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Reference Hasn't Changed at All, *but* Reference Has Changed a Lot

by Anne Billeter
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About the author: Anne Billeter was Head of Reference Services at Jackson County Library Services from 1985–1997 and Josephine County Library from 1981–1985. During this time she witnessed the installation of the first fax machine in Jackson County government (at the library), the transition from card catalog to computer catalog to Internet accessible electronic catalog, the change from logging every long distance phone call to answering questions via phone, fax, e-mail, and over the Internet. She developed and directed SOLIC (Southern Oregon Libraries Information Cooperative), one of the regional reference services that evolved into L-net.

Reference hasn't changed at all:

- People ask questions because they need answers.
- People don't know how to ask questions.
- The people who ask questions come with a wide range of expectations, knowledge, and understanding of information.
- People lack the critical skills necessary to evaluate information.
- People don't know libraries provide reference services.
- People don't know libraries provide access to reference resources not easily available elsewhere.
- Reference questions are asked anywhere and everywhere: librarians recognize they are being asked a reference question and seize the opportunity.
- A good reference interview is essential.
- Reference librarians LOVE discovering reliable, accurate, easy-to-use reference resources and explain them to patrons.
- Most librarians don't know much about genealogy (or care to know).
- Most academic reference librarians and public reference librarians have erroneous ideas about the types of reference questions and services provided by their counterparts.
- School libraries vary widely in staffing levels and in size and currency of the collection.



Reference has changed a LOT:

THE QUESTIONS

- Most of the “easy” reference questions aren’t asked anymore, because people find the answers for themselves on the Internet.
- People are overwhelmed by the information provided on the Internet.

COMMUNICATION

- Communication methods have changed radically. In the past, many reference librarians had access only to the resources of their collection. Long distance phone calls were a tool available to only some reference librarians. Now reference librarians use fax, e-mail, live chat, and cell phones, and have the ability simultaneously to transmit and confer about documents and graphics.
- In the past, workshops and meetings were available only by traveling to a specific location, and time and money were spent traveling. Now online tutorials, virtual workshops, meetings, conferences, podcasts and other forms of electronic communication have made education and collaboration more easily available, even to geographically remote librarians.

EXPECTATIONS AND AVAILABILITY

- People expect to have access to information (and assistance in finding it) 24/7.
- People expect their answers faster.
- Reference services were only available when the library was open; today, with services such as L-Net, reference librarians are available 24/7.
- Libraries and library staff were isolated by geography and by limited communication capabilities (e.g. long distance telephone, fax, and text-only e-mail, inability to send full-color images, text, and documents).
- Library patrons had immediate access only to materials in their local library; they had slow access to materials in other libraries only via a slow and complex inter-library loan (ILL) procedure. In Oregon, requests were first sent via US mail for materials known to be at the Oregon State Library (OSL). If not in the OSL catalog (originally in multi-volume book form, later on microfiche), requests were sent via US mail to libraries that MIGHT own the requested item. Later, through OCLC, items could be requested via computer serially to five libraries known to own the item and who had agreed to lend available materials. Now, patrons of the Oregon and Washington Summit libraries can place their own ILL requests online with guaranteed four-day delivery to their library. Further, many items are now available full-text via the Internet, sometimes available to anyone, in other cases available only to patrons of libraries with database subscriptions.



- Originally materials were sent slowly by US Mail, now they are sent more rapidly through a Courier system that travels among Oregon and Washington libraries.
- Many libraries formed consortia with shared electronic catalogs, so that local patrons had access to the library materials in all of the consortium libraries.
- Libraries which accepted hold requests (then often called “reserves”) used a cumbersome paper tracking system to fill a hold request, and notified the patron by phone or mail when the requested item had arrived at the library. Then computers began to track and fill hold requests, but notification was still by phone or mail. Now computers send e-mail notices that requested items are available or place automated phone notices. Some libraries now deliver hold requests directly to the patron.

CATALOGS

- Library catalogs were in card form and index terms were limited to authors, titles, and subjects. Many catalogs did not indicate that a book was on order. Catalogs did NOT indicate whether a book was “in” or checked out. Catalogs were accessible only by going to the library. Today catalogs are electronic, available via the Internet, and provide keyword, Boolean and multi-faceted search strategies. Catalogs now indicate whether or not an item is on order, available, or if checked out, when it is due. Some catalogs now provide graphics of book covers, excerpts from books, book reviews, suggestions for additional titles that might be of interest to the reader, and links to Internet sites with related information and/or a full-text versions of some of the books.

PERIODICALS

- Periodical articles were identified by using print indexes in libraries, primarily *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and the entire family of H.W. Wilson's specialized indexes. If the specific periodical was not in the library's collection, the cumbersome and slow ILL process was used ... or not. (Many patrons chose not to request items by ILL.) Then articles began to be available via Courier service and/or fax. Now many are available instantly from anywhere with Internet access through full-text subscription databases and services. Many current newspapers are available online and some provide online access to archived issues.

GENEALOGY

- Genealogists are being better served by libraries, through the provision of access to subscription services such as *Heritage Quest* and *Ancestry.com*.
- Many books of interest to genealogists are available full-text on the Internet.



SCHOOL LIBRARIES

- There are many fewer school librarians.
- K-12 students were limited to the resources in their local school and public libraries. Today K-12 students account for one-half to three-quarters of L-Net's questions, and they have access to a wide range of databases and other resources through OSLIS, statewide database licensing, and the Internet.

So What Does This Mean for Reference Librarians Today?

- It is essential to promote reference services.
- It is essential to conduct a good reference interview.
- It is essential to be able to communicate using a wide variety of communication devices.
- It is essential to learn continuously about reliable and accurate reference resources. 

