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Public Library Reference Desk: Less is More

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Does your reference desk have cobwebs? Is the dust an inch thick on your ready-reference shelves? No! Circulation statistics and reference statistics are climbing. Who is it that keeps saying reference statistics are stagnant? What planet are they on? Look at our statewide public library statistics, reference transactions per capita parallel increases in circulation. Libraries are thriving. Unfortunately, staffing is not.

How do we remedy the push-me-pull-you affect of growing demands, new technology, new programming, and decreasing staffing levels? The last few years have been simply remarkable for public libraries. We have created more and more ways for people to access our services, and we provide more resources in less time. And yet, we haven't given anything up. How is this possible? Librarians are working 60-hour weeks instead of 40. Stop! Your family, dog and cat miss you.

For several years now we have embraced many of the new trends in reference service without altering how we provide traditional reference services. The reference desk is our security blanket. Although we will consider or implement new approaches to reference services; yet till the day Hell freezes over, we will continue staffing the reference desk as usual with professional librarians every hour the library is open.

The traditional reference desk, as it has been for the last hundred years, should not be our sole priority. We need to provide less traditional reference services in order to provide more.

OK, you're interested but how do we convince our manager, our public, ourselves? Measure. Measure. Measure. In order to apply a measuring for results approach, we need to look at actual duties at the reference desk, library priorities, task difficulty, and staffing.

Jeanne Goodrich introduced me to a reference desk measuring system implemented by the Baltimore Public Library. Instead of daily statistics they measured quarterly. Baltimore also measured the types of transactions; for example, ready-reference, directional, and Internet help. A year and a half ago I implemented this type of measurement system at Deschutes Public Library System (DPLS). Every quarter we measured reference services at each branch for a week. The results were an awakening. The pie chart below represents a one-week study at the Bend Branch.



Simple directional questions (1) made up 22 percent of the transactions, (2) issuing guest passes for the Internet was 12 percent, and (3) providing instruction on how to use equipment (copiers, microfilm readers, not catalogs or databases) made up 17 percent. In other words, over half (51 percent) of all transactions at the reference desk could have been handled by well trained volunteers. ILL (4) and ready-reference (5) transactions accounted for 3 percent and 35 percent, respectively. Work actually requiring a professional librarian consisted of 11 percent of all transactions with almost 10 percent of these referred to other libraries or branches. The results above are typical for the Bend Branch. Branches in Redmond, La Pine, Sisters and Sunriver see an even smaller percentage of transactions that require a librarian.



for Results are excellent resources for measuring library priorities, tasks, and appropriate staffing. The most meaningful workflow for me was measuring the estimate of the cost/value of library activities (workform S16 from *Managing for Results*). This workform incorporates each task's level of difficulty, importance to the library, and the percent of time spent on the activity by staff. Once again the results can be enlightening. The cost/value of staffing the reference desk is tremendous; all other activities are a mere drop in the bucket. No wonder adult programming, collection development, proactive/anticipatory reference services, communication, and other staff activities may be suffering or are not even explored. We undervalue everything else we do to make sure we have bodies and back up bodies for the reference desk.

Change, Change, Change

My goal after looking at the measurements cited above was to cut reference librarians' desk duties in half. We are open seven days and 59 hours a week for a conservative total of 118 reference librarian hours/week. If you consider question follow-up, breaks, set up, and closing, the actual number of hours spent by librarians at the reference desk is far greater. Furthermore, there is no additional funding for personnel.

Our first response to these measurements at DPLS was to restructure the reference department. The Bend reference desk serves the whole county and had typically been staffed by two reference librarians. Librarians were also responsible for teaching public computer classes, CONIN/digital reference, adult collection development, staff training and other programming. Obviously, many of these duties suffered, as well as reference service, since librarians were expected to work four or five hours at the desk each day. The restructure eliminated a vacant librarian position and one page position at the Bend branch. I replaced these positions with 1.5

FTE of library assistants and a .25 FTE substitute librarian. We currently have library assistants (1.5 FTE) to process inter-library loans for the district and handle other clerical duties for the department.

The second response was to develop a ready-reference training program for library assistants. The goal was to have library assistants working the reference desk and capable of handling up to 90 percent of all reference transactions. The remaining "hard" questions could be triaged to the librarian on duty or another librarian off desk. DPLS reference librarian Martha Pyle led the project and developed a detailed and impressive training program. As soon as the new library assistants and substitute librarians were on board we started the training program. Within a month they were shadowing librarians at the desk. The next month they were scheduled at the reference desk with a

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librarian. Their training continued for a total of three months, and we are now looking at continuing education projects. All of our library assistants have become very skilled reference staff.

Computer classes were the next area we explored. DPLS reference librarian Liisa Sjoblom developed detailed course objectives, outlines and provided train-the-trainer training. We now have librarians, library assistants and volunteers teaching public computer classes at all of our branches.

There are still some concerns about the implementation. Even with a librarian at the desk every open hour, we are not convinced that the best triage always occurs. We are looking at better ways to communicate with each other at the desk. We are also looking at ways to continually measure successful reference transactions and class instruction. Peer evaluation is an approach we are currently investigating. However, I think overall we view the restructure and training a tremendous success. Reference librarians now have more time to provide professional services to our community, and our library assistants have exciting educational and career opportunities. We have also implemented a MLS tuition program as well as a reference librarian internship.

Conclusion


Proactive/anticipatory reference services such as digital reference, computer classes, marketing, and adult programming may be suffering due to our over-commitment to traditional reference services. Many libraries cannot even envision implementing such programs because of their inability to keep up with an increasing demand at the desk. The situation can seem dire. It seems a bit like talking to a person with water up to their eyeballs about advanced hydrology.

However, we owe it to staff, patrons, and ourselves to explore more effective

and efficient methods of getting the job done. Taking a snapshot of where you are now and examining priorities, staffing, and tasks is a start.

Digital reference, computer classes, and library online services are not perfect but they are a step in the right direction. These services focus on two things:

1. Teaching patrons to fish rather than feeding them the catch of the day.
2. Anticipating their information needs with professional resources when and where they need them.

By focusing on these two points, more patrons will benefit from our services and less will require the reference desk. Ultimately, even those scheduled to a shift on the reference desk will be more proactive and spend most of their shift on the floor. Off the desk, professional librarians will spend less time performing Kinko's clerical duties and more time engaged in fulfilling work. Finally, the esteem of our profession will grow as more librarians, and library staff, are given the time and the opportunity to demonstrate their full potential. If you are not convinced, ask a reference librarian. 

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