

now, because I am afraid that we are in danger of believing that the situation is online vs. in-person. The situation is our library, our patron community and its expectations, not the mode of contact.

We all have, or should have, an underlying philosophy of service about how we interact with our particular patron groups. When I worked at a tax library, if a patron wanted IRS Revenue Ruling 98-7, the reference interview consisted of asking where to fax the ruling. Now that I am in an academic library, I am more likely to show the user how to find the ruling in RIA or on the IRS Web site.

So how does this translate into the online environment? Why is our virtual philosophy just an extension of our general reference philosophy and not a separate philosophy? If your in-person policy is to teach the user how to use resources to find answers for herself, you cannot give the answers to the same patron if she contacts you online. (Sure, here are five articles on gun control, but if you come into the library I will show you how to use InfoTrac to find them for yourself next time!) The issue of teaching the patron is separate from the issue of whether the patron wants to learn or would rather have us choose their paper sources. Teaching and not providing information, in this case, is a matter of institutional philosophy and mission. I do not want to enumerate, elaborate, or debate the various types of reference service philosophies. This has been done elsewhere. My point is that we have these philosophies because they mean something and we need a consistent, situated philosophy of service behind all of our reference interviews.

Some librarians argue that it is not appropriate to do instruction or answer in-depth questions online because of the time involved and the problems with communication. I know that many librarians are doing this. It does take time, but it is consistent with our philosophies. If we solve the problem by not offering research assistance virtually, by only accepting ready-reference type questions by e-mail and chat, how are we serving our users? Mixed modes of communication may be necessary. If I were at the Illinois CPA Society today, and got a chat request for an IRS ruling, I might not make the patron wait online while I found it, I might still fax that response. On the other hand, I might push the user the Web page if it was a quick enough answer. This fits with that library's philosophy of providing answers, quickly and accurately.

In making sure that we have one philosophy of service that works across all of our modes of communication, we can reexamine exactly what our philosophies are. As institutions, we can discuss what our philosophies are and realign our reference interactions and our philosophies.

We need to make these philosophies clear to our users. They need to know what to expect, and that they can expect the same service via any mode of communication. We also need to be clear ourselves on our philosophies and how they impact our reference interactions. We need to take responsibility for the training of our staff on how we do our interviews. Directly related to this is taking responsibility

for maintaining the quality of our reference interactions. We have an opportunity to retrain on the reference interview. Are we upholding our service philosophies in-person as well as online? At the MARS preconference, Dianne Mizzy of Carnegie Mellon reported that in the online interviews that they examined, only a third had any open-ended questions asked at all.³ And these are only for interviews that were research questions, not directional, policy, or requests for known items. Another third had only closed-ended questions and in the last third no questions were asked at all. I wonder how different this is from their in-person interactions and how different it is from interactions at other library's reference service points, virtual and in-person?

To make a short reply even shorter: we should not inflate the issues of impatience and immediacy online; we need to work to make the reference interaction more transparent to the users, especially online; and we need to remember that the type and quality of the service we offer must depend on our philosophy of reference service and not on the mode of communication with the user.

References

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2. "RUSA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals," *RQ* 36 (winter 1996): 200-03.
3. Matthew R. Marsteller and Dianne Mizzy, "Exploring the Digital Reference Interview: It's Still Okay to Answer a Question with a Question." Paper presented at the RUSA/MARS 2002 Preconference "Digital Reference @ your library," Atlanta, Ga., June 14, 2002.

Reference at Its Core: The Reference Interview

David Tyckoson

The 2002 Annual Conference of the American Library Association was remarkable in that it included two major programs about reference services: The RUSA-sponsored program "The Future of Reference" and the RUSA President's Program "The Reference Interview: Connecting In-Person and In Cyberspace." The two programs clearly struck a chord in the profession, with literally hundreds of reference librarians turning out to hear selected experts talk about their futures. As the only speaker invited to participate in both programs, I gained a unique perspective on these issues.

The "Future of Reference" was designed as an experiment. Five librarians were invited to write white papers in

advance of the conference. These papers were posted to the RUSA Web site (see "Professional Tools," "Future of Reference Services") and have also been published in slightly modified form in *Reference Services Review*.¹ While the five papers had some commonality, our views of the future of reference ranged from more of the same (my view) to warnings about not having a future at all (Anne Lipow's view). Reference librarians had the opportunity to respond to the papers in advance of the program, although relatively few actually did so. During the program, each speaker discussed the main points of his or her paper and why they felt that reference has the future that they suggested. The lively part of the program was the question and answer session, which could have lasted the rest of the day if time had permitted.

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Based on the interest, enthusiasm, and the interaction of this program, it could only be labeled a success, with one major exception—all of the experts were wrong.

Well, we were not actually wrong, but we were not really talking about reference service. Our papers discussed the history of reference, the factors influencing what we do (especially technology), and how those influences will change how we provide service in the future. Unfortunately, we did not talk about the core function of reference service—the process of helping people.

This became clear to me twenty-four hours later, as I sat and listened to the speakers during the "Reference Interview" program. Catherine Ross talked about the value of the reference interview and how it affects the reference process when it does not take place. Her research findings, which take place over several years, including before and after the widespread use of the Internet, demonstrate that the reference interview is the essential component of reference success. Librarians who make the effort to conduct a thorough reference interview are more likely to succeed in finding what their patrons want than those who do not take the time for the reference interview.

These findings mirror those of Joan Durrance, whose studies reported in the article "Willingness to Return" indicates that patrons remember the librarian much longer than they remember the answer or even the question that they asked.² To the patron, the interaction with the librarian is the essential part of the process, not the answer to the specific question. Many patrons will come back to a librarian even when they know they have received a wrong answer in the past, as long as that librarian conducted a thorough reference interview and tried to find the answer. Patrons clearly value the human contact with the librarian,

even if the results of their specific query are not successful. Catherine Ross states this point succinctly when she says "the librarian is the key to the information seeking process."

The current big thing in reference service is online chat reference service. Through any of a number of software packages, librarians are able to interact electronically in real time with patrons, with a computer and Internet access, located anywhere in the world. Jana Ronan talked about how the reference interview works in such an environment. In the traditional in-person form of reference, the librarian receives many cues about the patron's needs. The dialogue between the librarian and the patron conveys the specifics of the information desired, but other factors, such as tone of voice, facial expression, and body language, help the librarian through the process. In the online environment, communication takes place entirely through the text of the chat dialogue, without these extra cues. Jana Ronan points out that "(written) language does not express the full play of our interpersonal exchanges." To help us move beyond the strict text-based environment, she provided some ideas

for enhancing chat communication so that it could contain extra communication cues. Based on the "RUSA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals," Ronan created a list of ideas to give the librarian (and the patron) additional communication cues in the chat environment.

In both the chat and in-person environments, the central focus of reference service is the human interaction between the librarian and the patron. Chat and its more sophisticated cousins are channels for communication, but they do not replace the communication itself. As we develop new channels of communication, we need to develop new protocols for conveying information over those channels. Chat is new, so those protocols are still developing. With other channels, we already have a variety of methods of communicating the nonverbal portion of the message. For example on the telephone, the tone, volume, and speed of the speaker convey information that enhances the message. Over time, we will develop similar methods for any new technology that arises.

Successful communication between librarian and patron—regardless of the medium over which that communication takes place—implies success in the reference process. Failure to communicate—no matter how good the tool for communication—dooms the reference process to fail. This is where we all went wrong during the Future of Reference program. All of us experts focused on the tools, not on the process. Our tools will evolve and change continually, but the process of communicating with the patron to determine his or her information need will not.

Every library serves a specific, well-defined community. A public library serves the people within a specific geographic location. An academic library serves the faculty,

staff, and students of a specific educational institution. A school library serves the students and teachers of a particular school or district. A special library serves the employees of the organization or company that it supports. In each case, the success of the library depends on its ability to provide information needed or desired by members of its community. The reference interview is the essential skill needed to determine what those needs might be. The librarian might be helping a child making the first explorations into the world of reading; a high school student working on homework; a college student writing a paper; a worker seeking new job skills; a lawyer working on a case; an adult looking for something good to read; or a retiree looking for investment information. Each of these very different patrons comes to the library with different information needs and each expects to get individualized, expert help from the librarian. Each person will end up using a different tool or information source, but each transaction will begin with a reference interview. It is the success of that interview that determines the success of the transaction.

In most cases, the reference interview is not an isolated encounter but is one of a series of transactions that form a relationship between the librarian and the patron. Most people who use libraries are repeat library users. One of the primary reasons that patrons come back is that they feel that the librarian tries to help them (as evidenced by Catherine Ross and Joan Durrance). The library is one of the few remaining institutions in today's society where a member of the community is able to communicate directly (and without a fee) to an expert service provider. The process of communication, whether in-person or through some other medium, is often more important to the patron than its content.

Librarians rarely save lives, but we shape lives on a daily basis. Through the process of interacting with the librarian, members of the community—and the community itself—grow and evolve. By communicating with a teenager today,

the librarian may be keeping that child out of jail tomorrow. By working with the unemployed today, we may be getting them back into the workplace tomorrow. By working with new immigrants today, we may be helping to develop the community leaders of tomorrow.

The reference interview is the most important skill that a reference librarian can learn. Tools and sources will always change, but the process will always begin with the reference interview. When I hire new reference librarians, I am much more concerned with their ability to conduct a reference interview than I am with their subject background or their knowledge of the latest tools. It is much easier to teach a tool or a discipline to someone who can communicate than it is to teach communication to someone who knows the subject or the tool.

As I look back at my own version of the Future of Reference, I see now that this is what I really wanted to say. This is the same idea that Samuel Green implied in his original article on reference service.³ The examples of information seeking that he provided in his article are as relevant today as they were in 1876. Our tools and channels of communication will continue to get better, but the human component of the communication process will remain the same. If we continue to provide the human element of the reference interview, reference service will have a long and healthy future. If we fail to interact with our community on this human level, reference—and perhaps libraries—will whither away and die. ■

References

1. All five papers and invited responses are available in *Reference Services Review* 31 (Feb. 2003).
2. Joan Durrance, "Reference Success: Does the 55 Percent Rule Tell the Whole Story?" *Library Journal* 114 (Apr. 15, 1989): 31–36.
3. Samuel Swett Green, "Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers," *Library Journal* 1 (Oct. 1876): 74–81.