

Serve Their Needs, Not Their Wants

By David Isaacson

IF YOU COULDN'T BE BOTH, WHAT would you rather be: popular or right? As individuals, most of us want to think we'd choose to be right. But as a profession, I don't think we've been that brave. We place too much emphasis on public relations, not nearly enough on substance.

We should stop thinking of our users as customers and stop trying so hard to compete with, for example, Barnes & Noble. Booksellers, after all, are out to make a profit. As librarians, we should be educating users and making knowledge more accessible and functional—and if we don't get our educational act together soon, the people we call our users won't use us for much more than recreation.

Sift, refine, check

It's no surprise why this sorry state has come to pass. As a profession, we're too afraid of losing our once

vaunted ability to answer reference questions to Google, Wikipedia, and the whole populist culture of the Internet.

Although Google and Wikipedia work just fine if a question is unambiguous and the answer comes from a truly objective source, too many librarians are letting the users' penchant for convenience and speed come before accuracy and true relevance. We are less and less willing to tell ourselves, let alone our patrons, that some questions need to be sifted, refined, checked in multiple sources, and perhaps even reframed before they can be answered adequately.

We are professional librarians, and we should dare to act the part. Other professionals aren't afraid to act like they have special knowledge and abilities nonprofessionals don't have. We go to physicians because we don't have the medical knowledge to heal ourselves. We go to lawyers because we don't know how to represent ourselves in court or interpret the law. If we as librarians know something about identifying, finding, and

interpreting information sources that nonlibrarians don't (and we'd better), we must demonstrate that expertise.

Ready-reference?

For one, today's reference librarians should seek to answer the questions patrons *mean* to ask—which, as any experienced professional librarian will tell you, is not usually the first question. Only an experienced professional librarian has the patience, the knowledge, and the motivation to conduct a reference interview to find out what a user really needs. Some of our potential users are too impatient; they want their questions answered immediately. We must do a better job of

tion you are asking can't be answered the way you're asking it," or, "That question is one that requires more thought and seems to have more than one answer. I can't just give you an answer, but I can show you how to help yourself better."

No, the librarian isn't always right. I am not advocating some elitist and condescending attitude to the public. But we often seem to act as if the user is always right, and that is just as foolish an extreme. If we continue to try simply to please our users with what they say they want, we might as well give up all pretense of being educators. No, we don't always know what's best for the public. But often, neither do our users know

I like the freedom and convenience of our fast-information culture. But how many librarians are ready and willing to be authoritative teachers?

explaining that answering the question right away does not always mean answering it correctly. Convenience doesn't trump accuracy, nor should simplicity trump the truth.

We have invested far too much of our professional time and money accommodating ourselves to this burgeoning quick-fix culture, when we should invest more in talking directly with our users. Chat reference, for example, is fine for long-distance patrons. But to be truly effective, we should exert even more control over it so that it is useful for serious reference questions and doesn't come off as a public relations gimmick. We must dare to teach our users how to develop better ways of framing reference questions.

What users need

Don't get me wrong. I like the libertarian freedom and convenience of our fast-information culture. But as a profession, how many librarians are ready and willing to be authoritative teachers, willing to say to patrons, "I think the ques-

what's best until they actually have a discussion with an informed librarian, not merely a "have-a-nice-day" chat with one of our well-intentioned, eternally smiling, but not necessarily well-informed "service providers."

It's up to us

It's up to librarians to help patrons use libraries better. For too long we have been overeager in giving the public what they think they want rather than help them figure out what they really need. We don't need Wal-Mart greeters in our libraries. We need dedicated professionals who can talk about resources as easily as they can smile and make folks feel welcome.

David Isaacson recently retired after 32 years at the Waldo Library of Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo. We welcome opinion pieces for BackTalk. Please send them to LJ/BACKTALK, 360 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10010; fialkoff@reedbusiness.com

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Conclusion

Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources: A Report to the OCLC Membership is intended to provide OCLC staff, the OCLC membership and the information community-at-large data on the perceptions and practices of the information consumer and how libraries are positioned in the infosphere they use.

This report is the result of a need to better understand the interests, habits and behaviors of people using libraries in a time of information abundance. We concluded *The 2003 OCLC Environmental Scan* by suggesting—based on the patterns and trends we identified and highlighted—that the place libraries hold today is no longer as distinct as it once was.

Libraries, many of their resources and services, and the information experts who work in libraries appeared to be increasingly less visible to today’s information consumer. But we could not say with any certainty how extensive or how permanent this apparent shift had become, for, as we noted in the introduction to this report, there are no recent, large-scale use studies to draw on.

We have compiled a database of over 270,000 information consumer views, habits and recommendations from over 3,300 people in six countries. The database contains over 20,000 verbatim views about the library, Internet resources, library services and the “Library” brand. We have not identified and analyzed all aspects of the data for this report—this research data will be a source for ongoing exploration—but we have discovered much more about the practices and perceptions of these information consumers. A summary of the findings and a few conclusions and observations follow.

*My library of the future,
will use technology,
to allow great books that are locked away
to be seen by you and me.*

*The great libraries of Alexandria,
and the monasteries of Rome,
will reveal hidden treasures
in the comfort of your home.*

*For each book will be scanned,
electronically of course,
and a hologram created,
it’s the new modern force!*

From *My Vision*,
a poem by “Kirstie,”
a Weatherhead (U.K.) High School student
[2003]

The full poem is reproduced in
The 2003 OCLC Environmental Scan, p.97.

Report Findings

...on Information Consumers' Perceptions and Habits

- Respondents use **search engines** to begin an information search (84 percent). **One percent** begin an information search on a **library Web site**. *(Part 1.2)*
- **Quality and quantity of information are top determinants** of a satisfactory information search. Search engines are rated higher than librarians. *(Part 2.6)*
- The criterion selected by most information consumers to evaluate electronic resources is that the information is **worthwhile**. **Free** is a close second. **Speed** has less impact. *(Parts 3.1 and 3.4)*
- Respondents do not trust purchased information more than free information. The verbatim comments suggest a **high expectation of free information**. *(Part 3.4)*
- Library users like to self-serve. Most **respondents do not seek assistance** when using library resources. *(Part 2.4)*
- Library card holders **use information resources more** than non-card holders, and they are more favorably disposed to libraries than non-card holders. *(Parts 1.1, 1.4 and 3.7)*
- **Age matters sometimes. Sometimes it doesn't.** Responses are sometimes consistent across U.S. age groups, suggesting age-independent preferences and practices. Familiarity with e-mail is an example. In other areas, responses vary considerably by the age of the respondents. For example, young U.S. respondents are much less likely than those over 65 to agree librarians add value to the information search process. *(Part 2.6 and all Parts)*
- The survey **results are generally consistent across the geographic regions** surveyed. Responses from the United Kingdom showed the largest range of variations from other regions surveyed. *(Part 5 and all Parts)*

Report Findings

...on Libraries

- Information consumers **use the library**. They use the library less and read less since they began using the Internet. The majority of respondents anticipate their usage of libraries will be flat in the future. *(Parts 1.1 and 3.7)*
- **Borrowing print books** is the library service used most. *(Part 2.1)*
- “Books” is the **library brand**. There is no runner-up. *(Part 3.8)*
- Most information consumers **are not aware of**, nor do they use, most libraries’ **electronic information resources**. *(Parts 1 and 2)*
- **College students** have the **highest rate of library use** and broadest use of library resources, both physical and electronic. *(Parts 1 and Part 2)*
- **Only 10 percent** of college students **indicated that their library’s collection fulfilled their information needs** after accessing the library Web site from a search engine.
- The majority of information consumers are aware of many library community services and of the role the library plays in the larger community. Most respondents agree **the library is a place to learn**. *(Part 4.1)*
- Comments from respondents provide clear directions for physical libraries: be clean, bright, comfortable, warm and **well-lit**; be staffed by **friendly people**; have hours that fit their lifestyles; and **advertise services**. Find ways to get material to people, rather than making them come to the library. *(Appendix B)*

...on Alternatives to Libraries

- Information consumers like to **self-serve**. They use **personal knowledge** and common sense to judge if electronic information is trustworthy. They **cross-reference other sites** to validate their findings. *(Parts 3.2 and 3.5)*
- **Ninety percent** of respondents are satisfied with their most recent search for information using a **search engine**. Satisfaction with the overall search experience has a strong correlation to the quality and quantity of information returned in the search process. *(Part 2.6)*
- People trust what they find using search engines. They also trust information from libraries. They **trust them about the same**. *(Part 3.3)*
- **Search engines fit** the information consumer’s lifestyle better than physical or online libraries. The majority of U.S. respondents, age 14 to 64, see search engines as a perfect fit. *(Part 3.7)*

Conclusions and Observations

What was confirmed

As discussed briefly in the introduction of the report, many findings of the survey do not surprise as much as they confirm the trends we highlighted in *The 2003 OCLC Environmental Scan*.

The survey results confirm that libraries are used by information seekers. The number of people holding library cards is compelling and most information seekers use library services at least annually. Libraries are used for borrowing books, access to reference books and research assistance. Respondents shared many positive associations with these traditional resources as well as with the library space itself. When asked to give advice, many respondents suggested increasing the library's quantity and variety of traditional information resources—"more books" was often cited—as well as the number of hours libraries are open. Respondents clearly want to be able to visit the library, but they want the services to be more convenient.

The results confirm, too, that the majority of information seekers are not making much use of the array of electronic resources (online magazines, databases and reference assistance, for example) libraries make available to their communities. Very few respondents use such resources regularly and the majority of respondents are not aware that their libraries have these electronic resources. Most do not use the library Web site where access to electronic resources is made available. College students are the exception. College students use electronic resources at significantly higher rates and are the most familiar with what libraries have to offer.

Results confirm that respondents are aware that libraries are "wired" and many use the computers in libraries to access the Internet and to use Internet resources. The majority of high school and college students use library computers regularly.

The survey confirms the findings of many other studies: that there is widespread use of Internet information resources. Respondents regularly use search engines, e-mail and instant messaging to obtain and share information. Many use these tools daily; most use them weekly or monthly. Subject-based Web sites, online news services, blogs and RSS feeds are all used, even if only minimally. The library is not the first or only stop for many information seekers. Search engines are the favorite place to begin a search and respondents indicate that Google is the search engine most recently used to begin their searches.

The information resource market—tools, content and access—is growing, not shrinking, providing more options and more choices to people using the Web to search for information and content. Information consumers are willing to experiment with new resources and incorporate them into their expanding repertoire of information tools. People continue to read, but they do it less as they add other

To gather as much literature and information as possible in one place, and to share that wealth of resources with that community.

It is important to have a place where anyone can go to learn (be it news, research, films and music, fiction, or non-fiction

23-year-old from the United States

Source: *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, OCLC, 2005, question 810, "What do you feel is the main purpose of a library?"

ways of consuming information and content to their lives. Libraries are seen as a place for traditional resources (books, reference materials and research assistance) and to get access to the Internet. The results of this survey confirm that libraries are not seen as the top choice for access to electronic resources.

Awareness, usage and preference trends held fairly consistently across the geographic regions surveyed and across U.S. age groups. While differences in age group or geographic preferences are observed, general trends hold constant. Online information consumers surveyed are “universally” using the Internet, rather than the library, to access electronic information resources.

What was revealed

The survey revealed how information consumers make choices about electronic information resources; and how they evaluate those resources and make decisions about the quality, trustworthiness and monetary worth of resources available from libraries and generally on the open Web.

While it is easy to assume that search engines are the top choice of information consumers because of the speed with which information can be delivered, the study revealed that speed is not the only, and not the primary, reason search engines are the preferred starting point for today’s information consumer. Quality and quantity of information delivered are the highest determinants of overall information search satisfaction. Respondents indicated that search engines deliver better quality and quantity of information than librarian-assisted searching—and at greater speed. As more and more content becomes digital and directly accessible via search engines, quantity will increase. The amount of quality information, overall, is also likely to increase.

Information consumers trust information they get from libraries, and they trust the information they get from search engines. The survey revealed that they trust them almost equally. While all U.S. age groups surveyed indicated trust across both sources, young people in the United States ages 14 to 24 show the greatest level of trust for information received via search engines. How much of this trust could be attributed to greater familiarity and frequent use of Web-based electronic resources? Most U.S. youth are not familiar with library electronic resources, but are very familiar with search engines, e-mail and chat. As more content becomes directly accessible via search engines, familiarity with more and different types of digital content is likely to increase. Will trust continue to increase too?

The survey highlighted that not only are information consumers happy to self-serve, they are confident that they can serve themselves well. When asked how they judge the trustworthiness of information, “common sense/ personal knowledge” was the top method used. Eighty-six percent of respondents feel confident they have the personal knowledge to evaluate information resources. When they want to validate information, they self-serve again, by searching another Web site that contains

Conclusion

similar information (82 percent). This self-reliance was also reflected in respondents' use of the library. Most library users say they have not asked for help using any library resources, either at the physical or the virtual library. As more and more content becomes digital and accessible via the Internet, the number of information sources available for both information discovery and validation is likely to increase, fueling increased confidence and self-reliance.

Information consumers feel that information should be free. Most respondents will not pay for information and some who do (25 percent) expect that they will pay for information less frequently in the future. It is also clear that information seekers do not believe that higher priced information equals higher quality information. That the library provides access to "free" material is well-known. But the majority of users are not aware that free electronic information is available via their library. As many respondents are not familiar with, or infrequently use, the library Web site, the free library information is not accessed. The verbatim comments in Appendix B provide evidence of respondents' appreciation of free material as well as their frustrations with trying to access them and having to come to the library to use them. Information consumers want, and expect to use, more and more "free" and unfettered information in the future.

Survey respondents are generally satisfied with libraries and librarians, but most do not plan to increase their use of libraries. Many of them, particularly teenagers, use the library less since they began using the Internet. Verbatim comments reveal strong attachments to libraries as places, but many of these positive associations are nostalgic in nature and focused on books. As one respondent from the United States commented "...as a child I loved to go downstairs to the children's section and read books there and take them out. I loved the smell of old books." This attachment to the traditional nature and purpose of libraries is an asset all libraries share. It is not clear that this attachment extends, or will extend, to electronic resources or that it will have a significant impact on an information consumer's choice of information sources in the future.

Respondents do indeed have strong attachments to the idea of the "Library" but clearly expressed dissatisfaction with the service experience of the libraries they use. Poor signage, inhospitable surroundings, unfriendly staff, lack of parking, dirt, cold, hard-to-use systems and inconvenient hours were mentioned many, many times by respondents. The overall message is clear: improve the physical experience of using libraries.

We learned that respondents have much to say, when asked, about their libraries, the people who staff them and the services. This suggests that libraries have an opportunity to learn much more than was revealed in this report about the perceptions of the people in their communities by conducting local polls and open-ended surveys.

*keep it
current
and keep
it free*

44-year-old from Canada

Source: *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, OCLC, 2005, question 1240, "If you could provide one piece of advice for your library, what would it be?"

The Library Brand

One of the most important goals of the project was to obtain a clearer understanding of the “Library” brand in 2005. How do information consumers think about libraries today? How do information consumers identify libraries in the growing universe of alternatives? What is the “Library” brand image?

What is the library’s identity in the minds of information seekers? By a huge margin respondents feel that “library” is synonymous with “books.” When asked about their first spontaneous impression of libraries, information consumers reply, “Books.”

Familiarity, trust and quality—these are intangible traits often summed up by the word “brand.” All brands from search engines to cars to libraries are either familiar or not, trusted or not, provide top quality or not. We tested these brand concepts in the survey.

We asked about familiarity. Libraries are very familiar as book providers. Search engines are very familiar as electronic information providers. We reviewed the concept of trust. The lines are fuzzy. Libraries and search engines are trusted almost equally. We asked about quality. Respondents see both libraries/librarians and search engines as providers of quality information. Again, the lines are blurred. In a tie, the data suggests the nod would go to search engines.

a building with books

35-year-old from Wales

Source: *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, OCLC, 2005, question 807, “What is the first thing you think of when you think of a library?”

The “Library” brand is dominant in one category—books. It would be delightful to assume that when respondents say “books,” what they really mean to say is that books, in essence, stand for those intangible qualities of information familiarity, information trust and information quality. The data did not reveal it. We looked hard. We reviewed thousands of responses to the open-ended questions that inquired about positive library associations and library purpose. We searched for words and phrases that included mentions of “quality,” “trust,” “knowledge,” “learning,” “education,” etc. We found mentions of each, but they were relatively few in number. “Books” dominated—across all regions surveyed and across all age groups.

In addition to being familiar, trusted and high-quality, strong brands must be relevant. Relevance is the degree to which people believe a brand meets their needs. In the survey we tested for relevancy and lifestyle fit. Over half of respondents said that search engines perfectly fit their lifestyle. Seventeen percent said libraries are a perfect fit. Over 20 percent said libraries do not fit their lifestyle. Of the activities that respondents are doing less since they began using the Internet, watching television was number one (39 percent) and using the library was number two (33 percent). Reading books, the dominant brand domain of the library, was third at 26 percent. That library resources and librarians add value to information search was not disputed by respondents, but the data suggest that the relevancy and lifestyle fit of that value are in question.

In a world where the sources of information and the tools of discovery continue to proliferate and increase in relevance to online information consumers, the brand

Conclusion

differentiation of the library is still books. The library has not been successful in leveraging its brand to incorporate growing investments in electronic resources and library Web-based services.

Can the brand be expanded or updated to be more relevant, to be more than books? While this is a very difficult question to explore in a single survey, we briefly tested the concept. We asked respondents to identify what they felt was the “main purpose” of the library. What could/should the “Library” brand be? While a third of respondents still indicated “books” as the main purpose, over 50 percent of respondents feel “information” is the main purpose of the library. These views held fairly constant across all regions surveyed. U.S. youth were more inclined to view books as the library’s main purpose; those 25 and older had a stronger feeling that the main purpose of the library is information.

The study suggests that the potential exists to stretch the “Library” brand beyond books. More study is required.

The similarity of perceptions about libraries and their resources across respondents from six countries is striking. It suggests that libraries are seen by information consumers as a common solution, a single organization—one entity with many outlets—constant, consistent, expected. The “Library” is, in essence, a global brand: a brand dominated by nostalgia and reinforced by common experience.

This global, nostalgic perception should give the library community reason to be concerned, but it also provides a solid base from which to leverage value, and create change, on a large scale. When change is needed, scale can be incredibly useful. In a world where information is rapidly becoming virtual, a “universal” brand can be effective and powerful. Libraries must take this advantage and work collectively to “rejuvenate” the brand. It is not simply about educating the information consumer about the current library. Trying to educate consumers whose habits and lifestyles are changing and have changed seldom works. It doesn’t work for companies and it probably won’t work for libraries. Rejuvenating the “Library” brand depends on the abilities of the members of the broad library community to redesign library services so that the rich resources—print and digital—they steward on behalf of their communities are available, accessible and used. Rejuvenating the brand depends on reconstructing the experience of using the library. While the need for localized points of distribution for content that is no longer available in just physical form is likely to become less relevant, the need for libraries to be gathering places within the community or university has not decreased. The data is clear. When prompted, information consumers see libraries’ role in the community *as a place to learn, as a place to read, as a place to make information freely available, as a place to support literacy, as a place to provide research support, as a place to provide free computer/Internet access* and more. These library services are relevant and differentiated.

Libraries will continue to share an expanding infosphere with an increasing number of content producers, providers and consumers. Information consumers will continue to self-serve from a growing information smorgasbord. The challenge for libraries is to clearly define and market their relevant place in that infosphere—their services and collections both physical and virtual.

It is time to rejuvenate the “Library” brand.

**Subscribe to
Rhapsody or
iTunes
or other music
download services**

**45-year-old from the
United States**

Source: *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, OCLC, 2005, question 1240, “If you could provide one piece of advice for your library, what would it be?”

**To provide
information
on global
issues
from both past
and present and
offer usable
information/
observations
as to the
possible
future of
all things.**

56-year-old from England

Source: *Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources*, OCLC, 2005, question 810, “What do you feel is the main purpose of a library?”

Diane Zabel



FROM THE PRESIDENT OF RUSA

Trends in Reference and Public Services Librarianship and the Role of RUSA

Part Two

In the last issue, I explored some recent trends in reference and public services librarianship. In this column, I will discuss factors driving change, strategies for predicting future trends, and the role of the Reference & User Services Association (RUSA).

Factors Driving Change

I have identified four broad factors driving change. Some of these factors intersect. All of them challenge libraries to rethink the delivery of services.

Shrinking Budgets

Academic and public libraries across the country are being forced to explore new staffing models because of budget reductions. Libraries have taken numerous approaches in order to save money in their public services budget. These cost-cutting measures have included the following strategies: trimming hours, merging departments, consolidating service points, hiring freezes, the use of fixed-term appointments, and hiring entry-level rather than experienced librarians. Most worrisome is an observation by Francine Fialkoff, editor of *Library Journal*, who noted in a recent editorial that there is anecdotal evidence that librarians are responding differently to the latest fiscal short-

falls. A decade ago, librarians cut collection budgets in response to reduced funding. Fialkoff noted that “[n]ow, libraries are cutting hours and/or staff, replacing MLS librarians with those without degrees, or outsourcing more ‘processing’ so that they can still provide current materials.”¹ Her concern was that these strategies do not restore public support for libraries. She argued that “to get public support restored it is more effective to show the public how valuable their libraries are” and that the message should be “[I]f only my library were open more hours, then I could get to all that good stuff more often.”²

The Millennials

Demographics are another factor driving change. While many librarians (especially administrators) are members of that huge, post-World War II Baby Boom generation, Millennials are the generation grabbing headlines. Millennials (those born after 1981) are also known as the Echo Boom, Generation Y, and the Game Boy Generation. I am very familiar with this group as my son was born in 1988. This generation has embraced instant messaging, cell phones, mp3 players, and multitasking. I would venture that many Millennials view chat reference software as too stodgy. Librarians who want to better understand Millennials should read one of the following provocative works on this generation and generational differences: *When Generations Collide*; *Serving the Millennial Generation*; *Adolescents and Literacies in a Digital World*; *Millennials Rising*; and *Millennials Go to College*.³ There have been some fascinating studies on the cultural influences shaping this

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generation. According to Millennials expert Michael Coomes, events that shaped these individuals are school shootings, the O. J. Simpson trial, and the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal.⁴ Given the large number of college-age Millennials, it is not surprising that academic librarians are trying to figure out the best way to reach these users. One of the contributed papers at the 2005 Association of College and Research Libraries National Conference focused on marketing to Millennials. Patricia Duck, library director at the University of Pittsburgh at Greensburgh, characterized Millennials as “visually oriented,” “easily bored,” “very demanding,” and “used to having the best of everything,” and noted that they “want cutting-edge facilities.”⁵ She reported on a 2003 survey (there were 202 participants) that asked students at her institution about their library experiences. Eighty percent of respondents were Millennials and 20 percent were members of Generation X (the generation preceding Millennials). While Duck didn’t find many differences between the two groups, she found that Millennials were more concerned with comforts (such as refreshments in the library), were knowledgeable about using Google but not necessarily knowledgeable about using library databases, and approximately half found library databases difficult to search. As a result of these findings, Duck’s library has made some changes (such as installing a very popular soda machine in the library lobby) and has changed its instructional program to incorporate more active learning and team activities—approaches favored by Millennials. Hopefully more librarians will report on their outreach efforts to this generation of users.

Technology

Another factor, one closely related to the growing importance of the Millennials, is technology. Librarians are worried about their ability to convey the relevance of libraries and

librarians to this techno-savvy generation. We all know librarians who complain that patrons, especially students, think it’s all in Google.

My perception is that the highly publicized launch of Google Scholar, Google’s new search engine focusing on scholarly materials, has intensified fears that libraries and librarians will become marginalized. Anecdotally, many librarians wonder how the professional community was blindsided by this latest development. Some libraries have opted to link to Google Scholar on their library Web pages, acknowledging that patrons are using this search engine. Additionally, some libraries with link resolvers are participating in a pilot that enables libraries to create links to their institution’s holdings in Google Scholar. It is probably premature to attempt to measure the impact of Google Scholar, and it is important to remember that Google Scholar is in beta mode. A balanced review of Google Scholar’s capabilities and limitations can be found in Laura Cohen’s bibliographic essay on search tools and Web technologies for locating scholarly content.⁶

Google Scholar is not the only example of technology impacting reference and public services librarianship. High-speed wireless access to the Internet has enabled librarians to become untethered from the physical reference desk. As noted in part one of this column, lightweight, wireless-equipped laptops have made it easier for libraries to experiment with roving reference. As related in an article in *The New York Times*, some libraries are circulating (for both in-library and in-home use) laptops with wireless technology, and libraries are integrating this technology into designs for new or renovated facilities.⁷ Some libraries are experimenting with personal digital assistants (PDAs) to provide access to the online catalog, databases, reference sources, course reserve readings, and e-books. More information about PDAs in libraries can be found in Sue Searing’s excellent compilation and digest of articles on this topic.⁸ One of the newest areas for library exper-

imentation with electronic devices involves iPods. In a recent supplement to *Library Journal*, Michael Stephens reported on various library pilots using iPods, with projects as diverse as course reserves for music classes to a hip form of audiobooks for high school students.⁹

Big Box Bookstores

As I mentioned in part one, the library I work in recently had teams of MBA students from two separate marketing courses analyze the Schreyer Business Library as a class project. Many of the suggestions from these teams involved improving the library’s facilities and atmosphere so our library would be more like a popular bookstore chain. Data collected by MBA students consistently demonstrated that our users want a pleasant and lively space with eye-catching displays of current books and magazines. They also want comfortable seating and want to be allowed to have food and drink. However, it is interesting to note that several of the MBA teams found that our users (especially undergraduate students) view our library as a place to meet and to use computers. People use our library as a gathering space.

This pattern mirrors what is going on nationally, the attention to library as place. One of the best resources on this topic is *Library as Place*, the in-depth report issued by the Council on Library and Information Resources in 2005.¹⁰ The chapter authored by Sam Demas (college librarian at Carleton College) is especially engaging as he astutely observes that students want libraries to be both contemplative and social places.¹¹ Demas notes that students want to do lots of things in the library at the same time. The bottom line is that libraries need to be a place for teaching, learning, research, community, and fun. It is important to highlight Shill and Tonner’s monumental study of usage patterns in new and expanded academic library facilities.¹² Their empirical research documents the importance of library as

place. Shill and Tonner found that “the great majority of new and improved libraries have experienced sustained increases in usage of the physical facility following project completion” and their study “provides clear, empirical evidence that students can and will use a comfortable, well-equipped library even with remote access to many electronic databases and the Internet available.”¹³ Essentially, the library building still matters in an electronic age.

Predicting Future Trends

How can libraries identify factors and predict trends that will drive change? One strategy to employ is environmental scanning. This technique (sometimes referred to as external assessment) is commonly used in business. It is a strategy taught throughout the business curriculum in strategic planning and management courses. However, it is not simply an academic exercise. In the real world, managers are always scanning the environment. A good manager examines economic, social, demographic, political, and legal changes and shifts in order to determine future trends. Why are trends so important? Trends are useful to project the demand for new products or services.

The American Library Association (ALA) used environmental scanning as a technique to plan the future of the organization. The ALA Council recently approved “Ahead to 2010,” the strategic plan that will guide ALA over the next decade. Gwen Arthur and I (as well as other members of the RUSA Executive Committee) were able to participate in discussions of the draft plan at the fall 2004 ALA Division Leadership Program. Additionally, there were other opportunities for broad membership input. The environmental scanning process that ALA used provides an excellent model for external analysis. The ALA Web site links to materials that ALA studied in the planning process (www.ala.org/ala/ourassociation/governingdocs/aheadto2010/enviro

[mentalsscanning.htm](http://www.ala.org/ala/ourassociation/governingdocs/aheadto2010/mentalsscanning.htm)). Many of these resources are excellent sources of trend data. This environmental scanning document is particularly interesting because it reflects the wide view that ALA took in this planning process. ALA reviewed resources on early childhood development, local governance, the social impact of the Internet, consumer privacy, philanthropy, digital culture, reading, scholarly communication, and more.

One of the most important documents that ALA reviewed in its strategic planning process was the *2003 OCLC Environmental Scan: Pattern Recognition Report*, the report produced by OCLC’s worldwide membership on trends impacting OCLC, libraries, museums, archives, and other organizations. This huge report is available on the Web (www.oclc.org/membership/escan/default.htm). It documents the external assessment that OCLC conducted, and it identifies the social, economic, technological, research, and learning changes that have major implications for libraries. These are just a few of the important trends identified in this report:

- ❖ People want to be self-sufficient; they have embraced self-service from banking to research.
- ❖ The lines between work and home have blurred, and there are no longer separate spheres of information. Technology is seamlessly integrated into work and leisure activities.
- ❖ The worldwide economy is slowing, and there will not be enough money for schools and libraries.
- ❖ There will be increased scrutiny of how tax dollars are spent, meaning that universities and libraries will be held more accountable.
- ❖ There is a movement to bring order to digital content, a recognition of the need to bring structure to chaos.
- ❖ There is support for the development of open source software.
- ❖ New notions of intellectual property will emerge.
- ❖ E-learning will explode in both educational and corporate settings.

- ❖ Libraries will assume new roles in scholarly publishing, moving from being service providers to collaborators.

All of these trends will profoundly impact the library profession. The *OCLC Environmental Scan* is important reading for all libraries. Because this document is so significant, it guided my institution’s recent strategic planning process. However, its relevance extends beyond academic and research libraries. Coincidentally, I just received the latest issue of *Public Libraries* and found that Dan Walters, president of the Public Library Association (PLA), referenced the *Environmental Scan* in his president’s column. He wrote that this document “can also be read as a synthesis of many topics of PLA-sponsored discussions, articles and programs of the past few years.”¹⁴ I believe that the same could be said for RUSA-sponsored activities.

The Role of RUSA

One thing is clear: change is constant in librarianship and it’s hard to keep up. Many of the trends identified in the OCLC report are very complex. How do librarians keep abreast of these changes? One way is by joining and actively participating in ALA, and the divisions that make up ALA. If you have not been active in RUSA, this is the time to take another look at it. RUSA is a vibrant and diverse division. Its membership includes reference and user services librarians, librarians who do readers’ advisory, interlibrary loan professionals, librarians who select materials, publishers, history and genealogy librarians, and business librarians. It includes academic, public, and even some school and special librarians. RUSA welcomes the participation of library support staff.

What does RUSA do? To learn more about its activities, consult RUSA’s Web site (www.ala.org/rusa) or read the *American Libraries* article written by Cathleen Bourdon on

RUSA's role in recharging librarians.¹⁵ Cathleen is the executive director of RUSA, and she keeps the association running on a daily basis with the help of her capable staff. Here is a brief list of some of the benefits that RUSA membership provides:

- ❖ Professional development and continuing education for reference and user services librarians and library staff
- ❖ Programs at the ALA Annual Conferences
- ❖ Preconferences and institutes at both ALA Midwinter Meetings and Annual Conferences
- ❖ Web continuing education courses. Last year, RUSA offered its first course, David Tyckoson's module on the reference interview. Based on this success, other RUSA online courses are being developed
- ❖ Finally, RUSA sponsors *Reference and User Services Quarterly (RUSQ)*, and members receive a free subscription. It was rewarding to learn that *RUSQ* fared very well in terms of prestige in the recent Nisonger and Davis study (which replicated the 1985 Kohl-Davis study) ranking the perception of library and information science journals by LIS education deans and Association of Research Libraries library directors¹⁶

Why become active in RUSA? It allows you to network with other professionals. There are opportunities to actively participate in RUSA activities through service on committees. RUSA has more than 150 committees, and for some committees, service is virtual. Those new to the profession might be interested in becoming active in the Reference Services Section (RSS), RUSA's newest section for front-line librarians and support staff engaged in all aspects of reference and information services. There are a half-dozen discussion groups within RSS including one on "Hot Topics in Frontline Reference," and more than a dozen RSS committees, with interests ranging from the management of refer-

ence to library services to the Spanish-speaking. Finally, RUSA can be a great place to find a mentor. It also provides a forum for experienced librarians to mentor others.

In conclusion, I want to note that RUSA leaders and staff are cognizant of how factors driving change in the profession are also driving change in the association. RUSA is employing technology (the Web) to deliver news about the association. *RUSA Update*, the quarterly newsletter, migrated to an online format, and e-mail alerts let members know when the recent issue has been posted. The Web has also enabled RUSA to deliver continuing education. New technological developments offer promise for additional communication and interaction among members. For example, RUSA has been involved in the testing of a new software application, ALA Online Communities. Because generational differences are real, the first meeting of the RUSA Board of Directors at the 2006 Midwinter Meeting, will be a brainstorming session on recruiting, retaining, and engaging all generations of members. ■

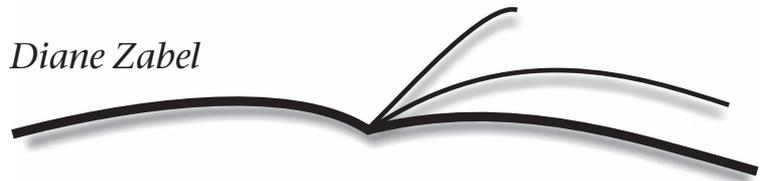
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Diane Zabel



FROM THE PRESIDENT OF RUSA

Trends in Reference and Public Services Librarianship and the Role of RUSA

Part One

In December 2004 and May 2005, I served as a guest lecturer for graduate students enrolled in LIS504: Reference and Information Services, a virtual course on basic reference offered by the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. It was an honor to have the opportunity to interact with students enrolled in a course not only offered by my alma mater, but also taught by my former advisor, Dr. Linda C. Smith. Since this engagement gave me cause to reflect on more than twenty years of professional practice and active participation in RUSA, I thought it would also be an ideal topic for this column.

In Part One, I will explore some recent trends in reference and public services librarianship. In the next issue of *RUSQ*, I will continue with a discussion of the factors driving change, strategies for predicting future trends, and the role of RUSA. My comments are based on my own observations as a business librarian at Penn State University's main campus, anecdotal evidence from academic and public library colleagues across the country, and findings from the professional literature. In particular, I want to thank Sally Kalin, the associate dean at my institution, for her willingness to share information about trends reported by the directors of public services at large research libraries. This group holds a discussion at each ALA Midwinter Meeting and Annual Conference.

Patterns in Reference Queries

What do we know about reference patterns? Statistics from the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) indi-

cate a downward trend in reference questions for large- to medium-sized academic libraries. The most recent ARL statistics indicate that reference transactions began to decline in 1998 and have decreased every subsequent year.¹ This report notes, however, that while the number of reference transactions has fallen, "the overall numbers are still substantial, with 93,036 questions per year for the median ARL library."² Public libraries have also reported a decline in reference transactions. Data from the 2004 Hennen's American Public Library Ratings (HAPLR) indicate, "In recent years, reported reference use has been declining, as electronic-resource use has soared."³

It is important, however, to note that there is evidence that the nature of reference queries has changed. The analysis accompanying the ARL statistics indicates that reference transactions require more time and are more complex, and that reference activity is shifting from the desk to one-on-one consultation with subject specialists. This mirrors reference patterns in the business library in which I work. My colleagues and I have experienced increases in e-mail and phone reference. We also have more patrons stopping by to consult with a librarian. These patrons are bypassing our reference desk. As a result, we spend considerable more time doing reference "off desk."

Academic librarians at other institutions have also anecdotally reported that more patrons are using their services. In some cases, the increase in demand for services is linked to physical improvements, such as

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building renovations. Other librarians have theorized that the millennials (a term coined by marketers for consumers born between 1982 and 2001) are more success-driven than the previous generation and that they value expert help. Others attribute increased queries to the complexity of electronic resources. Patrons do not know where to begin, given the vast number of databases available. Additionally, the volume of free Web resources has become overwhelming and users need help differentiating results. While patrons increasingly use the Web to find easy answers, they still seek out a librarian when they are stuck.

Implications for Staffing

Changing reference patterns have implications for staffing. However, there is no consensus about how to staff reference services. Since there is not a single solution, libraries are experimenting with many models. Here are some approaches:

- ❖ Elimination of the physical desk. Some librarians advocate dismantling the reference desk, arguing that students are intimidated by it and as a result are hesitant to ask questions. Other librarians report moving the desk to a corner or more private area to create a less intimidating environment. One of the contributed papers at the 2005 Association of College and Research Libraries National Conference was provocatively titled “Redesign Your Reference Desk: Get Rid of It!”⁴ This panel explained why librarians at Northwest Missouri State University, an academic library serving five thousand students, dismantled the traditional reference desk, replacing it with a library services desk staffed by students who were taught how to refer questions to the librarian

on call. By freeing librarians from the reference desk, the library was able to expand services, including the creation of instructional modules, 24/7 user guides, and online tutorials.

- ❖ Librarians back on the desk. At the same time that some librarians are getting rid of their reference desk, other librarians are going back to it. Librarians have returned to reference work in some large academic libraries that experimented with staffing desks with paraprofessionals and having librarians on call. These institutions found that librarians missed being on the desk.
- ❖ Recruitment from other areas. Many libraries are stretched for staff and welcome volunteers from other areas. The head of cataloging works at our reference desk two hours a week. This is a win-win situation. She also holds an MBA and is comfortable with business questions. At the same time, she finds interaction with patrons informative since it gives her insight into how people use the catalog. In addition, Penn State’s Technology Initiatives Librarian (an example of the changing nature of job titles) works a regularly scheduled shift at our reference desk. His expertise is valued, given our patrons’ interest in the application of information technology to electronic commerce, supply chain management, marketing, and other business functions and processes. The whole topic of recruitment is a highly charged issue. Our profession is debating whether or not we need different professionals in the twenty-first-century library. Some academic libraries are hiring professionals who do not have a master’s degree in library and information studies. Instead, they may have advanced degrees in subject disciplines, special foreign language skills, or expertise in information technology. James Neal has recently spoken about this new

cohort of professionals working in librarian positions.⁵ In addition, Neal identified another trend: the growing number of professional staff working in new assignments requiring expertise in areas such as facilities planning and management, fundraising, human resource management, and computer systems administration.

- ❖ Chat reference. Chat reference is the term used to designate virtual reference that uses special software that allows for real-time communication. Some libraries have abandoned chat reference, maintaining that it is not cost effective. Many experts feel that chat has not lived up to its hype. Two early adopters of virtual reference service, Steve Coffman and Linda Arret, wrote an article questioning the cost-effectiveness of chat reference. They concluded that chat reference is expensive given the cost of software, training costs, and underutilization of this service by patrons. Coffman and Arret offered a range of solutions: eliminating chat service; partnering with other libraries to reduce the cost of offering chat reference; increased marketing to increase usage of the service; and improved e-mail and telephone reference service as an alternative to chat. Their article resulted in a flurry of recent articles championing chat service.⁶ Carol Tenopir, a regular contributor to *Library Journal*, used one of her recent columns as a forum for librarians wanting to share their positive views of chat.⁷ These librarians characterized chat as filling a unique niche as the software enables capabilities beyond email and phone reference, such as the ability to demonstrate or troubleshoot a search. Additionally, these librarians who have had success with chat believe that the service is particularly useful in serving remote users as well as patrons from inside the library who are reluctant to ask a question at the desk. Another

Library Journal article argues that virtual reference is viable when offered as a statewide collaborative service.⁸ One example of a highly successful statewide collaborative chat service is the “Ask a Librarian” service offered as part of the Florida Electronic Library, a statewide initiative.⁹

- ❖ The move to instant messaging (IM). The cost of chat software, combined with low-use data, has led many libraries to move to IM as a tool for virtual reference. IM is an attractive alternative to chat because it is inexpensive, easy to use, and familiar to patrons. Many students (especially undergraduates) are already IM users. In fact, the statistics are startling. One information professional estimates that 85 percent of people between the age of fifteen and twenty-five have at least one IM account.¹⁰ My colleagues and I in the Schreyer Business Library intend to widely adopt IM in fall 2005 as a way to enhance our existing suite of services. One of our reasons for doing so is that we know IM is widely used in corporate settings, and we are preparing our students for the corporate world. We also have some Penn State colleagues who have used IM with great success in a service targeting student athletes. Our colleagues have published and presented on the Student Athletes in Libraries outreach program.¹¹ Librarians participating in this program offer hands-on instructional sessions to all incoming student athletes during their freshman year, and provide reference and research assistance throughout the year using e-mail and instant messaging.
- ❖ Roving reference. Some librarians are giving new meaning to this term. Harvard University librarians provide roving reference in the dining halls and student houses, which are wireless.¹² At the Schreyer Business Library, we are currently planning for off-

site reference service as we have been provided space in Penn State’s newly constructed College of Business building, scheduled for completion in summer 2005. As gate counts decline in many academic libraries, more librarians will no doubt take reference to places where students congregate, such as classroom buildings and student centers.

- ❖ Web self-help. This is another growing model of service. Some libraries are focusing their efforts on making their catalogs easier to search, making their home pages easier to navigate, improving interfaces, and investing in linking software to make for more seamless delivery of information. Additionally, many libraries are putting a lot of effort into developing home pages with extensive user guides, tutorials, and other online help. In short, librarians are making it easier for users to find information on their own. Tenopir interviewed Coffman and Arret in a follow-up to their highly cited article debating the merits of chat service.¹³ Coffman and Arret proposed that libraries improve self-service (via improved Web sites, better search engines, and more user-friendly interfaces) as an alternative to chat.

Consolidation of Service Points and Libraries

Consolidation of service points and even of libraries is an emerging trend in large research libraries in response to staff losses due to budget reductions and retirements. In some cases, service points have simply been merged in an existing facility. Some of these consolidated service points have been expanded to include the help desk function (assistance with computing questions). In other cases, institutions have merged separate subject libraries for greater efficiencies.

Increased Integration of Public and Technical Services

This consolidation of service points is closely tied to another important trend: the integration of public and technical services. More libraries are thinking about combining reference and circulation desks. The rationale is that patrons do not care who is staffing the desk; they just want service. Some libraries have already moved reference service to circulation for some part of the day.

The Growing Importance of Partnerships

Academic libraries have partnered with one another to deliver chat reference, sometimes taking advantage of different time zones. Florida’s “Ask a Librarian” chat service involves a partnership between public, academic, and special libraries.¹⁴ Virtual reference service is only one example of partnerships. Another is the collaboration between writing centers and academic libraries. This type of collaboration is occurring in academic libraries of all sizes across the country. Additionally, a growing number of academic libraries are building bridges with secondary schools as there is increased focus on helping students make the transition from high school to college.

Marketing and Branding of Library Services

Libraries are increasingly concerned with marketing their services. Some libraries have even hired a marketing or public relations specialist. It is becoming increasingly important to find out how users perceive the library and what they want. In the spring of 2005, two Penn State University MBA courses (Brand Management and

Marketing Strategy) used the Schreyer Business Library as the course project. A competition was held in both classes and teams presented suggestions for improving services and facilities. Colleagues Sally Kalin and Gary White presented the MBA students' recommendations at a recent in-house forum. While the projects targeted the Business Library, many of the recommendations are applicable to the Penn State Libraries as a whole.

Some common themes emerged. The central location of the Business Library (it occupies an entire floor in the new wing of the main library) was identified as a plus as well as the knowledgeable staff and authoritative resources. However, students informed us that the physical environment could be more inviting. Among the suggestions offered were better lighting, comfortable seating, and more plants. When MBA students surveyed users, many commented that our reference desk is too big, too intimidating, and indistinguishable from the desks on other floors. Users also want library staff to be more proactive. They want staff to greet users and to rove around offering assistance. More than one team reported that users do not like the "Ask" sign above our reference desk; the perception is that this places the burden on the user. Users also want our library to look more like a bookstore with magazines facing out and new books (especially business books on the *New York Times* bestseller list) prominently displayed. In terms of our Web presence, many teams suggested that we revamp our Web pages so they are more visual and less text-heavy. Many of the teams offered creative marketing strategies,

from creating a lively logo to advertising on local buses (the rationale being that many of the students we serve live off-campus). One team suggested that we consider using the term "research consultant" instead of librarian, and name our facility a "business research center" rather than library. While we may not adopt the latter suggestions, we are already moving forward on many others.

Increased Spending on Electronic Reference Products

It is impossible to discuss reference trends without discussing collection development. A greater proportion of reference materials budgets are being spent on electronic reference products. A recent article in *Library Journal* reported that academic libraries now spend almost 61 percent of their reference budgets on e-resources.¹⁵ At the same time, print is not going away. In fact, some products are being marketed as a bridge between print and electronic resources. These online products allow you to peer into your print reference collections. ■

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