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A New Service Model for the Reference Desk: The Student Research Center

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Julie:

In library school one of my instructors had a sign in his office that read "Ranganathan Said It All." Through school, I pondered how those seemingly simple principles could be so important. Since that time, though, I have used them on numerous occasions in considering new policies and procedures, and have found, time and again, that they are still relevant today. Ranganathan outlined the following rules in his 1931 book *The Five Laws of Library Science* (as cited in Rimland, 2007, p. 24): 1) Books are for use. 2) Every reader his or her book. 3) Every book, its reader. 4) Save the time of the reader. 5) The library is a growing organism.

These principles provide a test, or reality check, to make sure that as libraries grow and change, we design new policies and procedures that still help us accomplish our tried-and-true professional goals.

The fifth principle, that the library is a growing organism, is especially important to consider in light of new technologies. The impact that the Internet has had on the traditional reference desk is such that we find ourselves questioning the validity and effectiveness of traditional reference services. Patrons' ability to look up information on the Internet and the ability of paraprofessionals to answer directional questions puts into doubt the value of the traditional reference model's expensive and time-consuming (to staff) desk. We therefore find ourselves re-examining the current iteration of this growing organism to ensure that we are addressing and facilitating change effectively.

In addition to ensuring that current reference models are changing to meet patrons' needs and expectations, it is just as important that they regularly be considered

against Ranganathan's fourth law to ensure they are first and foremost *saving the time of the reader (*Rimland, 2007, p. 24*)* (italics mine). In most cases, the reference interview is the most obvious reference desk tool librarians use to meet this rule. Definitions of this technique vary; one common definition discusses the communication techniques used to help extrapolate readers' information needs, another defines it as a technique used "to translate the patron's question into one that can be answered with the library's resources" (Brown, 2008, p. 1), while still another mentions specific sets of behaviors that should be used to ensure information gets into the hands of patrons (Ross, 1998, p. 1). Regardless of the myriad definitions, the services at the 21st century reference desk must continue to have the goal of, and be able to show that, they are saving the time of the reader.

In considering Ranganathan's laws and in bandying about, and researching, the changing face of reference services, a few common drawbacks to the traditional reference desk model emerged:

- The reference desk itself is a physical barrier to patrons (O' Gorman, 2009, p. 333). Any theoretical change should take note of this obstacle and limit any additional barriers to the patron coming in contact with the librarian.
- There is no limit to the variety of communication that takes place between patrons and librarians at the reference desk. Despite librarians' attempts at best reference interview practice, miscommunication and delays are still possible in matching the user with their information.
- Hernon and McClure studied reference desk transactions and found that only 55% of the time librarians were able to help patrons find the information they needed (Ross, 1998, p.1).

In the face of these reference desk realities, it is not unfathomable to try new ideas with the hope of attaining more successful reference interactions. As new technologies for reference service become available, the format and duration of the reference interview may change, but the basic need for a thorough exchange of ideas between patron and librarian remains the same. With Web 2.0 technologies changing at the speed of light, the need for innovative reference interview techniques will increase. Collaborative reference will become increasingly important as these technologies develop.

What do librarians need to acknowledge about today's reference environment in order to provide the best service?

First, it is a myth that the Internet has made the library a self-service environment, e.g. that library technologies such as online catalogs and databases have made navigating the library so simple that a reference interview is rarely needed.

Some patrons feel that they should already know how to find information in a library and are afraid to ask for help. Even patrons that have used libraries previously may be unfamiliar with constantly changing electronic interfaces and library terminology such as "catalog," "interlibrary loan" and "databases." A completely self-service environment only serves to support the myth that patrons should know how to use a library, and provides an additional communication barrier between the patron and the librarian.

Dewdney and Mitchell studied reference desk transactions in public libraries. One of their findings was that "neither librarians nor users could initially predict how difficult a question might be to answer" (Kluge, 2003, p. 42). If patrons don't know what they are looking for, and librarians don't know what patrons are looking for, a lot of time can be wasted without the reference interview. Since nobody can predict the complexity of the question, any attempt to bypass the reference interview is in direct conflict with Ranganathan's fourth law of saving the time of the reader. The patron can lose a lot of time following false leads and using inappropriate search terms.

Regardless of how simple we believe library technology and systems are, the one

way to ensure saving the time of the reader is to apply a reference interview for every transaction, thus providing users ample opportunity to expand, clarify, broaden or narrow their questions (Kluegel, 2003, p.38)

Another myth is that patrons are savvy computer users and therefore know how to use a library. If they do need assistance, it will likely be only a directional question.

This myth reflects the theory behind Patrick Wilson's "face value rule:" Reference service should only seek to give the patron exactly what they ask for even if it's not what they really need. Interpretation of the question is therefore not the problem of the librarian (Kluegel, 2003, p. 38). While on its face it may appear to save the time of patrons, if they need to return to find more relevant information sources, their time has been wasted.

Many patrons do come to the library with quite a bit of online experience, but, in some respects, since the web is organized quite differently than a library, patrons may have a false sense of knowledge about the library. For example, a patron may have conducted a search for their topic on Google and found 3000 web documents. However, when they run the same search string in the library catalog, they find nothing. Their "success" in Google has given them a confidence in online searching that may not apply in the library.

Further, with the proliferation of the Internet, patrons are more likely to have done some of the searching on their own. They come to a librarian when they are truly stumped or when they have not found what they are looking for on the web (Rimland, 2007, p. 25). This gives the librarian a chance to conduct an appropriate interview and help educate the user in library search tools. Since many patrons come in with some of the background searching done on the Internet, ready reference questions appear to be becoming less common. A librarian at an academic reference desk may have only four or five reference questions in an hour, but those they have may well be more complex and in depth (O'Gorman, 2009, p. 334).

Some argue that due to technology and more educated users, a Brandeis model, or tiered reference service, may be sufficient. This is akin to the receptionist at the doctor's office making the diagnosis. The receptionist would listen to the symptoms and then determine whether the patient should see the doctor. Under this model, the reference assistant would conduct an abbreviated reference interview and then determine whether the information needs are sufficiently complex to refer to a librarian. Since neither patron nor librarian can predict how complex a reference question may become, it becomes further clouded as to when a reference assistant should refer a patron to the librarian. Reference assistants may feel a sense of failure when they refer a patron and be reluctant to do so. Also, this distance between the patron and the librarian creates additional barriers, such as time (does the patron need to make an appointment?) and space (is the librarian in the back office?) These barriers can waste the time of the library patron.

Of course, reference assistants may be trained for directional questions and to refer patrons to the librarian when necessary. What is unknown is whether the reference assistant can conduct an appropriate reference interview when it has eluded even the most experienced librarians at times. If they don't try to conduct a reference interview, patrons will walk away with only the most rudimentary information and have to come back later for more. In the worst-case scenario, the reference assistant acts like those dreadful automated telephone menus. You may get the information you need from the automated system. But if you don't get it, you have wasted your time and are less likely to call again in the future.

Cassell and Hiremath say: "The reference interview is more an art than a science…While librarians should learn the elements of a good reference interview, they must also recognize that these steps must be adapted to match each situation" (2006, p. 15). It takes years of experience to hone these skills and even a well-trained reference assistant will not have the background to balance the

communication skills with the individual attention required for each unique reference transaction as part of the reference interview.

Staffing the reference desk can be expensive and time consuming. However, Ranganathan's principles don't address that issue. The fourth law only implores librarians to save the time of the reader. Tiered reference systems only attempt to save money and the time of the librarian. They do little to match readers with their books, but only inhibit a process that is already difficult for many patrons. They do not serve to educate or market library services, and become a barrier to the collaborative process that should be the reference transaction.

We have addressed some myths. But, to look boldly at reality, reference is a collaboration, so in light of patrons' changing attitudes and emerging technologies, the reference desk should change as well to reflect this collaborative environment.

The best reference service is collaborative. The librarian and patron come to the transaction as equals with each bringing their own expertise (Kluegel, 2003, p. 38).

Even when patrons are computer savvy or seasoned library users, they may still benefit from the reference interview. Librarians should remember Ranganathan's fourth principle and save the time of the reader by using a collaborative reference desk model that both takes advantage of technology and is well grounded in the communication tenets of a good reference interview. In other words: "Keep the values and modify the service" (O'Gorman, 2009, p. 336).

The following techniques, as discussed by Steven and then Patty, are modifications to the traditional reference interview that will help ensure a novice user learns from the reference interview, and also that an expert user is made aware of new services and collections. These techniques are useful for education and marketing through the traditional reference interview, and serve to keep reference service a continuing viable resource for patrons.

Steven:

The decision to overhaul the reference desk at Grossmont was based on two overwhelming truths: 1) the fallacy of millennials as "digital natives" and 2) the up-to-this-point underutilized potential for instruction during a reference desk transaction.

Fallacy of Millennials as "digital natives"

Becker (2009, p. 342), makes the point that "computer literacy does not naturally equate to information literacy." No matter how efficiently students frenetically navigate Google, social networking sites, and Web 2.0 technologies, they are not necessarily able to successfully utilize library databases, or indeed, information resources in general, to meet their research needs. One problem with the traditional reference transaction is that it often presumes students are "digital natives" who are competent and comfortable finding authoritative library and web-based resources effectively.

In presuming that students are technologically inclined enough to succeed in using library resources with minimal guidance (and little, if no, follow up), we engage in the "show and go" reference interaction. This all-too-familiar model has students passively observe a librarian navigating the online catalog or an article database. Students are then expected to remember and mimic the process when they eventually sit down to do their research (whether immediately at a library computer or at home hours later).

One problem with this presumption is that students who are able to, or just think they can, navigate library resources efficiently are likely not the students who

approach the reference desk for research help. Tech-savvy students are already exploring library resources. Students approaching the desk for help may not be as confident in their computer skills, or they may simply need a more formal introduction to library resources. The “show and go” method may be appropriate for students needing just a little push in the right direction, but it fails the students who are asking for more guidance from a librarian.

Another problem with this “show and go” model is that it presumes that a library’s webpage design is intuitive and simple to navigate. It presumes that 21st century students, with their technological prowess, will be able to ultimately – through trial and error and self-exploration – end up with the resources that are useful to them. A number of studies have highlighted the way in which students interact with specific library web pages, and many of these call for simpler, more intuitive design. In the interest of more student-centered library homepage design, Delcore et al. (2009, p, 45) concluded that Fresno State’s page should have individual searches for “books, articles, and perhaps AV holdings… to bring the library’s site more in line with current web user expectations.” Similarly, the library study at the University of Rochester (Foster and Gibbons, 2007, p. 35) noted that student demands for library homepages often included significantly fewer research tools (online catalog, articles databases, course reserves) than what librarians tend to think students need (lists of e-journals and subject guides). Student-centered web design is especially critical, although by no means easy to attain, given the tendency of librarians to engage in the “show and go” reference model where students are expected to navigate a library’s homepage on their own.

Potential for instruction at reference desk

The opportunity to teach at the reference desk has been mentioned in multiple articles. Desai and Graves (2008, p. 254) consider this “point-of-need active learning,” while Elmborg (2002, p. 455) proposes that we use “constructivist learning theory-primarily composition theory-to develop a pedagogy for the reference desk.” Becker (2009, p. 354) also considers this possibility with the understanding that “students value library instruction, and it has been demonstrated that just-in-time user education has an impact on student perception and use of library resources.”

While providing instruction at the reference desk has always been an implicitly understood task by librarians at Grossmont College, we were not convinced that the “show and go” method was representative of a student-centered learning model, and we were also not convinced that students were retaining, and were able to duplicate on their own, the skills librarians modeled at the reference desk.

One problem with the “show and go” reference model for instructing digital natives is that it does not create an inviting instructional atmosphere. At Grossmont College, as at many institutions, our reference desk is a large, dominating desk that students must approach for help. The desk, standing about four feet high by three feet wide, is the perfect example of a barrier between instructor and student.

Nearly ten years ago, Fritch and Mandernack (2001, p. 292) discussed the effect technology was having on individuals and on implications of this for the reference desk. Their statement “Technology has promoted a society characterized by independence and self reliance, convenience and immediate gratification” is increasingly the case today. The traditional “show and go” reference model does not take this trend into consideration, and therefore does little – if anything – to ease twenty-first century students’ library anxieties.

Digital natives who are used to getting the answers they want with immediacy and minimal effort must first have the uncomfortable realization that they need help, and then they must muster up enough confidence to approach the reference desk to declare their perceived shortcomings. Digital natives who have mustered up enough confidence and insight initially to declare that they do not know how to do

research, may not have enough confidence left to approach the reference barrier a second, or even multiple, times. If this is the case, the goal of instruction at the reference desk has clearly failed.

Another problem with the “show and go” method is that it is supposed to be an opportunity for librarians to infuse an interaction with instruction. The brevity of the interaction, though, means instruction is minimized. Students would benefit from longer “hands-on” opportunities to immediately put into practice the techniques that a librarian has shown them, or to explore research tools for a length of time with a librarian nearby. Even though many reference desks are in close proximity to student computers, how often is it the case that all computers are being used at the time when a student is most motivated to put into practice the skills we have just modeled? Or, alternatively, as at Grossmont’s library, dedicated research computers are nearby but a librarian has to walk around the reference barrier to get to a student to continue helping and guiding them – and even then, the librarian’s attention is distracted when a line starts forming at the reference desk, but the students see no librarian available for help.

Student Research Center

Understanding and recognizing both millennials’ false sense of technological aptitude as well as the opportunity for instruction at the reference desk, I suggested that the librarians at Grossmont College restructure the reference desk area. This new entity, the Student Research Center (SRC), is a student learning-focused research space with multiple computer stations presided over by a librarian. To the traditional large, curved desk with a single computer we added four additional computer stations – two stand-up computer stations to the left of the librarian’s computer, and two sit-down computer stations to the right of the librarian’s computer. The two computers to the left of the librarian are a bit higher than average waist height and lend themselves well to brief use, such as looking up a call number of a reserve textbook; the two computers to the right of the librarian’s computer are at a typical table height, and lend themselves to more in-depth research such as database searching. All computers have chairs at them, although the chairs for the “stand up” stations are often pulled out of the way to allow for ease of access.

With the old “show and go” model, if a student came looking for a reserve textbook’s call number (most reserve texts are located in reserve open stacks), a librarian would turn the monitor to face the student, and then would demonstrate how to use the online catalog to get the call number. The librarian would then write the call number down for the student. If they were really intent on students actively participating, they would have the student write the call number down. So the student has only demonstrated that he or she they knows how to passively observe someone else performing research, and that they can copy down a string of letters and numbers from a webpage.

With the new SRC model, when students approach the desk and announce they need a call number, the librarian invites them around the desk to use one of the many computers with a “Sure! Let me show you how you can look that up in the online catalog.” The student then joins the librarian at one of the many computer stations, and the student uses the computer, with the librarian’s guidance, to look up a call number. The same model is also used for database searching and for completing online interlibrary loan forms. Thus we have created an empowering, collaborative model for the student.

So far, so good. But – one more facet of reference desk work still warrants discussion – marketing.

Patty:

Why Up-Sell

As MacDonald, van Duinkerken, and Stephens state, “The popularity of Google and the notion that all information is available on the Internet has created a very competitive service environment for academic libraries. To compete effectively, academic libraries need to aggressively market the variety and quality of their information resources” (2008, p. 375).

Although that was written in the context of a virtual reference marketing campaign, it is also true that librarians at the reference desk need to market our unique commodity (the ability to locate authoritative sources, thus becoming ourselves “the authoritative information source”) face-to-face, during every single reference desk encounter.

Alire would agree, as her article “Word-of-mouth marketing” (2007, p. 546) attests: “Why is marketing so critical to us in academic libraries today? There are several reasons, including:

- Academic librarians can no longer sit in their ivory towers waiting for customers - students, faculty, and staff - to use their libraries. We no longer have a captive audience.
- The competition is greater because we are no longer the only information service game in town.”

As a matter of fact, students themselves, in a recent survey at Bergen Community College, argued for more marketing. Thompson and Schott declared, when a survey was conducted among students about electronic resources, that 30% of them ranked “Making me aware of library resources and services” ***below*** their minimum expected level of service (2007, p. 62) (Italics mine).

Another point that can be made is that the reference desk is still seen by students as viable, and is therefore the perfect place for marketing. In the article “Preference for Reference” (2008, p. 46), Granfield and Robertson point out that the study found that although 29% of those surveyed said the reference desk staff was not inviting, “…the physical reference desk [still] had a clear advantage for most users because of the ‘personal touch’.”

Since the reference desk is still viable – that is, it is one of the few, if not the only, place on campus to get authoritative guidance immediately through walk-up help - that’s the perfect argument for an excellent place to market – a viable area where the librarian can appear friendly in his or her eagerness to share (up-sell) extra information.

In fact, in a point-counterpoint between Watstein and Bell, Watstein says: “ If reference traffic is down, perhaps we need to do a better job-a more aggressive job, promoting the unique value we add to our users’ academic or personal lives” (2008, p. 4). And what better time to do it when they are standing before us at the reference desk?

And finally, authors Duke and Tucker tell us quite plainly, “Marketing is often thought of as planned activities…targeted to highlight a specific resource or service. In addition, however, each library faculty, staff member, and student assistant acts as a marketing representative of the library on a daily basis. Every interaction that a member of the library staff has with potential users…impacts how they perceive a library and what they learn about the services, programs, and resources” (2007, p. 56).

So, since libraries need to compete for usage, reference desks are still viable, and each staff member is a marketer, we have a good case for up-sell at the reference desk.

How to Up-Sell

Here are three recommended approaches to accomplish up-sell, depending on the situation:

The Up-sell Push

The first, the most generalized approach, is to make sure the library offers an inviting environment – one that may include a café, study rooms, laptops for check-out, calculators and the like. After all, our very first goal is to get the students in the library door, since we cannot do any up-sell at the reference desk if no one is in the library. In “Student Values and Research” (2009, p. 353), Becker says: "Students were interested in the library’s Internet accessibility, computer commons and work/study space. We should interpret this optimistically. Think of the multitude of customers who visit a bookstore yet buy nothing. Businesses looking to expand their market would love to have our dilemma: 87% of our clientele have visited their college library in person … [and]…whether or not they are using our physical collections, they are at least entering the door.”

So, we make sure to create an inviting place. Then, as the librarian on duty moves about the area where the reference desk is located, as he or she notices a need, it can be addressed.

For instance, noticing that computers are all in use, and someone appears in need of one: “All of the PCs are in use right now, but we also have wireless laptops to check out. If you are working with friends, you can check out laptops to use with them in our group study rooms. ”

The Up-sell Add-on

The second recommended approach is for a student who actually approaches the reference desk, but asks for directional or other non-research-related information. For instance, recently at our reference desk, a student asked where he could find a fax machine. Our librarian gave the student explicit directions to help locate the fax (in the student union area), and then added, “If you ever need to scan documents to fax or email them, the library has a scanner networked to all of our computers, available for free.” While the student may or may not substitute a scanned email document for the fax, still, he or she is now aware of this service and also has a perception of a helpful librarian.

The Up-sell Intensive

The third approach is the most intensive. Let’s say the librarian offers a student a list of call numbers for books on his or her topic that are available in our library. Just because there appear to be enough books for the student’s research, we need not stop there. We go on to promote journal articles as a research option (“shorter and more current than most books”), and interlibrary loan as well. We may even talk about students’ privileges at other local libraries, and how to search the holdings of those libraries. Finally, we can mention that there is always a librarian available on chat, through the “Ask a Librarian” service.

A number of us already naturally take the aforementioned approach, as part of our regular reference service. But there are other types of promotion that are less closely tied to the question but nevertheless offer a great up-sell opportunity. For instance, a student may ask for an MLA Handbook. While handing that over, the librarian could offer one of the following: 1) give them an MLA library-created flyer and explain the availability of flyers, 2) mention that we also have the handbook on reserve, 3) talk about other style guides for future reference for other classes, 4) refer them to online sites for midnight MLA questions at home, and/or 5) briefly introduce the related idea of plagiarism and offer a handout on that.

Naturally, each of these approaches requires judgment – about linking like services

together, and about when enough is enough. Brevity in this case, is our friend. Too much, and millennials tune out. One well-placed up-sell may very well do the trick.

Training in Up-sell – to ensure success

When the University of New Mexico Library began its word-of-mouth marketing approach, they recognized the effectiveness of conducting training sessions for their employees, both to enhance their marketing skills and to garner employee support for their goal of word-of-mouth marketing (Alire, 2007, p. 548).

Training appears to be a wise approach. Most college libraries have a combination of full- and part-time librarians. The part-time librarians, especially, may not have been part of the discussion that resulted in the adoption of a new service model which includes marketing at the reference desk. They therefore need to be trained, separately or as a group, on both the concept of, and the need for, marketing. It may also help to role-play and/or provide examples – to both full- and part-time librarians. And it needs to be clear that this is an essential part of their reference desk duties, not just an option.

Conclusion

While the reference desk still plays a vital role in fulfilling libraries' missions, certain pedagogically-informed modifications can be made to it so it more effectively meets the instructional goals of an institution. Twenty-first century researchers are accessing information in a very different way than researchers of ten or twenty years ago, and thus it makes sense that the way in which we provide reference should also change.

In transitioning to the new SRC model of delivering reference, Grossmont College librarians envisioned the opportunity to work more collaboratively with students than what the "show and go" model allowed. We were worried, and anecdotal evidence showed, that many students were merely depending on librarians to regularly look up call numbers rather than utilizing the numerous dedicated research stations nearby. We also hoped the SRC would provide:

- A collaborative workspace that would lessen students' library anxiety – by putting student researchers a matter of a foot or so from a librarian, we hoped to make students more comfortable asking for help.
- A more student-centered instructional space that provided a familiar self-service model – students are already used to self-service models at the grocery store, airport, gas station, so the do-it-yourself model is not new or unusual.
- An opportunity to help multiple students at the same time – the librarian can get one student started with looking up a book by title, guiding the student next to him on advanced searching for an article in a database, and giving directions to the bathroom at practically the same time.
- An opportunity to bring our reference desk instructional services in line with those of other non-classroom faculty (e.g., faculty who provide drop-in tutoring/instruction in the English Writing Center, Math Study Center, etc.)
- A built-in method for the reference desk to look as welcoming, useful and viable as it really is.

We are currently in the first six months of piloting this new model, and are devising tools for assessing the SRC with the intention of publishing results in the near future.

So far we are pleased with the results: The reference desk is 1) busier – with students working behind it constantly, 2) friendlier and more collaborative – we are inviting students behind the desk and we're all working together, 3) more fun for

the librarians, who are happier helping more students collaboratively and intensively, and who are also enjoying the ease with which they can help more than one student at a time, and 4) more viable, by using up-sells to market our many “hidden” services.

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