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Reference is BI

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Reference is actually BI (bibliographic instruction) at its best. The key components of effective instruction are available in the reference area setting. The user is at the point of need, we are prepared to give personalized service, and we are available for follow-up.

Point of need: Users have determined that they are ready to learn and have made time to focus on a particular assignment or specific informational need.

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Personalized service: Each user's specific interest and level of expertise can be taken into account, and a brief, one-on-one, interactive instruction session can take place.

Follow-up: The user can ask follow-up questions after exploring some resources, or the reference staff person can check back to see how the user is progressing and provide follow-up instruction.

So let's think of a reference inquiry as a mini-BI session. Time may be limited, but a friendly welcome can quickly make users feel comfortable and ready to talk about their need. Ask a question or two to clarify the request and to show genuine interest. Then suggest some possible resources, briefly explain the type of material contained in those resources, and relate a few important searching and technical tips. Remember the possibility of follow-up during this brief instruction session. There is no harm in being succinct in this initial exchange, since regular BI sessions often err on the side of being too long and including too much information for users to absorb.

Next leave users to explore, to adjust the topic if necessary, and to decide when their needs have been met. Success in searching for information means empowerment and satisfaction for users. If users are not successful, help is near at hand. If the first encounter was comfortable, users will not hesitate to come back and ask. During a regular BI session, the users are often not ready to ask questions because they have not actually thought about or begun to explore the assignment.

Follow-up as the user's search is progressing can provide a few more instructional opportunities. By this time the user may see the need to concentrate on specific subject headings or use an online thesaurus. A user may want more technical pointers on the intricacies of a specific electronic interface. Some users may be receptive to critically evaluating what they have found on the Internet or in a popular magazine. Presenters of BI sessions are always looking for meaningful and interesting examples, but the best examples come from the user's real work. The reference setting provides the opportunity to teach users with their own searches and retrieved information as examples. Once an interesting and colorful site is on the user's screen, that checklist for evaluating the content of a Web site will take on new meaning. When the user actually is ready to mark and download or print citations, the rather boring details of how to do so will be received with interest.

From these personalized reference/mini-BI sessions will come satisfied users. They will go out into our user community speaking well of our services. They perceive their time well spent, they are closer to completing their own assignment, and they have learned a few useful skills for the future. The users see their library as a less mysterious place, one where they achieved success, and one to which they will return with more confidence in the future. Thus reference, with its BI opportunities and its focus on the individual user, will also bring about good PR for the library.

Material from Literature Review Library is teeming with proclamations about the future of reference and library instruction services. While I am proposing that we provide individual assistance and instruction in the reference setting when the user is interested and receptive, other points of view have been expressed. Ewing and Hauptman (1995) took the position that "traditional academic reference service needs to be eliminated." Lewis (1995) confirmed that "reference is dead" and suggested librarians get on with designing better systems and new tools for accessing information. Rettig (1995) talked about BI and reference in the "sea of change," the instruction-information tension, and polarized groups who
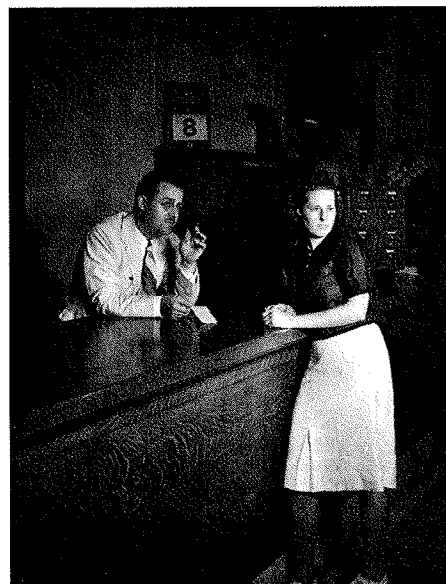
Student Being Helped by Reference Librarian
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believe BI has no future versus those who believe BI is the future.

On the other hand, Sarkodie-Mensah (1997), Goetsch (1995), and Reichel (1993) are more closely aligned with my point of view and have stressed the importance of the human side of reference. Goetsch (1995) stated "I would argue that the human element is, in fact, our greatest strength, and would be the library users' greatest loss." Sarkodie-Mensah (1997) said "In an era where teaching and personal encounter with undergraduates are emphasized, I find it appalling that many of my colleagues measure the importance of what they do by staying away from the so-called mundane questions from undergraduates." Reichel (1993) said "Our vision needs to remain on the individual user." Tychoson (1997) suggested staying with the basic principles of providing instruction in the use of the library and constantly re-instructing, because the "new technologies, new services, and new sources are not self-evident, even to the most experienced library user." He also said that individual assistance of users is "one of the most important functions of the library to the user and establish the library as a useful and important institution in their lives."

CONCLUDING REMARKS

By now you may be responding that this one-on-one, personalized service is a great idea but also a great luxury. Our budgets are often small. Our staff members are very busy. But I think it is a matter of the library setting its priorities. We do have some money, and we do have the staff to perform some tasks. Supporting personalized reference services and focused, one-on-one instruction on demand is time and money well spent. What could be more important than being there for our users at their point of need? We also spend time and money amassing and presenting our collections in many formats and through many access points. We spend time and money promoting our resources through outreach, formal BI, and faculty liaison activity. When the important moment arrives, when the user has a specific informational need and thus some desire to learn, are we there doing our best? Whether the user comes in person, by telephone, or through an electronic interaction, matters not. There is no substitute for personalized attention and focused instruction. Group instruction, consultation by appointment, simpler electronic interfaces, help screens, and printed instruction guides all have value, but I propose there is more value in point-of-need assistance and instruction, which we can provide through our reference services. Reference is BI, very effective BI, and it's good PR. It should be a top priority for libraries. ▢

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