
Why Is Germany in Europe?

And Other Lessons from a Life in Reference

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For many of us reference librarians, one of the greatest rewards we get from what we do is the immediate and direct feedback that we receive from our users. Because we help people, we are on the receiving end of their gratitude when we are able to give them what they want. We get a strong feeling of achievement and pride in being able to meet user needs and we get satisfaction from the “feel good” nature of reference service. As reference librarians, we may have to put up with inadequate staffing, insufficient resources, mechanical failures, and evening and weekend shifts, but the feedback that we get from our users often makes up for those annoyances.

No other branch of librarianship enjoys this same reward. Circulation staff also interact daily with the public, but too often that interaction is adversarial in nature, centering on overdue fines and lost books. Technical services and systems staff build the tools that we use when helping patrons, but they do not receive much feedback about that work. Rarely does the public—or even other library staff—acknowledge the hard work that is done in those areas. “Wow—you really nailed that subject heading!” or “What a great author entry!” are not phrases often heard in the halls of the library. Similarly, praise for Web design, authority control, open URL linking, metasearch configuration, and OPAC maintenance is rare. Although users are grateful for all of these features, they do not have the same real-time interaction with their creators that they have with reference librarians. We reference librarians are seen as the good guys of the library, riding in on a white horse, providing the book or the Web site that will save the day for our users. The positive reinforcement that we get from that image is why many of us became reference librarians in the first place.

Having been a reference librarian for three decades (as of summer 2008), I realize that I have helped thousands of patrons over the past thirty years. By my rather crude and conservative estimate (five reference transactions per hour, ten hours per week, forty weeks of the year [not counting time for vacation, conferences, etc.], for thirty years), I have participated in somewhere between sixty and seventy thousand reference transactions. That’s a lot of people.

In those thousands and thousands of transactions, some stand out in my mind. Doubtless you have had a similar experience. Whether you have been a reference librarian for five months or fifty years, you will have experienced some transactions that are simply more memorable than others. I would like to share four real reference transactions that I experienced as a reference librarian. Your mileage may vary, but each of you has probably had experiences similar to those

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that I am about to mention. The key to this group of stories is not the subject being searched, the methodology used to find the answer, or even the technology involved (which was pretty much nonexistent in these examples), but in how the patrons reacted to what I did. As you read each of these scenarios, think about similar experiences from your own reference work.

1. *Why is Germany in Europe?* Yes, someone really asked me this question. One reason that I remember it is because it was one of the very first questions that I was ever asked, way back before I even became an official, degree-carrying reference librarian. It was 1977 or 1978, and I was working as a graduate reference assistant at the University of Illinois. An undergraduate student came to the reference desk and asked this question. I immediately thought of a cute, clever, and accurate response, which I proceeded to tell her: “Because our side won World War II, which means that Europe is not in Germany.”

Fortunately, she did not dismiss me for what I was: a smartass, overconfident graduate student. When I asked her for more information, I found out what she really wanted. It turns out that she misspoke when she said Germany (she was studying German history) and wanted to know why Russia (then the Soviet Union) was considered to be a European country. After all, the greater land mass of Russia is in Asia, so shouldn't we call it an Asian country? What cultural biases have led us to classify Russia as part of Europe instead of Asia? And while we are at it, why are Europe and Asia even considered two separate continents, since they are joined together by the Ural mountains? These complex questions were all buried in her initial question, which I had trivialized.

Needless to say, Mr. Smartass was humbled by the experience. Searches for books (no Web sites to search back in the 1970s!) on geographic naming standards, Russian history and culture, and even continental drift all factored into the search for an answer. This experience taught me two important lessons: that cute and clever was not the appropriate response, and that questions are often much more complex than they seem. In the end, she was somewhat satisfied with the transaction, even though we never really found an answer. Although I still liked my initial response, I knew that it did not help solve the problem.

2. This example occurred about a decade later. A man came to the desk and wanted help with his family history. He had a photocopy of a document in German that referred to a specific town or village. He wanted to find out where that village was located and had so far been unsuccessful. Quick checks of atlases and gazetteers proved that he was right—the place name that he had was not listed. He was in a hurry and I offered to keep looking and call him when I found something.

Subsequent searching, consultation with a librarian who read and spoke German, work in the map collection, and some historical geographic sources revealed the

answer. This town was near the German/Polish border and had changed nationalities several times over the years. The name that the patron had was the old German name (written in Old German script), whereas modern maps used the Polish name. In addition, the village had since been subsumed by the growth of a nearby city. Once we knew where it was, we found an old map that showed the town with the name in German and a current map that showed it in Polish. I was very proud that I was able to use my reference skills—and get the appropriate help—to figure out the answer.

A few days later, the patron came back. I showed him the map and started to explain the reason why we could not easily find his town. He took a quick look at the map, said “thanks,” and was out the door. Three hours of research resulted in less than three seconds of use. I was stunned by how little the patron cared about the effort that was made on his query and at how little he seemed to really care about the answer. The lesson that I learned from this question was that a strong effort on my part did not always lead to high satisfaction on the patron's part.

3. This example involved a young man in his late twenties or early thirties who was starting his own business. He was interested in information on writing business plans, getting funding, government regulations, and everything else that he needed to start up his company. Because he had a day job, he only came to the library at night and he happened to come in on whatever evening shift I was working at the time. We worked together over a period of about a year and developed the rapport that makes a great partnership. Little by little, I helped him find the information he needed to start his company.

What was interesting about this prolonged transaction was the product that he was going to produce, which was liquor. But this was not just any liquor. He wanted to produce a high-end product and had a brilliant marketing scheme. Since the state of Vermont always seemed to be associated with quality, wholesomeness, and purity (at least to New Yorkers, where I was working at the time), he was creating “made in Vermont” liquors. His company actually got off the ground, and he sold several different types of liquor, including a maple-based vodka. I don't know if it is still in business, but it was rewarding to see his plan grow from idea to product.

I probably would not have remembered this transaction at all except for the “thank you” gift that he brought me. One night he came in very proud because he had recently produced, bottled, and labeled his first batch of hooch. Because I had helped him get started, he handed me a sample bottle of Vermont-made gin. He apparently had used this same bottle to thank others, because when he delivered it the bottle was only about $\frac{3}{4}$ full. I thanked him for thanking me and faced the dilemma of having an open bottle of alcohol sitting at the reference desk. I did the only thing that I could think of, which was to stick it in the reference office where no patrons would see it. Of

course, I forgot about it when I went home that evening. The staff who came in first thing in the morning found an open bottle of gin sitting in the office, which probably confirmed their suspicions about my performance. Fortunately, they believed this story, and I did not get in trouble for alcohol possession at work. Besides, they all knew that I was strictly a beer drinker.

4. I was working at the reference desk during final exams one December in the early 1990s. A young undergraduate student came up and was frantically looking for some criticism of a novel that she was reading (or supposed to be reading) in her English class. Although I no longer remember the book, I do remember the process. I went to the index to the Gale literary criticism series, found that her book was covered in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, found the appropriate volume on the shelf, opened the book to the correct page, and showed her that there were several pages of criticism on her book. This was one of the easiest reference questions to answer and probably took a total of under two minutes to conduct the interview and find the answer, including walking time from the desk to the shelves.

This was the type of question that I had answered hundreds of times before and never thought twice about. Again, what makes this transaction memorable was not the question, but the patron's response. She was so excited by getting this information that she kissed me on the cheek. Now over the years I have had tens of thousands of thank you's, hundreds of handshakes and thumb's up signs, a couple of high fives, a few dozen boxes of candy or plates of cookies, several people who called me their savior or their saint, and even the aforementioned bottle of gin and a couple bottles of wine, but only one kiss. I don't know if I ever helped her again, but needless to say her reaction to this transaction definitely left an impression in my mind!

These four examples are all real, swear-to-God experiences that I have had in my career as a reference librarian. When I look at the patron reactions to each of these four transactions, I see a wide array of responses to my efforts. The easiest question (4) resulted in the most enthusiastic response, whereas the question that was perhaps the most difficult (2) had the poorest reception. The one that involved long-term effort (3) worked out well but could have gotten me in trouble, while the silliest (1) turned out to be the most profound. It all goes to show that you just can't judge the query by the question.

These were just four of the tens of thousands of patrons that I have helped over the past thirty years. They stand out because of how the patron reacted to the reference process, but they also represent all of the other patrons that I have helped during that time. A reference librarian's life is a blur of helping people find statistics, biographies, books, articles, and Web sites that meet the needs of their specific search at

that specific time. And this makes me wonder—with new technologies, instant communications, and a deluge of information resources, what comprises good reference service? When I look back at these four examples in the clear light of the twenty-first century, I realize that today I would take a very different approach to every single one of them than I did at the time. I would have new tools, new sources, and new ways to communicate that would make me more efficient, if not more effective. Would those patrons be more—or less—satisfied if they came back with those same questions today? Would they even have bothered to come to the library, or would they find the information by themselves through some other channel? I wish I knew.

As librarians, we pride ourselves on quality service. But, with a few notable exceptions, service is no longer a significant component of modern life. Home Depot wants you to cash out on your own, it is impossible to talk to a live person at the phone company, airlines treat us like criminals, and most companies only accept comments/suggestions on their Web forms. Although we live in a society in which people are instantly and constantly connected through a wide range of technologies, people seem to be ever more disconnected as human beings. Quality customer service is something that is becoming ever rarer in today's society.

Libraries remain one of the very few institutions in modern society where members of the community can receive personal, professional assistance within convenient time frames without direct cost. I personally believe that the "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers" that Samuel Green discussed 130 years ago still comprises the heart of library service today. But what form that service takes is vastly different from the way it looked in the nineteenth century.

This all leads up to the big question: *What is quality service in today's environment?* How do we provide services that give our users what they want, when they want it, wherever they are located? How can libraries remain vital to their communities when there are so many alternatives for information, research, and entertainment? These are key questions for reference and user-services librarians—and they will be the topic of my RUSA President's Program at this summer's ALA Annual Conference. If you wonder what it means to offer high-quality service in today's interconnected society, please come to this program on Monday, June 30, 2008, from 1:30–3:30 p.m. With representatives from the corporate and library worlds, this program will attempt to identify why service is important and what factors contribute to quality service. You will hear from staff of a service-centered public library system, a company that builds its reputation on service, and a theorist who will discuss the importance of service to practice. There will also be plenty of time for your questions and discussion.

As RUSA President, I hope that you will find this program relevant and useful to your daily reference life. Join us in Anaheim for this quality program on quality service. It might not get you any drinks or kisses, but it will make you think about what it means to be a good reference librarian.