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The Challenge of Virtual Reference

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The "reference interview" has long been librarians' secret weapon. We use the term to describe the practice of asking probing questions to uncover unspoken (or unrealized) needs of patrons. It has many practical aspects: weeding out research avenues that have already been tried and failed (i.e.: "where have you looked already?"), giving the patron the opportunity to think through their own needs (i.e.: "how will you use this information? Are there other things we should look for in addition to this?"), and providing the reference librarian with needed parameters within which to search (i.e.: "when do you need this by, and how much are you willing to spend to get this answer?")

The art of the reference interview is still taught in library schools and practiced on unwitting patrons across the world. The truth is, skilled probing on the part of the librarian can turn a potentially dissatisfied patron into a strong ally. Good librarians know how to get the patron the information they need, even if what the patron asks for at first is not always what he or she is ultimately looking for.

But, the traditional reference interview is being challenged by the changing nature of reference work itself. In the past, our patrons usually physically came to the library. Those that were too busy sometimes called, but in both instances there was an immediate exchange of information that allowed the librarian the opportunity to ask questions and narrow down the search parameters. It was fast, and very efficient.

In the modern law firm library, however, patrons coming to the reference desk and asking for assistance are almost non-existent. In fact, many firms have eliminated the traditional reference desk altogether. Instead, patrons commonly send their queries to the reference staff in a number of ways, e-mail being the most common. E-mail is a wonderful tool, but it does not always allow for the immediate exchange of information the same way a telephone or a face-to-face exchange does. For one thing, most attorneys, and most librarians, for that matter, are inundated with e-mail. While the telephone, by the nature of its ring, warrants immediate attention, e-mail can be less intrusive -- and therefore easier to ignore. When the attorney sends a request to the librarian by e-mail, he or she assumes that the librarian is fast-at-work uncovering the answer, not recognizing that the librarian is in need of further probing to uncover the answer. What used to take seconds to convey verbally can now take precious minutes -- with the exchange of e-mails in an attempt to gather the appropriate information. It has made it that much more difficult to conduct an effective reference interview. In addition, the nature of patrons' information needs have changed significantly over the last few years. The reference librarian once had a relatively thorough knowledge of the library's collection, and the majority of reference questions could be found within the walls of the library. Should the information lie outside of the library, the librarian would locate the most likely source in another institution -- and most often arrange to borrow the material through interlibrary loan.

Of course many reference questions that are handled by the law firm library staff are still located within the confines of the library -- but many questions now involve going outside of

the library to obtain the information. With the large number of online databases available to the average librarian, it is not a question of "where" to get the answer, but where to get it in the quickest and most cost-effective manner.

And as the nature of the law firm changes, so do the information needs. U. S. law firms are increasingly global, as evidenced by the fact that 41 of the top 50 law firms in the world are U.S. based, according to Hildebrandt International. (According to the same study, 80% of Baker & McKenzie's 3,200 lawyers are abroad.) As these firms grow and spread, they need access to the same level of information that the single office law firms have. Law firm librarians are beginning to see the demand for 24/7 service sometimes referred to as the "Follow the Sun" type of service. Several law firms are toying with the idea that all reference requests go to a central location and then be distributed out according to who is on duty at any given time. That means that a reference librarian in San Francisco might be handling calls from law firm offices across the globe.

While it is beyond the scope of this article to provide answers, it serves as a reminder of some of the issues that must be addressed as the reference interview moves into a virtual environment. Determining how the query will be handled, and by whom, is fundamental. Identifying the resources the firm will need to meet its information needs in a global environment is also a significant task.

The reference interview has long been the domain of the information professional. Ensuring that it makes the leap into the virtual environment will guarantee that it remains an effective reference tool.

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