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The Future of Reference in Special Libraries
by Stephen Abram

Many years ago the esteemed Barbara Quint offered her estimate that Google answered as many reference queries in a half-hour as all the reference librarians in the world did in 7 years. I suspect that ratio is quite different now, and not for the better! From that insight I was aware that reference ad to be the place to watch for change and innovation in libraries. That's a major shift. Please be clear that I differentiate reference questions from the deeper research support that is our stock in trade. Reference questions usually result in answers that are mere facts, the ones that answer the questions that start with who, what, where or when. Research support, and dare I say the more *important* questions, start with how or why. The search engine folks do find it much easier to deal with the reference end of the continuum while we library types excel at the research end – with our personal service, deeper interviews and professional levels of metadata. However, you can see the train coming down the tracks that reference work is changing and our core users don't always know when their question is simple or more complicated. In olden times, in the last century, we helped them determine this through the reference interview. How can we capture the high value questions when simple reference has moved to the web?

Generally our reference stats are down. This is not the case with our research requests, training activities, and one-on-one contact with clients. Intranet and website hits – from nearly any measurement data point – are way up. Are we getting the value we need or is the illusion of 'good enough' answers taking over?

Reference and research services, the front line of library service is dealing with a less predictable future. The asynchronous, asymmetrical threats facing us are very real hydra monsters with many possible tangents and all having some truth. The fate of reference has come into clearer focus in the Web 2.0 / Library 2.0 discussions – even debates. Either way, the tone has moved from understanding and learning the technology to one of understanding end-user behaviours in context. The tone has moved from serving libraries' management needs and the library workers' preferences, to one where the end-users' needs trump librarians' insights and personal search preferences. A plethora of new ethnographic end-user research – from usability through personas and from hit analyses to behavioural studies – focused on workplace needs, scholarly behaviour, learning styles and entertainment uses – demonstrates a material shift in the library firmament.

After almost 20 years of working on the infrastructure of libraries – servers, intranets, websites, wireless, broadband, access, security, viruses, etc – we have reached a real tipping point. In 2007 we are seeing the real action in our world of libraries move from the back office to the front room. We're moving from a technology-centric strategy to one where the real needs of our clients must predominate. Aligning technology with user behaviours is no longer sufficient for success. We need to understand and understand deeply the role of the library in our end-users' lives, work, research and play. This is critical to our long-term success and failure is not an option.

Bricks, Clicks and Tricks

In order to capture market share, and more importantly end-user mindshare, we must now prioritize our long-term and short-term strategies on serving the real customer (and not just the internal needs of library workers). For instance the OPAC doesn't suck for library workers. It was built to meet our specific needs. When we moved an internal tool to make it accessible to the 'public' we did a good thing. The unintended consequence of public OPACs was that we learned and have now acknowledged that end-users have different needs and processes for discovery and navigation than library workers. Rats, it would have been so much easier if it had worked out differently. We shouldn't feel too bad. Retail operations like Amazon learned very quickly that people behave differently online than they do in physical stores, online learning is differently than physical classrooms, and online communication in all its formats is different than the simple telephone or interpersonal conversation.

We have adapted well to part so the changes in recent times. Now we are challenged to put our services, especially reference services, into our users' spaces. Such major innovations and trends as e-learning, mobile devices, instant messaging, online worlds, social networks, etc. are putting the basics of our human spaces into flux. And we're seeing resistance to these changes from many of our colleagues. Can we change and invent a new paradigm? Remember, the dinosaurs didn't go extinct because the climate changed. They disappeared because they couldn't adapt to the changes happening around them!

What does all this mean to reference? We have a new suite of 2.0 tools, focused on human needs and relationships that are changing the dynamics of our marketplace. This is a good thing since libraries have always been about service and personal relationships with our users. Now we just have to reintroduce ourselves into every aspect of the virtual world. That means rethinking our professional development agenda, investing our technology decisions in ones which meet the needs of the end-user; and retraining and entire segment of librarianship to adapt to a fundamental new reality.

What are the possible scenarios for the future of reference? Here are a few that I can imagine off the top of my noggin.

1. ***Status Quo: A Recipe for Fossilization***

This is the disaster scenario. Suppose we don't evolve fast enough. Most of us know the story of the frog in the boiling water. Will we be blind to the overall changes and allow ad-driven search results to dominate the important question space? Will there be no event, no transformational experience that shocks us out of complacency? Will we ignore the Web 2.0 opportunity to revitalize distance user relationships?

2. ***Information Commons***

In this scenario we find the energy and insight to blend our Bricks, Clicks & Tricks strategies. We combine the in person and facility strengths of the library experience with a seamless and balanced image for our contribution to the improvement of questions and research results. Can we partner with all providers in the information space to create a one-stop solution? Can we attain this goal for a segment of special library users like R&D users or higher-education students?

3. ***Learning Commons***

e-Learning is a major trend in the corporate and academic spaces. In this environment the learners have their major relationship with the learning space at the lesson level. Most libraries are organized at the enterprise or institutional level. There's a vast distance between the library and the learner if we don't put reference services at the lesson level in such systems as Blackboard. Can we partner with the e-learning developers and offer context sensitive help in such courses?

4. ***Embedded Librarians***

In this scenario we find ourselves at-the-table. We go on rounds at hospitals, visit the Labs, and attend major unit and departmental meetings – both virtually and physically. We are truly partners and valued members of each critical team in our organization's mandate. We not only design intranets that mirror each team's needs but offer personalized service customized to each team member.

5. ***The Remote Librarian***

This scenario depends on an understanding of the potential for personal devices – laptops, smartphones, PDA's – to dominate as THE device. When they do, if they don't already in your environment, we'll see every user as a distance user and every user can potentially have all the information they may require in their

pocket. Can we be there too? Such emerging service technologies like micro-blogging, Twitter, text messaging, and digital phones with advanced web features are great opportunities to be at the point of every user's need.

6. Shoulder to Shoulder: Personal Skills Training

We have to acknowledge that librarian's role in passing on information literacy skills is a key focus of reference work. Whether it's in classrooms, individually given or online, we make a difference in every reference interview transaction by passing on skills, resources and knowledge. Will the day emerge when this is our primary role? In an information economy or knowledge economy, who holds the keys to this key activity?

7. Meet My Avatar

Gartner Group estimates that 80% of Internet users will be using an avatar as part of their web presence within five years. I don't know if I agree with this timeline but I do agree that such virtual worlds as There.com, Second Life, or Active Worlds are fascinating to explore and learn from. With millions of users already and 80 hours of reference desk staffing in Second Life already, some are already learning what this scenario might evolve into.

8. Extreme Reference: Emergency Librarian

I love this scenario since it acknowledges that librarians make a difference. We have SLA members researching IED's and saving the lives of soldiers; we have members in hospitals who answer life-saving questions every day; members who are involved in disaster recovery – oil spills, drugs, Katrina/Rita, avian flu, killer bees, honey bee die offs ands global warming. How do we highlight this scenario as critically important to survival and success?

None of the above scenarios are likely to come into being on their own but they could form the basis for a continuing debate in our world of libraries. The good news is that we have options! The great news is that there is no single scenario that can or will work for everyone or every specialized type of library work. Our profession is complex. Our markets are complex and our users and infinitely complex. We have a window of opportunity for extreme success right now. We don't know how long that window will remain open. Those of us, who prepare for emerging new world balance of personal service – virtual, in person and computer mediated, will be better prepared than those who wait and see. It's a new Renaissance in libraries. Hurray!

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