Services in a (Post)Google World

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Reference in the (Post) Google Age

Purpose: This paper serves as an introduction to the articles in the special theme issue on “reference in the (post) Google age”, outlining some of the challenges and opportunities this new information environment has presented for reference services and introducing some of the creative ways in which librarians are adapting.

Design/methodology/approach: This paper provides an overview of the reference service issues and models which are discussed in the papers that follow, including various ways of assessing, locating, and staffing services.

Findings: Reference services have not been made obsolete by new online search options, and reference librarians are adapting and rethinking their service models in various resourceful ways.

Practical implications: Specific examples of new reference models and ways of assessing reference services are outlined.

Originality/value: This paper provides an introduction to the special issue on current reference services.

Keywords: Reference services, Change, Assessment, User Studies

Category: Viewpoint

This special issue of Reference Services Review focuses on the ways in which libraries are adapting reference services to meet the different needs and research strategies employed by users working in a “(post) Google” age. It has been nearly 10 years since Google first came on the scene (Google, 2009), and it and subsequent search technologies have had an undeniable impact on libraries and their services. Anyone can now quickly, and freely, look up much of the factual information that once required a knowledgeable reference librarian with access to and mastery of multiple print ready reference sources. These changes have caused great angst among many librarians who started their careers pre-Google. As Foster has observed, “many…librarians started in their professional careers at a time when there was a different kind of demand for their services. They had a higher level of meaningful contact with library patrons; students thronged the desk and there were two reference librarians on duty. Now, a single librarian might languish at the desk for hours, only to be asked for directions to the restroom or to lend a patron a fork.” (2007).

While Google and its ilk took away the demand for ready reference, it created a new need for service to users overwhelmed by the fire hose of information, both credible and incredible, unleashed on the internet. Ever adaptable, librarians are finding new ways to reach out to and serve users in the current environment. They are questioning their own assumptions, assessing their local users and services, and engaging their creativity to experiment with various service
models. The articles that follow present an array of these resourceful approaches to rethinking reference services.

Two of the articles in this collection focus on using assessment to rethink our assumptions about reference services. In “What the Net Generation Really Wants”, Ismail reports on a survey of Marywood University students which surprised the librarians by showing that their 18-22 year old students preferred in-person reference over use of Web 2.0 services. She suggests that librarians first look at the needs and desires of their local users, rather than quickly adopt the latest technological trend. In a novel approach for libraries, Elizabeth Kocevar-Weidinger, et.al., report on a project in which librarians at Longwood and Radford Universities applied the “mystery shopping” technique, typically used by private businesses, to assess and improve services and training. They detail the methodology for mystery shopping and data analysis.

Several articles look critically at the location of reference services, ranging from relocating the reference desk to removing it entirely. As Barratt, et. al., put it, librarians should “try something new and get out from behind the desk”. In “Reference Models in the Electronic Library,” the librarians at the Miller Learning Center of the University of Georgia describe how they engaged in a number of experiments with different reference models in response to the low number of questions at their Research Support Desk. Faced with providing reference services in an information commons setting, the librarians tried an interesting mix of roving reference; offsite reference staffing in dorms and a coffee shop; and open research skills workshops. In “The Research Center: Creating an Environment for Interactive Research Consultations”, Meyer, et.al., describe their development of a service model analogous to the Writing Center, since research and writing are so closely connected. The librarians at the University of Denver Penrose Library created an attractive, dedicated, highly visible, enclosed space for conducting in-depth research consultations. In their article “Reference at the Commons: a Case Study,” Lee, et.al., of Regent University Library, describe how by simply relocating their desk to a more prominent place, use of reference services increased. In “Reference Service Without the Desk,” Arndt describes how the librarians at Dickinson College took the more radical step of eliminating their reference desk altogether. Using the analogy of “office hours” held by faculty at their institution, they reshaped reference services for students by promoting the librarians’ existing subject expertise and departmental liaison relationships. The resulting increase in use of reference challenges the assumption that a highly visible reference desk is necessary for a viable service.

Two of the articles challenge our assumptions about how a reference services desk should be staffed. In a move that many professional librarians would find radical, the librarians at Coastal Carolina University’s Kimbel Library implemented a peer reference service model using undergraduate upperclassmen as reference assistants. In “Peer Reference Redefined: New Uses for Undergraduate Students,” Faix, et.al., describe how the librarians overcame initial concerns to successfully implement this model. The success at the Kimbel Library challenges us to rethink our biases toward the educational background necessary to provide reference services. Many libraries have long used graduate student assistants to support reference services. While not all libraries are located near a graduate school, a pool of talented undergraduates may be readily available. In “The @One Service Environment: Information Services for and by the
Millennial Generation,” Zink, et.al., describe a staffing model in which librarians, IT professionals, multi-media professionals, and student assistants collaborate side-by-side to provide services at a central desk. The authors’ report on the results of a survey of the professional and student staff provides insight into the benefits of this staffing model.

The special section concludes with two articles which offer ideas for maintaining our reference skills, and also exploiting Web 2.0 tools for our own professional development as reference librarians. In “Becoming a Renaissance Reference Librarian in Academe” Oliva, et.al., present the results of a survey of academic librarian attitudes on being a generalist or a subject specialist. The authors also discuss types of training which can maintain generalist skills and allow one to become a “Renaissance Librarian” who can handle a “vast range of reference questions”. In “Web 2.0 for Reference Services Staff Training and Communication”, Currie offers a useful overview of the ways in which the many new online tools routinely used to find information for reference, can also be useful for internal training and management of reference services.

As the articles in this issue show, reference services have not been made obsolete in the “(post) Google age”. The findings of the authors suggest that their remains a need and demand for reference services, although we need to constantly check our assumptions about the ways in which we provide those services. While the dawn of Google may have engendered fears for the future of librarianship, it has merely challenged librarians to apply their creativity and innovation to rethinking and reshaping their services for the (post) Google age.

References
