Reference Observation

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The Civic Center branch of the Livermore Public Library is a large building, with a wide central walkway. The stacks and the catalog computers are off to the left, and the desks are off to the right. The first desk the patron passes is the circulation disk, which is labeled "check out." About fifteen feet beyond that is the reference desk, labeled "information." These signs hang from the ceiling; they're large and easy to read, but are a couple feet above a patron's typical line of sight. There are no directional signs in the library to point the way to the reference desk, and nothing to tell the patron what the purpose is of the "information" desk. Oftentimes patrons come first to the circulation desk with their questions, and then have to be redirected to the reference desk, which can waste time for both the patrons and the circulation staff.

There are usually two to three librarians behind the desk at a time, with one or two more roving around the library. The librarians wear badges and name tags, and the roving librarians also wear black aprons with the library logo on them. Green (1876) suggested that librarians "mingle freely with [the] users, and help them in every way." The roving librarians are quite helpful, usually coming up to a patron at the catalog computers who looks frustrated and asking "can I help you find anything?" In general, they don't leave the patron until the patron has indicated that he or she has found sufficient information. At times the roving librarian will set the patron up with one information source, such as a computer database, leave, and return later with more information; in this way they "serve as an information consultant" (Genz, 1998, The Historical Legacy, ¶ 10). However, this is sometimes done without letting the patron

know that the librarian is still working on the question. Durrance (1995) states that "it is not clear to the questioner whether an abrupt departure is a method of closure or a continuation of the interaction by retrieving additional materials" (p. 254). While the librarians did not display the rudeness to which Durrance is referring, they still at times left it unclear as to whether or not the reference session has been concluded.

The reference desk also deals with the computers, the copiers, and reserving the community meeting rooms. The computers involve monitoring the computer room, which is located just past and a little behind the reference desk, giving patrons permission cards for the computers and, when the computers are busy, an appointment time, as well as fielding basic computer questions. Dealing with the copiers and the printers means changing the toner, filling the paper trays, and basic troubleshooting. More involved technical problems get directed to technical services. In addition the reference librarians are responsible for the displays of new and popular books, which are located in the center isle just in front of the desk.

Genz (1998) stated that "librarians can no longer afford to be experts in 'reference books' but must have instead a sense of both the greater information landscape and how it is navigated for the purpose of retrieving the appropriate information for a well-defined need" (The Historical Legacy, ¶ 9). The print collection behind the reference desk does not appear to be very extensive. The librarians seem to rely mostly on the electronic resources, such as the online catalog, the periodicals databases, and the World Wide Web. However the print collection is occasionally used, usually when a patron asks for a phone book or an index which is not available online. The electronic resources are all

ones the patrons can access themselves from a library or home computer; the advantage the librarian brings is familiarity and search experience.

The majority of the questions seemed to be either computer questions or directional; true reference questions were in the minority. A typical reference interaction took no more than five minutes. There were a few longer ones, which lasted between 10 and 15 minutes. There did not seem to be any provision for longer reference interviews, but neither did there seem to be a demand for them. When doing a search the librarian typically turned the monitor so that the patron could browse the results and see how and where the librarian was searching. The librarians gave the impression of being genuinely interested in the questions. They stuck with the search until the patron seemed satisfied, and often walked the patron to the appropriate area of the library after the books had been located in the catalog. They also didn't hesitate to pass the question on to a coworker when appropriate. However, the librarians seemed to ask more closed questions than open questions, starting with questions such as "are you looking for books or magazine articles" or "did you want just pictures of horseshoeing or descriptions."

There is phone service, as well as e-mail and instant messenger service, described on the web site under the "Contact Us" link. While the "Contact Us" page is clear that these are ways to communicate with a reference librarian, there is nothing on the main page or any of the other pages to make it clear that "Contact Us" is a way to ask an information or research question. There seemed to be more live reference interactions than phone interactions, and most of the phone interactions seemed to be questions about the community rooms; very few of them seemed to be actual reference questions.

The web site also has a way to search the on-line catalog and several periodical databases, as well as links to outside sites that could provide a patron with information. With the exception of the catalog, these resources are listed under the heading of "Online References," which does not tell patrons clearly that this is where they should look for magazine or newspaper articles. Aside from an e-mail address at the bottom of the page, there is very little on the "Online References" page to offer help to the patron, and only in the last month have the links been organized in a way that lets the patron know what type of information the site or database contains.

When not helping patrons, most of the librarians were working at the computers behind the desk. Some of this seemed to be work such as entering statistics into a spreadsheet, but some of it seemed to be non-work related. Green (1876) said that reference work should have the "appearance of being performed incidentally," and that the librarian should have some regular work, but she should be able to set it aside at a moment's notice (¶ 43). In this case, however, it was clear that the reference work, the work of helping patrons, was the main work, and any other work was incidental and sometimes unimportant.

Overall, the reference librarians were friendly and approachable. Roving librarians often helped those who did not come to the desk. Although much of the librarians' work dealt with the computers or the meeting rooms, they seemed genuinely interested in helping patrons.

References

Durrance, J. (1995). Factors that influence reference success: what makes questioners

    willing to return? *The Reference Librarian*, 49/50, 243-265.

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Genz, M. (1998). Working the reference desk. *Library Trends*, 46 (3), 505-526.