
A Personal Choice

Reference Service Excellence

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Guest Columnist

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In an effort to bring RUSA's ALA Annual Conference programming to *RUSQ* readers who cannot attend the conference, I invited Marie Radford to write this guest editorial based on her address that was presented as part of the 2008 RUSA President's Program, "Quality Service in an Impersonal World," at ALA Annual Conference in Anaheim. However, this article is much more than a reworking of that excellent presentation. This reflective piece synthesizes findings from other recent workshops and conferences focusing on reference and provides a blueprint for reference service excellence. The innovative and practical reference strategies presented here can be easily implemented by academic and public libraries.

Marie holds a PhD from Rutgers University and an MLS from Syracuse University. Prior to joining the faculty at Rutgers University, she was the acting dean at Pratt Institute, School of Information and Library Science in New York City. Previously, she was the head of curriculum materials at William Patterson University of New Jersey, and a school librarian and media specialist at Belvidere (N.J.) High School and Franklin (N.J.) Township School.

Her research interests are evaluation of virtual reference, interpersonal communication aspects of reference, nonverbal communication, and media stereotypes of librarians. Marie's dynamic presentation style is well known and she has given numerous conference presentations and workshops. She has also published extensively in scholarly library journals and is active in professional organizations, including ALA, RUSA, Association for Library and Information Science Education, and the New Jersey Library Association. She served as program chair for the Reference Renaissance: Current and Future Trends conference held August 4–5, 2008, in Denver. Marie is one of the editors of *Virtual Reference Service: From Competencies to Assessment* (Neal-Schuman, 2008). Her book, *Web Research: Selection, Evaluation, and Citing*, was published by Allyn and Bacon (2006) and *The Reference Encounter: Interpersonal Communication in the Academic Library* by ACRL/ALA (1999). She blogs at Library Garden (<http://librarygarden.blogspot.com>) and her website is www.sclis.rutgers.edu/~mradford.—Editor

I want to celebrate the rise and revitalization of reference service excellence and to talk with you about the realities and possibilities we face in today's libraries. I have been involved in reference for twenty years on the front line in school and academic libraries, and as a researcher for an overlapping time of twenty-three years. I have never seen a more exciting time for reference. In fact, I've never seen any time that has even come remotely close. So my talk will be in the

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context of what I believe to be a time of reference renaissance. Why do I feel this way? Let me share some of my reasons.

Over the past year, it has been my privilege to be intensely involved as program chair for the Reference Renaissance: Current and Future Trends conference held August 4–5, 2008, in Denver, co-sponsored by Colorado's Bibliographic Research Center and RUSA.¹ Presenters of competitive papers, workshops, and panels reported an astonishing array of creative, successful, and groundbreaking reference endeavors from all forms of services and library types—including all modes of Virtual Reference (VR), innovative Face-to-Face (FtF) services, novel phone-based services (including text messaging), pod- and vodcasting, Web 2.0 social networking applications, etc. As a post-Annual Conference 2008 note, I am delighted to report that the Reference Renaissance conference was an incredible success! A total of 508 participants from 42 states, the District of Columbia, and seven countries came together in Denver to share and celebrate everything reference.

The success of the Reference Renaissance conference is just one reason why I don't believe that VR or FtF reference is in decline. Quite to the contrary, I see, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that rapid and remarkable advances are taking place in a variety of library settings across the United States and beyond. These changes involve the merging and morphing of a large range of reference modes. Groundbreaking experiments in outreach to user communities including on-ground as well as cyberspace communities (such as Facebook, MySpace, and Second Life) are appearing at an accelerating pace.

In a November 2007 *Library Journal* article, David Isaacson said, "Unfortunately, the 1984 reference model endures in too many libraries today: librarians passively waiting at a desk for people to approach."² Now this scenario may be all too true for some libraries, but a growing number of exciting outreach initiatives are appearing that are breaking new ground in brick and click environments. At Penn State University Libraries, I helped facilitate a two-day reference retreat in August 2007 and learned about a range of new enterprises this forward-looking group of professionals is undertaking to forge stronger connections with their students. I learned about Billie Walker, the "Library Dude," whose reference outreach is described on the Penn State website:

The ASK cart (actual hotdog cart) is a mobile library service offered by the Thun Library to provide reference assistance. Designed as a simple, effective and fun approach to faculty and student outreach, the Library Dude aka Billie Walker and other librarians offer on-the-spot information and/or reference assistance outdoors. Equipped with wireless laptop and various goodies (highlighters, candy, etc.) the librarians at Berks are increasing visibility and awareness of reference service (one-on-one consultations, specialized databases, etc.) and library resources (podcast, bestsellers, etc.). So when you see the ASK cart please give a shout-out to the Library Dude!³

I've been told that students now come in to the library and specifically ask for the "Library Dude" when they have reference questions.

Another sign that there is heightened interest in the scholarship and practice of reference is that "Reference in Digital Environments" was one of the two themes for Libraries in the Digital Age (LIDA) conference in Croatia, June 2–8, 2008.⁴ As chair of that half of the LIDA program, I was impressed by the number of creative approaches to reference I heard about, in both digital and on-ground environments. For example, Scott Vine and Pamela Snelson of Franklin and Marshall College, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, presented a paper highlighting outreach activities at their small, private institution.⁵ They spoke about their practice of making "House Calls" to faculty offices and other buildings on campus. A team of librarians let the departments know when they are coming, and now offer coupons for free coffee for those with substantial reference questions that are asked on the visits. This service started slowly, but now business is growing and faculty and staff eagerly await the "House Calls" and have meaty questions to ask and concerns to share.

Also at LIDA I had the pleasure of meeting James Malloy of University College Dublin (UCD). He told me of a fun way that the UCD library is involving students and faculty in their library blog. They have designed a cloth library bookbag that sells for a pittance (£2) and have invited students to take photos of the bookbag in exotic places and post them on the blog! Students have responded enthusiastically and artistically in posting shots that display the bookbag all over the world. What a great idea for drawing students to the library blog!⁶

Public libraries are also in the forefront of offering innovative services. Earlier in this RUSA President's Program, we were privileged to hear from Donna Bachowski, Head of Reference Central at Orange County Public Library, Orlando, Florida. Some of the Orange County service excellence initiatives include abandoning the traditional reference desks and having staff welcome and offer help to every person who enters. I was very impressed to hear that without charge (yes, free!) they snail-mail items that are requested online to user's homes. (Hey, I want that!) In addition, Orange County is using a wireless communication system (Vocera) throughout the building for instant communication between librarians and staff to improve service to users.

Despite these and a growing number of other worthy efforts, there is evidence that some libraries are seeing a decline of in-person visits to the traditional FtF reference desk. Danny Wallace of the University of Alabama, in a February 2008 post to the JESSE discussion list, noted that according to the ARL Statistics, reference questions in academic libraries showed a decline from 1991 to 2005 but reported an increase in the complexity of reference questions. In the same period, there was a 58 percent increase in librarian training sessions to user groups, a 93 percent increase in attendance to these sessions, and an amazing increase of 147 percent in interlibrary loans.⁷ Academic libraries have reported that users are making fewer trips to the library in person, but often

are asking a growing number of VR queries, a trend that can be expected to continue.⁸ On the other hand, public libraries are generally showing increases in both foot traffic and reference stats. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, reference questions in public libraries increased 18 percent from 1994 to 2004 and overall gate count increased 60 percent.⁹

I strongly suspect that one reason we are seeing a decrease in the reference statistics for academic libraries is because there is a lag in figuring out how to count reference questions given the increase in online and other nontraditional reference activity. For these many years, FtF and phone stats have been tallied and reported separately from VR reference (including e-mail, chat, IM, contacts through Facebook, etc.) and in-office or course-embedded consultations (in courseware such as Blackboard). This deeply entrenched practice means that reference queries are woefully undercounted. I argue for a revision of the way that reference stats are collected and reported. I applaud initiatives to revamp these practices for a more accurate and consistent counting that captures and aggregates *all* reference queries in addition to tracking the level of difficulty and time spent.

At the same time, it is imperative that we face up to the reality that we are in a time of “disruptive technologies” that threaten the library’s mission and branding as the “go to” place for quality information. In the fascinating and highly recommended book *Academic Library and the Net Gen Student*, Susan Gibbons presents an anthropologist’s exploration of the information-seeking and communication behaviors of students at the University of Rochester.¹⁰ She also talks about Clayton Christensen’s *Innovator’s Dilemma*, which profiled companies that failed to stay on top of their competitors when confronted with market and technological change.¹¹ These organizations, such as Sears, Xerox, and Bethlehem Steel, were well-managed and customer-centered, but still “collapsed or lost primacy in the marketplace. . . . In each of these cases, and many more, the organization did what the traditional management literature recommends: it stayed focused on its core competencies, responded to the demands of its high-end customers, and invested in new technologies and processes. What each firm failed to do, though, was pay early and serious attention to ‘disruptive technologies’ within the marketplace.”¹² Basically, they continued to do *business as usual*. Unlike sustaining technologies (such as color film replacing black and white film), disruptive technologies bring a new proposition to the market that is usually cheaper and more convenient (such as digital photography, which has all but replaced film).

Gibbons argues that the idea of disruptive technologies may actually go a long way to explain much of the recent upheaval caused in libraries. She asserts that the Internet and ever-expanding services built upon it are in fact disruptive technologies for all libraries. In the good old days (pre-Web, pre-Google, pre-Wikipedia) people had no alternatives to the library for their information needs. Now they have a plethora of alternatives that are simpler, easier, do-it-yourself, and, most

importantly, unimaginably more convenient.

One bit of good news is that a prominent sustaining technology for libraries is the cell phone. After all, *now* is the time to promote phone reference. Fact 1: Everyone and her brother is carrying a phone! Fact 2: Every library has a phone! Duh! All predictions indicate that cell phone technology is taking off as arguably the most important communication device of the decade. With the advent of the iPhone and its kin enabling mobile web search and access to social networks, handhelds are gaining supremacy. We can easily leverage our long-established phone reference savvy. Libraries can begin by putting the reference phone number in a prominent place on the library website. On some library sites I am perplexed and frustrated when it is hard to find a phone number (and mailing address)! I suggest putting the reference number in the upper left hand corner, known as the “golden triangle” where everyone looks first. At the start of any library use instruction class, program, or training session, have users/students enter the reference phone number into their buddy list immediately. Next put tent cards on every table and flat surface with the library URL and the reference desk phone number. (“Got a question? Need help? Click, Call, or Come On by the Service Desk!”) We were surprised when focus groups with teens as part of the “Seeking Synchronicity” IMLS grant project revealed that some of them did not realize that their library had a phone!¹³

Other crucial sustaining technologies are VR services along with Web 2.0 approaches to reference, since they harness the power of the Web to make obtaining reference help much more convenient. The best success stories (and largest reported gains in numbers) for VR are usually among state-wide or other large consortia that are able to pool professional talent and to offer a quality service that is always available for online users. Libraries experimenting with IM reference find that younger people soon become enthusiastic users.

So, despite some reported drops in FtF queries, especially for academic libraries, the statistics for VR and other forms of reference are on the rise, unless out of fear of being overwhelmed these digital enhancements, including chat reference, are either not offered, kept as well-guarded secrets, or poooh-pooohed as not being worth the effort and abandoned too quickly. Kris Johnson, coordinator of AskColorado, found that library sites with the most links also correlated to higher usage stats. The links to VR that were most prominent on the library websites got the most traffic! She said “easily accessed” is the key.¹⁴

What else is important besides easy access? In talking to VR users and nonusers as part of the “Seeking Synchronicity” grant we’ve been hearing earfuls, much of it adding up to good old fashioned service excellence with a dash of Web 2.0 thrown in for the increasingly technology-literate populations we serve.¹⁵ Here is a taste of what we heard:

- VR users love having a range of services including FtF, phone, e-mail, and chat.
- younger users (teens to mid-twenties) greatly prefer chat

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to e-mail, but also love their FtF librarians—that is, the ones who treat them with kindness and warmth and who take their questions seriously. Even helping them with homework (gasp) questions.

- Library users know (and respond in kind) when service is given enthusiastically (or grudgingly).
- Users get very frustrated when they get the runaround or are ignored (in any venue).
- Chat users often want very specific information. They get annoyed with elaborate instruction when it is forced rather than offered, as in, “Would you like to know how I found this info?”
- Students really do need us when their independent searching skills fail (e.g., when they can’t easily find the information in Google or Wikipedia) or when Dad or their text buddy doesn’t know.
- Library users greatly appreciate our knowledge, accurate information, and personal, friendly encounters with us.
- VR nonusers don’t know about our chat services, and they’d be happy to try them out if they were informed through marketing that stresses service convenience and privacy.

So, then, let’s get down to brass tacks here. What constitutes excellent service in the current library landscape? What are some of the things I think are central for promoting service excellence in this environment of revolutionary and rapid technological disruption, conflicting demands on our time (all of them urgent!), and sophisticated services, sources, systems, and society?

THE END OF THE LONE RANGER

The days that anyone is alone at the reference desk are thankfully long gone. I think back to the mid-1980s when I was a K–8 school librarian in rural New Jersey’s Hunterdon County. My first professional position featured four year’s residence in a moldy basement library with no phone, no fax, no computer, no copier, no assistant, no window even for sending smoke signals to Tonto—*nada!* I was truly the Lone Ranger, except in rare cases of dire emergency when I would emerge from the basement, pale and wan, to place a land-line call to the local public library, providing, of course, that I could convince the stern (but lovable) school secretary to allow me to use her carefully guarded main office phone during my meager half-hour lunch break.

Jubilation! Now we no longer have to know the answer to every question, or to even know where to look. Opportunities now abound for asking experts and consulting colleagues. We can call, e-mail, IM, Tweet, beep, and so on when we need help. However, much of the time, it seems to me that we still operate as if we are alone at the desk (whether physical or virtual). I’ve been thinking that Twitter.com may be the perfect social networking tool for solo librarians (or, for that matter, any librarian in need) to seek instant help with difficult reference questions.

Here’s an example of what I’m talking about using the tried and true method of “phone a friend.” I’ve been truly inspired by some of the librarians I’ve interviewed for the “Seeking Synchronicity” grant. One VR librarian told me about going the extra mile in this encounter:

Someone needed to know if a library had a particular volume of a journal. . . . The first thing I did was go to the library’s catalog and look there, and it turned out that the information was not there, and then I just kind of picked up the phone and called that library and found the information that way. And sometimes I feel that it isn’t all or nothing, it doesn’t have to be completely online. I could have just looked up the phone number and given it to them, but I went the extra part to call it for them and make them a satisfied customer!

Isn’t that an amazing tale? And simple? Why do we forget about the simple solutions when we are in the midst of a chat (or any) reference encounter? Of course this level of service is not always possible, depending on what time of day the chat inquiry comes in, or whether there is a queue, but many times it actually is possible and may even be quicker.

Without a doubt, library users continue to value us and our ability to navigate complex information sources and systems. It may come as a surprise that usually they are willing to wait. In VR, we are often in a rush to push a webpage or a library’s home page. We think the users are in a hurry in chat. Well, our “Seeking Synchronicity” research has found that many clients are using chat because it is convenient, they like it, and it is a familiar type of communication, rather than because they are in a rush. Through online surveys and interviews with VR users, we discovered that only a very small percentage of users (less than 10 percent) is actually in a hurry.¹⁶ VR users have told us that they value good referrals and are frequently also willing to wait for a subject expert when they have a complex question rather than get an incomplete (or incorrect) answer quickly.

Statewide reference services bemoan the low numbers of referrals to subject specialists. Do we consistently reach out to other librarians or subject experts to ask for help (by phone, IM, or e-mail) when we are stumped? Perhaps it “takes a village” (if you’ll pardon the cliché) for service excellence these days. Isn’t it wonderful that we can use all of our professional networks in new and tech-savvy ways to help our users? One of our challenges is to think creatively in terms of “wow” service and going the extra mile to make every user “a satisfied customer” like the VR librarian quoted previously.

Beyond the end of the Lone Ranger in reference encounters—in the previous quote there is also a glimpse of a major trend that I’ve been tracking—the merging and morphing of services across modalities. An encounter that starts as FtF ends up in e-mail, a complex chat question moves to phone reference, a chat client may be invited to come by for a FtF appointment. Did you know that research suggests that

25–30 percent (or perhaps more) of our VR users are already in the building?

Judy Rutenberg and Heather Tuander found that nearly 55 percent of live chat VR sessions at University of California Irvine Libraries were from buildings on campus. Undergrads were more likely than graduate students to be accessing chat from within the library building, graduate students were more likely to be in other on-campus buildings such as offices, labs, etc.¹⁷ Why would users be using VR instead of FtF reference when they are in the library? Well, some won't leave their computers for fear of theft, or they are afraid to approach us because they are English Language Learners, or they may be hard of hearing, or they are just plain shy or fragile. If they have interacted with a sour librarian in the past, they may prefer not to use FtF. Familiarity plays more of a role than we may think. Library users have proclivities for seeking out the kind librarians and avoiding the ones who look grumpy or too busy. In VR, a similar phenomenon is seen in transcripts. In the middle of a chat session that has gone awry, "Seeking Synchronicity" transcripts show users asking "Can I have another librarian?" or "Is there ne1 else who can help?" (to translate chat lingo, ne1 = anyone).¹⁸ The bottom line is to realize that people, regardless of the type of reference venue, want to be treated with compassion and respect. They have interpersonal, relational needs, as well as information needs.¹⁹

INTERGENERATIONAL COLLABORATION

In my frequent visits to talk about service excellence at a number of public and academic libraries, I've been getting wind of a disturbing new phenomenon—Librarian Generation Wars. There seems to be a major disconnect in our libraries between the younger generations (Millennials, Gen X, and Gen Y) and the older generations—the Baby Boomers and beyond.

We need to declare a truce and try harder to appreciate and learn from those both older and younger than we are. I'd like to propose the idea of "cross generation mentoring." This idea would involve librarians teaming up in pairs with those having around ten to fifteen years' difference in library experience. Those newer to the profession get to benefit from the vast understanding of how to handle difficult situations with library users, supervising and management ability, and from the knowledge of reference sources and systems of those with more years in the trenches. The more experienced ones get to find out how to use their cell phones! Well, seriously, imagine this dynamic duo at the reference desk? Any reference query then becomes a collaboration that can be a learning experience for each of the librarians and the user gets the added benefit of both perspectives.

One of my friends, a veteran head of reference, said that there are so many new ways to do reference right now and that she had heard others speak of "waiting to see or for someone to tell them what really works." How long are we going to wait? Were we that stung when Beta-Max went under? Yes, it

is true we do not have enough time to learn everything. Yes, some new approaches might eventually fail. Yes, some of us are afraid. What are you afraid of? Blogs, wikis, avatars, Flickr, RSS feeds, Twitter, IM, widgets, moodles, getting stranded at the Information Archipelago in Second Life?

According to Meredith Farkas, referring to adoption and use of blogs and wikis, "The biggest barriers to making any knowledge-sharing effort happen is inertia. It's easier to continue doing the same thing, even if it is ineffective."²⁰ I think inertia and fear account for much of our hesitancy to embrace new, unproven reference approaches. It seems to me that what's been happening is that the Millennial and Gen Y librarians are jumping in to the Web 2.0 applications with both feet. The more experienced members of the profession are skeptical that these applications will be around for the long haul, are intimidated by the learning curves, and afraid to venture outside of our comfort zone. We are victims of upgrade fatigue. To become less afraid, we need diverse, intergenerational teams to maximize our effectiveness (and comfort levels) and minimize the learning curves (and fear) in this fast-paced profession.

BARRIERS TO SERVICE EXCELLENCE

There's no doubt that we face untold barriers in our personal quest for service excellence. In addition to Lone Ranger mentality and the Generation Wars, another major stumbling block is in our institutionalized mindset and litany of excuses for why we cannot provide service excellence to each and every person. Here are a few of the most popular excuses:

- We are already too busy to try something new.
- We don't do that here.
- We would be overwhelmed if we did that.
- Then everyone would expect it.
- Then they will expect it every time.
- We could never do that here.
- It takes too long.
- We don't have enough staff.
- They should do their own work.
- We can't break the rules.
- We must enforce the policies.
- That's not my job.
- It would be total chaos if we did that.
- They will take advantage of us if we did that.
- I'll get in trouble if I do that.
- The others I work with won't like it.
- I've been told not to bend the rules for anyone, ever, and I never do.

I could go on and I'm sure you could too, as I know these sound familiar. The last one can especially be taken to the extreme. Truth is stranger than fiction. On September 26, 2007, the Associated Press (AP) reported that "Even the dead apparently have to pay the fines on their overdue books" at a library in New York state. "Elizabeth Schaper said she was

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charged a 50-cent late fee while turning in a book that her late mother had checked out.” When she tried to explain to “the man behind the library counter” that her mother had passed away a few days ago, and otherwise would have returned the books on time, Schaper said: “His only reply was that, ‘That will be 50 cents.’” Ms. Schaper was shocked by this response, according to the AP.²¹

Who wouldn't be in shock, since a basic principle of library service should be to know when and how to make an exception to our policies? This true-life example, although extreme, reminds us of the untold damage in terms of public relations that can be caused by single-minded, robotic adherence to the rule book. Service excellence demands that we be flexible rather than rigid, and treat each encounter as a unique one, each individual user as a human being, even when they (or we) are having a bad day.

BURNOUT

Because reference service puts us on the front lines, coping with the high expectations of users, burnout is a reality. Although burnout generally affects the more experienced reference librarians, let me make it perfectly clear that burnout is not just for older librarians. Some of our best and brightest early and midcareer professionals are heading for burnout because of the increasing and sometimes contradictory demands of our users. Remaining current, on top of technology, and conversant with the myriad rapid and ongoing changes to our databases, search engines, and reference tools, is indeed exhausting. Staff and budget shortages frequently pose additional stress. I recently heard some buzz that there are two kinds of reference librarians: the ones who don't care and give poor service and the ones who are knocking themselves out with high service standards and are consequently on the verge of burnout. This problem is not new to our profession, but seems to be worsening in these tough economic times.

I've already discussed the need to regard reference as a team, not solo, activity. Another suggestion I have to offer is the idea of a reference sabbatical for those who are feeling burned out or getting close. This reference sabbatical can vary in length and frequency, but what I propose is a short, but total, break from the front lines. In all but the very smallest libraries, I think it would be possible to allow those in danger of burnout one week a month (Or perhaps, one or two days a week? One month a year?) without FtF or VR reference desk duty. This brief sabbatical could rotate among the reference team, so that service can still function at a high level. Dave Tyckoson, associate dean at Henry Madden Library, California State University, Fresno and 2007–08 RUSA president, chimed in at 2008 ALA Annual Conference to say that as an administrator, he greatly values and looks forward to his time at the reference desk. No doubt many people feel this way, but if you are feeling burned out, talk to your colleagues about a formal or informal sabbatical approach. Before you reject this idea because “we could never do that here,” give it some thought and perhaps talk about it with your colleagues at a

reference meeting or over lunch. Even asking to be put on the desk at the quieter times for one week per month might be a possible way to start small.

During this sabbatical time, recharge your batteries and take time to reflect on your reference presence and perhaps do some research or read blogs to find out what different approaches are promising for your library. There may be some low-hanging fruit (Creation of an online FAQ for a reoccurring assignment? Forming a visioning team? Talking to your Millennial part-time/student assistants/volunteers about Web 2.0 projects they could work on—or asking them to coach you on use of Firefox? Rearranging schedules? Asking for help?) When we are burned out, it is difficult to see how we could be more effective.

CONCLUSION: SERVICE EXCELLENCE, A PERSONAL CHOICE

I know that many of you are thinking that I am “preaching to the choir,” that we are already doing everything we can to promote service excellence. I ask, could we do better? Buffy Francisco said in a dig_ref post, “Now we should—and can—do better. ‘Taking care of business’ in our libraries . . . must be a high priority when it comes to communicating with patrons.”²² I am not worried that librarians are being replaced by search engines. I had the opportunity to hear Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia, speak at the last Online Information conference in London, where he said that Wikipedia will not replace librarians: “Everyone tells jokes, but we still need professional comedians.”²³ Our skills are still appreciated and highly valued by users in this age of info glut.

Excellent service frequently comes to the personal choices we make to learn, to embrace change, to push into uncharted cyber-territory, to choose to find positive approaches even to the most problematic people. It is definitely scary to expand, innovate, rearrange, and market all types of reference services. These moves risk even busier physical and virtual reference service points. After all, a quiet reference desk might just be a safe and comfortable one. Heaven forbid that we break out of our comfort zones to go boldly where we haven't gone before! Heaven forbid that we have a line of users, a ringing phone, and a pinging chat client queue all at once. Heaven forbid that we might become overwhelmed with users clamoring for our services! Wait a minute—isn't it true that just about every reference librarian I know would rather be kept crazy busy than be bored? Isn't it true that we crave the thrill of the chase? Isn't it true that we are continually asked to have hard stats to justify our existence (and salaries?), to justify the large, prime real estate of our buildings, and to justify our print and e-resource budgets—budgets that we know need to grow rather than shrink with the information explosion we face?

After all, what's the alternative to growing and nurturing new services to meet our users' needs? To continue to do business as usual (e.g., only at the traditional FtF reference desk) and then throw up our hands and moan that “reference

is dead” when our stats drop? The secret to a vibrant future for reference is to embrace the change, indeed, to take up the challenge to go beyond mere adoption of change, and to become change agents. Can we afford to do business as usual? I don’t think so. If our desk stats go down, this should be our wakeup call to find out more, to get curious, and to explore. How do our users want to be served? What can we do better? What draws them to our services and resources? What are the barriers?

In the end, service excellence comes down to building positive relationships with our users, one person at a time, whether FtF, phone, or online. Make it your personal choice and encourage your colleagues, especially those who need to be inspired rather than discouraged.

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