

INNOVATING WHERE IT MATTERS MOST: HOW REFERENCE SERVICE CAN TURN THE LIBRARY INTO A GLOBAL INFORMATION HUB

Bikika Laloo

Abstract

If there is any place that makes the library a true global hub of information, it is the reference desk or reference section, for this is the heart of librarianship, and it is here that innovative ideas need to be incorporated in order to fulfill this purpose. This paper examines the various innovations in reference service such as consortia and virtual reference service. It briefly describes these new services along with the problems and solutions relating to them. It concludes that while it is important to maintain traditional reference practices, it is also imperative to keep up with the times and embrace new ideas in order to make the library the global hub of information.

Keywords : Reference Service, Innovative Practices, Consortia, Virtual Reference Service, E-mail Reference Service, Chat Reference Service

1. The Information World Today

The idea of the library as a global hub of information is no longer just an illusion. The age of stand-alone libraries is slowly but surely dying out especially in the more advanced countries. Reports on the drop in the usage of the physical library and its services are getting louder. Carlson (2001) predicted a decline in library use despite such efforts as adding coffee bars to entice students. The rapid advancement of technology now makes information accessible from systems other than the library. "The popularity of Barnes and Noble bookstores, the googlization of information seeking (Really Simple Syndication) and create new knowledge (whether traditional papers or Power Point and multimedia presentations) are now major factors energizing librarians and higher education administrators to reevaluate the role and importance of the university library." (Weidinger et. al. 2007) There is also the change in users' approach to information. Users are fiercely independent, curious, fascinated with new technologies, multi-taskers who want to stay connected 24/7 and possess expectation of immediacy (Tapscott, 1998), Oblinger (2004)). It thus makes sense to overhaul the library system in order to make information as easily available as possible and draw the user back to the library. This is now being done through such innovations as collaboration with Internet search engines, consortia, virtual reference service, user direct document delivery etc. While all of these innovations are commendable, it must be said that there is no greater area that needs more innovations than reference service. Reference service is after all the heart of library work and it is

the service through which there is maximum interaction between the library and its users. And who or what can be more important in the library set up than the user?

2. Virtual Reference Service

These include e-mail and chat services. While e-mail services are well known, synchronous chat reference services are also becoming increasingly common **and are now familiar features on library home pages. Such services are useful for those users who cannot come to the library due to physical disabilities, scheduling constraints, or geographical distance. They** also enable users who are uncomfortable approaching a librarian in person, to submit anonymous questions. Users may also find virtual reference more convenient for their needs as it is available anytime, any place. Virtual reference services are also instrumental in providing library support for distance education students. It is possible that reference services will be more equal when provided online because during the reference interview (via e-mail) blatant differences do not interfere. Also, e-mail mediates inter-cultural communication and reduces miscommunication (Shachaf, 2005). When communication is mediated by computers, social presence is reduced (Sproull & Keisler, 1986). Interactions are more impersonal and task oriented because of the lack of social cues, lack of context and lack of non-verbal behaviour. This can have a democratizing effect on communication and can result in equal and unbiased service to diverse user groups (Shachaf & Horowitz, 2006).

Examples of libraries practicing such services include QuestionPoint, virtual reference software that is the result of collaboration between the Library of Congress, the Global Reference Network and OCLC. Another project is the Virtual Reference Desk sponsored by the United States Department of Education. This service is a wide-reaching resource sharing project that includes both libraries and other information providers. It has assisted in the creation of a network of more than 100 "Ask a" type virtual reference services which are reference type information on a wide variety of specialized topics. (Virtual Reference Desk, 2002) In addition, many statewide consortia in the United States and nation-wide consortia in other countries provide virtual reference. In the United States these include AskColorado, Maryland AskUsNow and Ohio's KnowItNow24*7. Then there is AskNow in Australia, Ask a Librarian in the United Kingdom, Al@din in the Netherlands, Die Deutsche Internetbibliothek in Germany, Reference Point in Singapore, the Virtual Reference Desk of the Shanghai Central Library and the China Academic Distributed Collaborative Virtual Reference System (CVRS). It is reported that seven prominent virtual reference software products are now being used by over 2,800 libraries around the world (Olivares, 2004)

3. Problems

The innovations in reference service while they have revolutionized the profession, are not without faults. In fact anything that has to do with machines, particularly the computer is bound to have

technologies. A foolproof system is yet to be invented. Experts have encountered the following problems relating to the innovations in the field of reference service:

1. E-mail can create problems in that due to lack of non-verbal cues during the reference interview, misunderstanding can occur (Abels, 1996).
2. Discrimination is more likely to be expressed overtly due to the anonymous, spontaneous, impersonal and uninhibited nature of computer-mediated communication (Glaser & Kahn, 2005).
3. Although librarians will not likely deny some resources or services to users, they may find an excuse to behave discriminatorily at the moment. In computer networks for example, higher levels of hostility, uninhibited and flaming behaviour have been observed. This can lead to unequal treatment of users (Douglas & McGarty, 2001).
4. Shachaf and Horowitz (2006) found that virtual reference librarians discriminated against Arabs and African Americans and provided the best level of service to Caucasians. Librarians ignored requests made by this group more than other users, responded more slowly to their requests, put less time and effort into their reply, and when replying to these users' requests the librarians did not adhere to professional guidelines as much as they did when replying to requests from Caucasian users.
5. As regards chat reference service, quite a few of them have been discontinued. In their investigation of five academic, one public and three consortia chat services, Radford and Kern (2006) found that the major reasons for discontinuation of these chat services were: funding problems; low volume of target audience; staffing problems; technical problems such as software malfunctions and connectivity difficulties.

4. Solutions

On account of the above problems with innovations in reference service, experts have recommended the following solutions:

Regarding discrimination against user groups:

1. IFLA digital reference guidelines state that librarians should, "Show professional courtesy and respect when answering questions" (International Federation of Library Associations, 2005)
2. There should be increase in the awareness of librarians to their subjective bias through training. This can be done through routine diversity training for virtual reference librarians and diversity training for librarians in general.
3. Managers of reference librarians can include equality of services as part of performance evaluation.

4. LIS schools should emphasize the importance of providing equitable services to different user groups both online and face-to-face.
5. Libraries and LIS schools should make more efforts to recruit minorities to the library profession

Regarding discontinuation of chat reference services (Radford & Kern, 2006)

1. Before beginning a chat service, user needs assessment needs to be conducted in order to determine optimum hours and days of service and software needs
2. Allow sufficient time for services to 'catch on' for pilot projects or initial service offerings.
3. Poll staff to find out how many people are willing to staff the service and for how many hours per week.
4. Regard chat not as an add-on service but as an integral part of reference service.
5. Invest sufficient time in training and pilot projects including 'training the trainer.'
6. Use a variety of modes of communication i.e. phone, e-mail, chat.
7. Invest significant resources in marketing and use a variety of marketing techniques
8. Design a prominent and easily identifiable link. Place this link frequently and strategically throughout the library's Website
9. Choose software carefully, investigate vendor options and consider institutional technology needs and preferences. Consult with similar institutions before making software decisions.

5. Conclusion

There is no denying that reference service has certainly come a very long way. New innovations such as those discussed above have enhanced reference work to a great extent. More and more libraries need to embrace such innovations in order not to be left behind and considered redundant. However traditional, face-to-face reference service needs to be carried out side-by-side with the new innovations for complete and thorough satisfaction of the user who is king in the whole set-up. If there is any place that makes the library a true global hub of information, it is the reference desk or reference section, for this is the heart of librarianship, and it is heartening to know that innovative ideas are emerging in order to fulfill this purpose.

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ABOUT AUTHOR

Ms. Bikika Laloo is a teacher and writer. She has been Lecturer in the Department of Library and Information Science, North Eastern Hill University (NEHU), Shillong since 1996. She completed her schooling from Loreto Convent, Shillong; B.A. in Political Science from St. Mary's College, Shillong; M.Lib.I.Sc. from NEHU, Shillong; M.A. in English from IGNOU and is awaiting her Ph.D. results from Gauhati University, Assam. She has a book and various articles in her credit.