
Retail Reference or Not?

Where Are We Headed?

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How has reference changed? I came to reference later in my career after attending library school in the late '80s and early '90s. At that time, I was still enough of an idealist to think that I would be supplying better reference service when I graduated even though I had already been teaching in a library instruction program for more than twenty years. However, some of what I read and hear has been cause for some consternation. One worrisome term recently coined in the literature is “retail reference.” Although the literature for some time has been discussing first the advent of, and then the reality of electronic reference materials, and the slowing or plummeting (depending on who you believe) number of patrons coming to the reference desk, the term retail reference is defined by Fialkoff in her 2006 *Library Journal* column as, “dumbing down reference” or “delivering what several librarians have referred to as the retail store model: not just quick in, quick out, which is fine, but service delivered by the retail store equivalent of clueless clerks.”¹ Like Davis in her answer to the Fialkoff column, I always dreamt of the ways I could help patrons.² I am occasionally disillusioned by what I hear and what I see, but I remain the eternal optimist; you may have seen some of this in my previous columns.

We have all noticed the changes occurring in the kind of reference questions we are currently dealing with as compared to a couple of years ago. The questions that arrive at our reference desk are often described as fewer and harder; there seems to be a broad chasm between “where’s the pencil sharpener?” and “how many yards of silk fabric were imported to the United States from China in the past six months?” According to Fialkoff, this phenomenon of harder questions seems to cross the border of types of libraries, including public, academic, and special.³ As we battle the perception that Google can find anything, we are also in the mode of trying to decide what electronic model to adapt next as we attempt to provide valid information to our patrons, especially those in the NextGen group. What does this say about provision of reference service and the need for reference tools—what will we need? During the past few years, we all have changed our reference services in a variety of ways; at Iowa State we have tried tiered reference; some of us are deep into trying to provide some model of 24/7 reference service via networks; we have learned to keep up with the use of IM and iPods; but, finally, have we upgraded our reference services or have we just diluted them with our multifaceted approach? Have we left our patrons not knowing where to turn when they think they need us? Have our Web pages become more and more numerous and more complex, all while we spend hours

and hours trying to make their use seem less complicated to users? Where do we go from here? How do we avoid the retail-reference trap? As I thought about how I'd arrived at this point in my career and considered the conundrum, a number of possible answers/revelations occurred to me, and all can involve a role for RUSA:

- up-to-date knowledge of current trends;
- adequate staff training at all levels; and
- responding to patrons' actual use of our collections; Google, as well as electronic and print reference tools.

KNOWLEDGE OF CURRENT TRENDS

Knowledge of trends includes both trends related to our type of library as well as those pertaining to other libraries in our communities. Several points come to mind here:

- the need to read, and not just in our areas of expertise but in other areas that relate to our users and our communities;
- the importance of keeping abreast of the trends in education; and
- the understanding of public policy as it relates to libraries.

In many areas, the American Library Association (ALA) is providing information necessary for reading both in the broad sense with *American Libraries* (which is currently undergoing a major facelift), as well as with the journals in our areas of specialization, such as *Reference & User Services Quarterly (RUSQ)*. But what else do we read? Options include everything from the *Chronicle of Higher Education* to *Public Libraries* and *School Library Journal*, to name only a few. Among the relevant policy issues currently being addressed are those contained in ALA President Leslie Burger's introduction to the draft document, "Toward a National Library Agenda."⁴ This document will be discussed throughout the spring of 2007 and updated to serve as a basis for discussion at the National Library Legislative Days, May 1–2, 2007, in Washington, D.C. According to the draft, this agenda is intended to:

- provide a broad framework for discussion and consensus building at the national, state, and local level;
- articulate a clear library agenda that resonates with the public;
- enable us to provide a positive message for our legislative and other advocacy efforts; and
- provide for advocacy initiatives during the next several years.⁵

This agenda is grouped into six major theme areas:

1. Libraries preserve the past and provide a bridge to the future.

2. Libraries build and strengthen communities.
3. Libraries support lifelong learning.
4. Libraries create information- and technology-literate communities.
5. Libraries encourage economic development.
6. Libraries support democracy.⁶

Further information concerning these initiatives is available at: http://wikis.ala.org/nationallibraryagenda/index.php/Main_Page. Surely RUSA can serve at the forefront of several of these initiatives, and particularly pertinent here would be creating information-literate communities.

ADEQUATE STAFF TRAINING AT ALL LEVELS

One means of pushing the literacy efforts forward is making sure that our librarians and all of our staff are better trained. The better we understand the tools available, the better we will be able to serve our users. In my previous column I addressed the issue of "certification for support staff," which is currently being addressed by a new ALA-APA task force, but this is just the tip of the iceberg. In my interviews with the new RUSA interns who are almost all new NextGen librarians, most felt they had come to their first jobs with plenty of theory, but little actual practice using current reference tools, both print and electronic, and that they need some on-the-job training. How are we incorporating this training? Is it ad hoc, or do we have a formalized way of handling that orientation and training for new librarians and staff? Having a formalized plan makes transition easier for everyone, and it can also serve as a means to update information for long-time staff. How do our policies deal with those librarians whose answer to update training is "I already know that; I don't need to go"? How can we continuously update the skills of our current staff? How do we avoid perfunctory service? While our libraries handle this in a variety of ways, Davis says that "sometimes cursory service is appropriate. But when used as a service standard it poses long-term problems to users and librarians in three ways:

- First, it prevents users from acquiring and improving information literacy skills.
- Second, it promotes the denigration of information authenticity.
- Third, it undermines librarianship by threatening the bridge between user and genuine bibliographic data."⁷

Our answer here must be some kind of written policy for handling training and retraining at all levels. The use of well-defined competencies gives staff at all levels a measure of progress and the impetus to continue to learn. As one of the new librarians at our library just said, "I strive to learn at least one new thing every day." This isn't a bad goal; it's one I, too, continue to strive for each day.

FROM THE PRESIDENT OF RUSA

RESPONDING TO THE PATRONS' ACTUAL USE OF OUR COLLECTIONS

Perhaps this is the most difficult issue to address because it varies so much within individual libraries and because we all have our pet titles that we cannot live without. It is, however, time to address this area with an open mind. For an example, when we last weeded our reference collection four or five years ago, there was a two-volume set of journal abbreviations that I declared would be the last thing to be canceled regardless of cost because I used it so often each day. However, when I started orientation for several new librarians in January this year I had cause to stop and realize that I wasn't using this set much anymore. Perhaps Dave Tyckoson said it best in his short article in *Across the Grain*; in a similar situation he took pause, in the process of planning for a new building and move, to realize that he hadn't made much use of *Facts on File* lately and asked himself whether this was still an important purchase.⁸ According to Fialkoff, "Reexamining reference is smart, but downgrading is not."⁹ How can we accomplish one without the other? How have Google and the Internet in general changed how we do what we do?

GOOGLE AND THE WEB!

According to Joe Janes, "Google works. Now what are reference librarians going to do?"¹⁰ Surely none of us can ignore the obvious? Every time I address or teach a class at any level I start by affirming what they already know—Google is the first stop on almost any research project's information shopping list. That doesn't mean that I don't try to increase the likelihood of students finding what they need by suggesting some search tips that make Google function better, but what if—oh no—Google doesn't work? We already know by now that when users reach us they are often already frustrated by the search process. They are turning to us for help—not first—but later or last. Because I teach with a dozen or more instructors each semester, I also receive and answer literally hundreds of individual e-mail questions from those students. Regardless of what I have said or not said when speaking to those classes, I know several things about the students when the e-mails arrive:

- they are at the end of the Google rope;
- they probably have forgotten most of the things I suggested in class that they should do next; and
- they do not remember that I created Web pages in our Instruction Commons to assist them or do not remember how to get to them.

Can we change this pattern? I sincerely doubt it, but we have to be prepared to step up and offer assistance no matter what the library type or patron type/generation. The questions are getting harder because users have, to some extent, taken our advice—they started the fishing trip without us and did not catch what they needed; now they expect us to

suggest the appropriate lure they need to attract the right information.

ELECTRONIC REFERENCE BOOKS, OR WHATEVER HAPPENED TO SHEEHY?

I do not think I will ever forget the time I could not find the answer to a question for a patron. I asked another librarian for assistance and the answer was, "Did you try checking in Sheehy?"¹¹ For those of you older or younger than I am, this refers to the *Guide to Reference Books*, which for a long time was compiled by Eugene Sheehy and others. It was last updated and edited by Robert Balay in 1996 and is currently being revised. I am hopeful that the revision, which is due out this year (2007), is not only a print source, but a dynamic electronic tool that will not gather dust on our limited reference shelves, a tool that will move us into the age of electronic reference, and enable us to offer better electronic solutions to our users.

HOW TO AVOID RETAIL REFERENCE

Conclusion

The trap of retail reference can be tough to avoid, and preventing ourselves and our libraries from slipping into it will be a challenging task. But at all levels and locations, we must strive to consider not just our pet tools but our users' needs. We must remain current in order to offer our users what they really need within their time frame, or we face becoming obsolete. I am not advocating 24/7 reference for everyone, but rather a sincere and realistic look at who we are and what we have to offer as a profession that makes us unique. Then I would hope we can be proactive and not reactive to our rapidly changing world.

For an updated look at the world we may face in reference and user services ten years from now, I hope you will join us in Washington, D.C., for the 2007 RUSA President's program, "Time Odyssey: Visions of the Future for Reference and User Services." Speakers will include:

- Allen Renear, professor of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and expert in knowledge representation;
- Michael Cornfield, George Washington University Political Scientist and director of research for the PEW Democracy Online Project;
- Genevieve Bell, director of User Experience at Intel and an anthropologist;
- William J. Mitchell, professor of architecture at MIT; and
- Stephen Bell, the "blended librarian," who will provide his vision and a response to other speakers.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 23

