just as there are different learners, library clients need different approaches to reference service. The roving librarian serves the on-site user, while kiosks, video conferencing, and web access address the needs of remote users. In Fall of 1997, the Reference Department of Northeastern State University coined the slogan, "Going Where the Questions Are" to serve as a banner to improve service to all reference department library users. Many of the techniques utilize different types of media and can

be effective in medium-sized academic libraries which, because of their size, are more able to adopt these approaches.

BACKGROUND

In early librarianship, assistance wasn't even provided to library patrons. ''The father of the American reference process, Samuel Green, instituted the first formal reference service at the Worcester Public Library in Massachusetts in 1876.''1 In the 1800s, librarians saw the need to help patrons locate and interpret library finding tools. The reference librarian was born. Libraries developed centralized reference desks where reference librarians waited for questions to come to them. Some academic libraries instituted departmental libraries.

A few academic libraries, such as Brandeis University, have removed the librarians from the reference desk and librarians are mainly available for consultations. This provides in-depth, uninterrupted assistance for the user.2 This seems to be effective for graduate libraries, but may not be as effective in serving students in medium-sized academic libraries.

Whether the Reference Department has changed or the customers' needs have changed, the primary emphasis of reference to guide and teach people to use resources hasn't changed. Different clients have different needs from the Reference Department, and additional modes of service have been added over the years, such as phone and e-mail reference. None of these have replaced traditional face-to-face interaction between reference librarian and library patron. Some students who live on campus might prefer a face-to-face interaction with a librarian. Other students might communicate more effectively in writing and prefer contacting the Reference Department via computer.

There are, however, several approaches that can improve all types of reference service. No matter where the patron is, we need to ''Go Where the Questions Are,'' and answer the questions effectively and professionally. Reference librarians must emphasize our strengths which are our combination of people and technology skills. The manner in which we answer the question can be as important as providing factual information.

Telephone reference has been done for years and is a great way to use media in reference. The reference interview can be highly effective and the question can be answered in real time. There are also new phones available that free the librarian's hands to locate reference books or type on keyboards. The benefits of the librarian's good people skills shine in this environment.

''Going Where the Questions Are'' can be accomplished by going directly to faculty offices to answer questions. If a faculty member is having difficulty using electronic reference tools from her office, go to the professor's office and provide a little one-on-one tutoring. One librarian at Northeastern State University took an ERIC thesaurus to the faculty member's office and talked the professor through the research process.

Another way to reach students would be to place signs in computer labs listing the reference desk phone number and offering reference assistance. The same information could be listed on menu screens embedded in computer programs, CD-ROM LANs, or the World Wide Web. With this approach, the librarian is accessible from other locations on campus without ever leaving the library.

THE ROVING LIBRARIAN

Service to on-site library patrons is still provided in medium-sized academic libraries by reference librarians sitting at a reference desk waiting for questions to come to them. This puts the burden on the student to come to the reference desk. As the student approaches the reference desk, the librarian often appears to be too busy typing on a keyboard or reading to be considered approachable by the patron.

One way to improve this traditional approach to reference assistance is to implement the concept of ''Going Where the Questions Are'' by using roving librarians. With this approach, reference librarians are still available at the reference desk, but other assistants roam the floor looking for patrons who need assistance. This approach can be helpful to the students because they don't have to stop what they were doing and leave their workstations to get assistance. They receive immediate help and don't have to ''interrupt'' busy librarians. Boston College Library, who used staff from other areas of the library as

rovers, found that the reference librarians benefitted by the extra assistance and that it saved them time in running from the reference desk to the workstations.3

Boston College found that three-fourths of the rover interactions lasted less than five minutes. This personalized approach to ''Going Where the Questions Are'' was a benefit to both students and librarians. In a survey done by Boston College, ''overall 90% of the users said they found the information they needed. This high success rate has led to greater user satisfaction and reduced demands on the staff.''4

The roving librarian model was also tried at Utica College in New York. One important point raised in their study is that the roving librarian reaches patrons who would not use the traditional reference service provided at the reference desk. ''One especially surprising result is the almost complete lack of overlap between roving and passive reference encounters.''5 Roving librarianship expands reference service by reaching clients with a need for proactive librarianship.

Many students are shy or do not want to admit that they need help. Forcing them to approach a reference desk only increases the students' anxiety level. As Utica College found, ''Unfortunately, the official reference desk survey also shows that reference service reaches only a tiny fraction of library users.''6

The roving librarian appeared to be more in touch with the problems encountered by the students trying to use electronic resources. One of the most common problems was students using inappropriate databases. ''Roving reference offers a greater chance for librarians to teach users the techniques that make improved searching possible.''7 The types of questions answered by Utica College's roving librarian were different than the ones answered by the reference desk librarians. While the roving librarians helped select the most relevant database, the reference desk librarians were locating specific items.8

The Utica College study indicated that roving reference service   reaches more students. The level of questions handled by the roving librarian appeared to be more sophisticated than the questions asked at the reference desk.

In our effort to improve reference service by using a personalized approach to ''Go Where the Questions Are,'' the roving librarian model seems to be a real plus. By standing, rather than sitting, by approaching the students first, rather than forcing them to approach us, we increase the students' access to our professional reference assistance. Going to the students, making the initial contact is one effective way to improve reference service in a medium-sized academic library.

DESKTOP CONFERENCING/REAL-TIME REFERENCE

Another way to ''Go Where the Questions Are'' and maintain the human element of reference service involves desktop conferencing. The Center for Business Information at Emory University in Atlanta experimented with the AT&T Vistium Desktop Video system to assist students at remote sites. This system is similar to distance education systems and requires a camera, telephone box, microphone, codex, application-sharing software, and Windows. ''Initially, the system crashed frequently. . . . We discovered that the application sharing software was very sensitive.''9 Lighting has to be considered for the image on camera to be effective.

Patron reactions to the system were interesting. For instance it was determined that ''. . . not everyone likes to be on camera.''10 Some patrons even covered the screen. Perhaps such high visibility can be a little too personal for some library users. However, there seems to be potential for desktop video conferencing because it is a way to stay in touch with those patrons physically removed from the library.

The Science Library at the University of California, Irvine experimented with desktop video conferencing to provide real-time reference. Since 1996, they have been using CU-SeeMe software in a Macintosh environment. One project goal was to integrate the interactive reference service into the reference desk functions including drop-in service, telephone reference, consultation-by-appointment and electronic reference.11

Video conferencing is an interesting approach to providing real-time reference because of the audio and video capabilities. Databases can be displayed as well as written text, such as sharing search

strategies with the student. ''Being able to see the video image of the person on the other end of the connection adds a personal and friendly aspect to the interchange.''12

At the Northeastern State University library, the Reference Department has been trying to meet the information needs of students at a satellite campus library that does not have a professional librarian on site. With the goal of providing personalized service, the department proposed a pilot project to enable a reference librarian at the main campus to see and manipulate the computer screen, and communicate verbally, with a student at the satellite campus.

''PC Anywhere'' (version 8, 32 bit for Windows 95) was chosen as the software to manipulate the computer screen. ''Internet Phone'' and the Netscape communication software have been suggested for the auditory component of the project. A beta test site is proposed to be ready by the fall of 1998. If this is successful, the reference librarian will have used media to ''Go Where the Questions Are'' and maintain the human element.

The Internet Public Library is providing real-time reference through the web in a Multi-User Object Oriented Environment (MOO).13 It first began as an experiment in Fall of 1995. Originally, it was accessible through Telnet, but now it is available through the World Wide Web. Several problems were identified with the original experiment. There were patron difficulties in learning commands, confusion with multiple users, concerns over typing, and getting cut off.14

In comparing MOO reference with the traditional reference experience, ''several librarians commented that on-line reference would not substitute for face to face interviews but that on evenings, or weekends or in remote areas it provided a good alternative.''15 Some suggestions for improving the MOO included simplifying commands and using an IRC chat line.

INTERNET MEDIA

The proliferation of the World Wide Web and the ease of design with html editors provides an additional means for ''Going Where the Questions Are.'' Library hours, staff directories and collection descriptions are found all over the web. Basic information is then readily available for patrons both in and

outside of the library. For instance, the Sterling C. Evans Library at Texas A&M University has a virtual tour.16 Virtual visitors have two options for learning about the library: the Walking Tour or the Point of Interest Tour. With both options, patrons and potential patrons have access to basic information about the library and its services.17

Libraries often try to personalize services by using the World Wide Web to make select electronic resources available to their community, as well as create unique new ones. The J. Y. Joyner Library at East Carolina University used a Microsoft-Excel-based database program to develop an in-house periodicals index to many North Carolina state titles not covered by major indexes.18 Subject headings are based on Library of Congress and Boolean commands are recognized. Accessible from around the world, the index has enabled the library to extend its reach.19

With technology abounding and the ease of making information available electronically, it is often easy to lose the human connection. As librarians know, it is not enough to just supply access to information. Distant patrons may often feel lost without assistance readily available from an actual person. As discussed earlier, libraries have traditionally relied on phone service to ''Go Where the Questions Are.'' Additionally, e-mail has developed into a means of reaching those individuals, as well as, a means to increase services. The question for librarians is how to develop effective systems for responding to the electronic information requests, decide who can be served and to what extent we assist them.

Moore identified four models for the management of electronic information requests. In the first model, the questions are answered by the librarian who is responsible for the system. If the numbers of questions grow, additional librarians may assist the first librarian. With the second model, the Head of Reference distributes the questions. In the third model, the questions go to a department e-mail account and the questions are answered on a first-come first-served basis. A bulletin board service (BBS) is used in the fourth model. Questions are forwarded to the BBS and volunteer librarians answer them on a first-come first served basis.20

The Internet Public Library has developed a system called QRC to help manage their e-mail reference questions. Designed so it may be easily used by patrons and their volunteer librarians, QRC serves as a mode of communication between patrons and librarians and also as a site for the librarians to coordinate, share and record their work. Categories are designed to hold different types of messages. Forms and e-mail addresses are created to feed the messages to QRC. Messages are called ''items,'' and all subsequent messages pertaining to the item such as responses from the librarians and from the patron are added to the item. The librarian in charge of the item may mark it for inclusion in the archive when the transaction is completed.21

As reference e-mail services grow, the community reference librarians serve has the potential to expand greatly. Many medium-sized academic libraries are already struggling with limited staff and their librarians hardly need another responsibility. Some libraries specifically state that they offer limited services to individuals outside of their service community. Even a research library, such as the University of Texas at Austin, indicates on their *Ask a Reference Librarian*, ''If you are not affiliated with UT Austin, expect a reply only about unique resources of the General Libraries.''22 The page also informs users that the service is for ''asking short, factual questions'' and even has a hotlink to a page explaining what a short, factual question is.23

Others, like Internet Public Library, place few restrictions on who they will serve. However, they do note on their *Ask a Question at the IPL Reference Center* page that sometimes they may not be able to answer a reference question because too many questions have already been received or because it may require resources unavailable to Internet Public Library. Additionally, Internet Public Library states what level of service the user can expect. Factual questions will receive brief factual answers. Broad questions will receive a list of resources to consult for the topic.24

Both the Internet Public Library and the University of Texas at Austin state the level of reference service they provide. Other libraries have separate forms for different services. Creighton University's Health Science Library has a general reference question form25 and a separate form for literature searches.26 In each case, the level of reference service is clear. As demand from distant patrons increases, each library

should decide what level of reference it is able and willing to provide. Most librarians can remember patrons who expected everything to be just handed to them. Some librarians feel that, ''Librarians must work harder to do tasks for online students that resident students would be expected to do for themselves.''27 However, other librarians are concerned about doing research for students. As librarian Dan Reams pondered in the BI-L listserv, ''I wonder where student honor codes, requiring students to do all their own work, collide with this notion of the librarian doing the research for students.''28

Other questions still exist with e-mail reference questions. For instance, conducting an effective reference interview may require several e-mail messages between patron and librarian. New skills may be needed in an electronic environment. Gone are the nonverbal communication clues and the immediacy of an in-person reference interview that aid a librarian in understanding the patron's needs. With an e-mail reference transaction, many librarians assume they understand the question rather than taking the time to clarify the request. Others may rely on a cycle of questions that take time for the patron to answer and then wait for another response.29 Often the exchange may be frustrating for the librarian and the patron.

During in-person reference interview, most librarians rely on a practiced approach to understanding a patron's questions. This skill and approach is especially important in an e-mail reference interview. Abels notes that the ideal e-mail reference interview should consist of three messages: statement of the problem by the patron, summarization by the librarian and confirmation by the patron. If clarification is needed, the interview can be extended to five messages to include that process. In order to keep the interview efficient, Abels recommends a systematic approach.30
There are two approaches to responding systematically. One is to design a structured reference question form to be completed by the patron. The''Computer Search Request Form'' at Creighton University, the Health Sciences Library follows this idea. In addition to describing their request, patrons are asked to indicate the type of search wanted and any limitations or restrictions they might have such as language, date ranges and age groups.31 The Creighton University's Health Sciences Library's request form states, ''The success of the search depends on how succinctly and thoroughly you describe your topic. Please

don't just list 'key words' or indicate a search strategy. A succinct description of what you want and why you want it is the most useful information you can provide our staff.''32

The second approach involves handling an unstructured question. If a patron sends an unstructured question, it is up to the librarian to provide structure. Abels recommends either responding with a standard request form or with questions written in an organized and logical manner, such as a numbered list. In the latter option, patrons may be instructed to respond by referring to the question's number.33

Eventually, World Wide Web reference assistance needs to be available in real-time mode where the librarian is alerted to an incoming question, and the patron and librarian can converse without cumbersome commands. The librarian needs to be able to do multi-tasking and show databases while conversing with the student. In the future, perhaps the flexibility of the World Wide Web will be combined with the attributes of desktop conferencing.

CONCLUSION

For years, reference librarians have assumed the role of intermediary between information and patrons. Since information and patrons are no longer just available at the physical library, librarians have needed to adjust their methods of providing service. As any librarian who's been asked a reference question while doing her grocery shopping knows, questions no longer just walk up to the Reference Desk. They are in the stacks, across campus, on the other side of town and maybe outside of the country. To continue to serve patrons with different needs, librarians must walk across the library, access the computer screen from across the campus intranet system, answer e-mail and explore other interactive tools for reaching our patrons in a personalized manner. With changing technologies and new medias, our responsibilities to serve our diverse customers will grow, and as a result, we will have to change to find and utilize new efficient means of meeting those responsibilities.

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