

Facing the competition

The critical issues of reference service

by Virginia Massey-Burzio

We are at a crucial juncture in our professional history in terms of the role of reference librarians in academic life. Because of the Internet, our clientele has changed in a number of ways: they have little patience for dealing with complex online library catalogs, searching the stacks, or standing in line to photocopy. Communication with our patrons is moving rapidly toward being online-only.

Competition with the information industry

Our place in academia is seriously threatened by the Internet. While it is true that libraries have the better quality information, students are selecting convenience over quality. Proof that we are not facing the reality of our competition is that we totally ignore the convenience issue.

As a nonprofit, service profession it is perhaps only natural that we have never placed much value on making things easier or more convenient for our users. What we value much more is providing high-quality content (a good thing) and instructing our users on how to use the library, and, now with the Internet, how to evaluate information. In other words, we are more missionary in our approach and are focusing on doing what we think is good for our clientele.

We would do well to adapt our service to allow students to spend more time on critical thinking and less time on research. Such an approach is not without support in our professional literature. The fourth law in *The Five Laws of Library Science* by S. R. Ranganathan is "Save the time of the user."¹ While Ranganathan is an often-quoted classic in the field, that particular law, unfortunately, is one that we pretty much ignore.

While our information environment is, of course, very complex, our users shouldn't have to deal with that complexity. Our online catalogs, in striving to provide powerful search options, are too confusing. We might instead emulate popular Web search engines by allowing a library user to enter keywords. The library's Web site and the online catalog should merge so users won't have to figure out which one is good for what. One search would result in magazine and journal citations from indexing and abstracting services, books in the library, books available via interlibrary loan, and high-quality Internet sources. A document delivery button would send the user the article or book by e-mail, fax, courier, or mail.

At Johns Hopkins we are planning just such an expanded document delivery service for our users. After all, the real focus of the scholar or would-be scholar is to interact with ideas and

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create new ideas, not to become a crackerjack searcher.

Electronic/digital reference

Although librarians are aware that electronic or digital reference is changing the relationship between librarians and library users, we believe that a reference interview can only be conducted in person and that e-mail reference is a lesser service because the reference interview doesn't port well to this environment.

Instead of treating e-mail reference as an add-on service, we need to give our users what works best for them—telephone, e-mail, remote desktop access, easy-to-understand and brief online help, indexed FAQs, or all of the above.

Information literacy

On the one hand, our libraries are self-service, which sends a clear message that libraries are easy to use, but on the other hand, we try to force our users to attend classes to learn information literacy skills. We encourage questions, but we also try to use the reference interaction as an opportunity to teach the questioner to be independent. We accept as an important philosophical value that it is not our job to do our users' work or research for them, but it is our job to show them how.

In *C&RL News*, Carol Goodson described her experience with her institution's distance education program, where librarians search databases and fax or e-mail the results to the student.² After a student marks the items he or she wants, the librarian sends the items by Priority Mail, UPS, Next Day Air, or fax. Students are then billed for photocopying and search charges.

I couldn't agree with Goodson more when she says that we are misleading the library user by assuring them they can acquire the same sophisticated searching skills that librarians have after only a brief introduction at the reference desk or after one class. She points out that our users have neither the time or inclination to acquire the skills of librarians.

A series of focus groups held at Johns Hopkins support her argument.³ Typical comments were:

"I don't really need it."

"I'm not going to spend the time, when there's only a little bit I don't know."

After all, the real focus of the scholar or would-be scholar is to interact with ideas and create new ideas, not to become a crackerjack searcher.

"... you should be able to figure it out ..."

It's interesting that we've been trying to market "information literacy" programs and classes since the 1970s without any success. No one has ever proved that library instruction classes have value for students or that students who have taken the classes learn any more than students who haven't.

Despite ACRL's passionate commitment to information literacy, we have eliminated our traditional information literacy instruction program at Johns Hopkins. Instead our resources and staff time are being invested by making our users aware of what is available (marketing), by having an informative and easy-to-use Web site, and by providing classes where a clear need or demand is indicated.

Some examples of the latter are the use of special collections materials in humanities research (a very popular class created by a humanities librarian and a special collection librarian) and chemical structure searching.

Conclusion

If we wish to survive in the future, we need to challenge old philosophies and be much more responsive to user needs. In the Internet environment, we will have to fight to keep our users and not only offer them the collections and services that they need and want, but also provide it to them quickly and conveniently.

Notes

1. S. R. Ranganathan, *Five Laws of Library Science*, (Bombay, Asia Publishing, 1963).

2. Carol Goodson, "Putting the 'Service' Back in Library Service," *College and Research Library News* no. 3 (March 1997): 186.

3. Virginia Massey-Burzio, "From the Other Side of the Reference Desk: A Focus Group Study," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 24, no. 6 (May 1998): 210, 212. ■