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Books, bytes, and bathroom sinks: The realities and rewards of reference

Pam North
Sherwood Public Library

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As a 1997 graduate of Emporia State University's School of Library and Information Management program, I have had the pleasure of serving as reference librarian at Sherwood Public Library for slightly over a year now.

Sherwood is considered a "small" library, one with a long and interesting history. Established in 1936 as a shelf of materials in the local drugstore, it has been run by volunteers, moved from place to place, and

experienced cutbacks and even closures. Today, the 3,000-square-foot library is a vital community resource, housing a collection of over 20,000 items and providing service to a population that has nearly tripled over the last 10 years.

Never could I have anticipated what my career in a small public library would hold. I found that reference service involves much more than applying theory. It calls for more than strong communication and research skills. It takes common sense, promo-

tional abilities, tenacity, and sometimes a few unexpected talents.

GREAT EXPECTATIONS--

I returned to school to enter a profession I felt would be both challenging and satisfying, but I had little idea of what realistically to expect. I was reasonably assured that my undergraduate work in technical journalism and years of experience as a technical writer had satisfactorily prepared my research and interviewing skills. I had gained a good deal of experience using the Internet, so I was certain I could put that skill to use. In addition, I have always possessed a strong desire to be of service to others, a desire not sufficiently satisfied through writing computer documentation.

In library school, I experienced "fire in the belly" the first evening of class. I was confident I would become a champion for the ALA Code of Ethics, a passionate supporter of the principles of intellectual freedom, an able "repackager," and an expert "diagnoser of information needs."

At the same time, I had doubts about this new vocation I was about to enter. Sitting through classes like "Psychology of Information Use" and "Information Transfer and the Diffusion of Knowledge," I wondered if I could ever remember the many models and theories we were studying. I was concerned that I might not be able to apply them in the appropriate situations. How could I possibly know at which point in Kuhlthau's information search process is the sixth-grader doing a report on Lizzie Borden? What

about determining and responding to the learning style of a patron searching for information on restoring a '69 Chevy Malibu?

REALITY CHECK

Shortly after receiving the title of reference librarian at Sherwood, I discovered the other hats I was to wear. I would also be librarian responsible for technology, interlibrary loan, some circulation and cataloging, and a bit of desktop publishing. Even more to my surprise were the esoteric functions of the position that eventually revealed themselves: disposer of dead rodents left at the front door by neighborhood felines, controller of ant infestations in the break room, assessor of roof leaks, participant in a Saturday afternoon wallet-snatcher capture, and ultimately, unclogger of bathroom sinks. Studying the works of Kuhlthau, Eisenberg, and Gardner never could have foretold that one day an occasional duty as reference librarian would be mucking the paper towels out of a bathroom sink mischievously clogged by a middle-schooler.

Not that I am complaining! Reference service in this environment can be a fascinating and educational experience. Our patrons cover all age groups and interests. In the past year I have located an obscure monograph published by the Tennyson Society for a visitor from Japan, found a phone number for a diesel repair shop in New Zealand, provided plans for an indoor/outdoor Koi pond, located novels writ-

Books, Bytes, and Bathroom Sinks: The Realities and Rewards of Reference

Service in the Small Public Library

by Pam North
Sherwood Public Library



Pam North, learning new skills and accepting new challenges as reference librarian at Sherwood Public Library.

ten in Portuguese, and retrieved the pattern for a "wizard's shoe."

Finding such uncommon information is sometimes an amazing process. I often think of the words of Richard Saul Wurman, "You don't have to know everything, you just need to know how to find it." I cannot emphasize enough the dramatic benefits information technology has on the reference process. Although I did not have the opportunity to work as a reference librarian before the advent of the Internet, it is difficult for me to imagine the limitations those pre-Web librarians faced when seeking resources for the more unusual requests.

The Internet has been significant in another area during my tenure here at Sherwood. I had the unique experience of implementing public Internet access at the library. Nearly every aspect of this project was mine from technology to policy to security to training to furniture to explaining to the city manager exactly why the process required so much time and thought. We have been online for over six months now with few complications and no complaints.

I now realize I did not have to worry about memorizing models and theories. I cannot think of a single instance in which I consciously stopped myself to evaluate a patron's stage in the information search process. I value what I learned of Kuhlthau's theories (and the others) and recognize that they have been helpful in shaping the way I approach information-seeking behaviors, but I certainly have not applied them verbatim. Being exposed to a wide variety of models and processes has allowed me to develop my own methods of reference service. I believe these have served the library patrons of Sherwood well.

LOFTY GOALS

Providing reference service in a small library setting has its obstacles and I am working toward changing the perceptions and assumptions of both patrons and staff.

Patrons often believe that a small library equals a modest level of service. They see small libraries as places of books, not as research centers or providers of information services. Both new and established patrons have generally been unaware of the availability of reference assistance at Sherwood and will often preface their questions with, "If it isn't too much trouble ..." or "I hate to bother you ..." I am quick to respond that I am here to help them find the information they need.

I have learned to promote the reference services and resources we have available. I have learned that demonstrating our comprehensive, customized reference assistance and showing our commitment to a high level of service are crucial in a small library like ours.


Another hurdle I encountered was our staff's tendency to direct patrons with reference questions to the "larger libraries" in the area or to recommend the county telephone reference number rather than offering our reference assistance. I have worked hard to change that tendency, making sure front-desk staff know that I expect to be challenged by any and all reference questions.

I find it important to leave patrons with a positive feeling about their reference encounter, even if I have not been able to thoroughly satisfy their request. Whether I need to ask for more time to answer their question or refer them to another resource, I want them to leave the library knowing I have done all that I can to assist them.

REWARDS

Working in a small library offers many opportunities not found elsewhere. I am fortunate to work very closely with an extremely talented staff. In some areas I have learned more from my coworkers than I could have ever learned in library school. In a small library I am exposed to and welcomed to assist in all areas of library operation from maintenance to management.

Reference is, of course, one of the best jobs in the world in any library setting. Every day I have the opportunity to provide access to information that helps people cope with medical conditions, explore careers, find new jobs, improve lifestyles, find recreational materials, locate lost relatives, embark on journeys, learn new hobbies, research a topic of interest ... the list is endless.

I once read that the reference librarian's job is one of unique difficulty, since ours is the only profession in which we have the obligation to welcome any question on any topic and are expected to find an answer. Uniquely difficult? Yes, but also completely irresistible in its challenge and thoroughly satisfying in its reward. 

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