Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

The Majority of Library Clients Still Use Person-to-Person Interaction when Asking Reference Questions

A review of:
De Groote, Sandra L. "Questions Asked at the Virtual and Physical Health Sciences Reference Desk: How Do They Compare and What Do They Tell Us?" <u>Medical Reference Services Quarterly</u> 24.2 (Summer 2005): 11-23.

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Abstract

Objective – To identify similarities and differences in the questions asked at the virtual and physical reference desks of a health sciences library, in order to better understand user needs and highlight areas for service improvement. Also to retrospectively analyze reference statistics collected over the previous six years.

Design – Use study; retrospective study of reference statistics for the period July 1997 to June 2003; literature review.

Setting – Large academic health sciences library in the United States.

Subjects – All questions asked at the reference and information desks, plus questions submitted to the University-wide virtual reference service and answered by a health sciences librarian, over a period of one month. The questions were asked by faculty, staff, students and members of the public.

Methods – A literature review was carried out to examine the types of information/reference questions typically asked in health sciences libraries both before and after the mass introduction of remote end-user searching of online resources and the establishment of virtual reference services.

Next, the reference statistics collected at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Library of the Health Sciences between July 1997 and June 2003 were examined. For most of this period a digital reference service was offered using a listserv address

to which patrons would submit email queries. Beginning in March 2003, a formal virtual reference service (chat and email) was provided using commercial software.

Finally, data was gathered on questions answered by a health sciences librarian, and clients who asked the questions, at either the physical or virtual reference desk, during the month of November 2003 at the UIC Library of the Health Sciences. Library staff completed an online survey form for each question, and if a client asked more than one question, each question was coded individually. Data included: status of client using the service (faculty/staff, undergraduate student, graduate student, non-UIC, unknown); mode of submission (email, chat, phone, in person); and type of question asked (directional, ready reference, in-depth/mediated, instructional, technical, accounts/status and other). In subsequent analysis, the original seven types of questions were further broken down into 19 categories.

Main results – It was not possible to undertake a meta-analysis or systematic review of the studies identified in the literature review because of differences in time frames, settings and the categories used to code reference questions. However the following trends emerged: directional questions accounted for between 30 and 35% of questions asked at both physical and virtual reference desks; the remainder of questions were generally about known item searches, library policies and services, research, database use and quick reference.

The statistics collected at UIC Library of the Health Sciences over the period July 1997 to June 2003 were analyzed. Coded reference questions fell into one of four categories: ready reference, in-depth reference, mediated searches and digital reference. There was a noticeable drop in the number of reference questions received in 1999/2000

which reflects trends reported in some of the studies identified in the literature review. The number of mediated searches decreased from 154 in 1997/98 to 4 in 2002/2003, but the number of digital reference questions increased from 0 to 508 in the same period.

Statistics were collected over the month of November 2003 for 939 questions asked at the reference and information desks which included: 38 e-mail; 48 chat; 156 phone; and 697 in person. The major findings were as follows:

- approximately 55% of questions were reference questions (33.5% ready reference, 9.7% in-depth/mediated, 9.7% instructional); 30% were directional; and 10% were technical; it is not stated what the remaining 5% of questions were;

- library clients who asked the questions comprised graduate students (26%), faculty (24%), undergraduate students (24%) and non-UIC patrons (22%);

- all groups of clients were most likely to ask their reference questions in person;

- graduate students were the largest users of email reference (34%), undergraduates were the largest group to use chat (35%) and faculty/staff were the largest group to use the telephone (39%);

- 28% of the questions were answered from library's staff's general knowledge of the library; 22% using the online catalogue or electronic journal list; 22% by referring the patron to, or using, an online database or resource; 13% by referring the patron to another department in the library (such as circulation); 7% by consulting another individual; and 5% by using print resources.

Conclusion – The results of the three parts of this study – literature review, study of 1997-2003 statistics, and in-depth collection of statistics for November 2003 – are difficult to compare with each other. However, the general trend emerging from the results is that some kinds of questions asked by health sciences library clients have remained very much the same regardless of the rise of remote end-user searching and the mode of transmission of the questions. These include questions about library policies and services, journal and book holdings, database searching and instructional support. Questions about citation verification and consumer health appear to be decreasing while technical questions and questions about accessing remote databases and online journals are increasing. The majority of reference questions are still asked in person.

Commentary

The author clearly states the objective of this study – to examine the types of questions asked and the demographic categories of the users of the virtual and physical reference desks in a health sciences library. However the article loses focus on the objective by starting with an overly long literature review. The studies described in the literature review are too disparate to be directly comparable with each other and the November 2003 in-depth study does not appear to use the methodology of any of the earlier studies identified in the review.

The subjects of the study are the questions asked during November 2003 by clients of the information desk and physical reference desk at the UIC Library of the Health Sciences, plus questions asked at the University-wide virtual reference desk that were answered by a health sciences librarian. The total number of questions included in the study is 939 which is an adequate sample size.

The data collection instrument used in this study – an online survey form – was not provided in the article, thereby limiting the replicability of the study. The coding of the questions is difficult to determine, as neither a comprehensive list nor definitions of coding categories are given. The data was recorded by the librarians providing the service being studied. The author does not discuss any possible measures taken to reduce bias beyond stating that the library staff received training on filling out the forms to clarify definitions. The response rate to this study was presumably 100%, but the article does not state whether all online survey forms were filled out in sufficient detail to be used in the study.

The author states that "the data gathering was to be unobtrusive to the users". It is not clear whether clients of the reference desk knew they were participating in a study, or whether consent to participate was sought or given.

There is some analysis of the reference statistics collected by the UIC Health Sciences Library staff over the period July 1997 to June 2003. The November 2003 study may have replicated some aspects of the 1997-2003 statistics collection, but this is not clearly stated. More value could have been derived from the retrospective statistics if more detail was provided on how they were collected and how the original coding of reference questions relates to the coding used in the later study. The author does not state clearly whether the online survey form used in the November 2003 study is the same instrument used to capture the earlier statistics.

The results of the study are generally clearly presented, although this reviewer found several of the graphs too small to read easily. On occasion, different terms are used for the same type of reference question. For example, the article refers to "database

searches to find articles" and "how to find articles on a particular topic," but it is not clear whether these are the same, or different, coding categories.

Overall, the study is valid, but its reliability is compromised by not supplying the reader with enough information, and its applicability is limited. The reliability of the study is reduced by the author's failure to include all relevant information and results. The author states that "coded information was … analyzed using SPSS statistical software" but complete results including statistical significance are not given. Not enough detail is given in this article to enable another library to repeat the study; the data collection instrument and data coding would be needed. The study is directly applicable to academic health sciences libraries and could be adapted for use by other libraries if further information could be obtained from the author.

This is a useful study in that it demonstrates that the majority of library clients still use person-to-person interaction when asking reference questions. Only 25% of the questions received during the in-depth study period (November 2003) were asked via phone, email or chat; the remaining 75% of questions were asked in person. The study provides useful evidence for health sciences librarians to present to administrators who may question the value of maintaining and funding a physical library. The study also highlights the fact that some library clients are more likely to use phone, email or chat to ask questions than others. This is one possible area of future study and has implications for staffing virtual reference desk services and promoting the service to different client groups.