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Where Have All The Patrons Gone?

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Peggy A. Seiden



FROM THE
PRESIDENT OF RUSA

Where Have All the Patrons Gone?

Over the past year, I have heard a great deal of unease voiced by colleagues all over the country who are concerned about the decrease in traffic at the reference desks. ARL statistics confirm what reference librarians surmised: there has indeed been a drop in reference traffic. Does this drop in traffic presage the end of reference service as we know it? While most people in and out of the profession have realized that both print publications and the traditional library are here for the foreseeable future, it's only been recently that we have begun to ask whether services within the libraries also have an indefinite future life.

The nature of the use of collections has begun to change in the wake of our increasing investments in and availability of online information sources. For example, microfilm usage dropped precipitously with the advent of online full-text. While our libraries are a long way from having the extent of back-files in digital form that we have in microforms for even the most popular of news magazines,

usage patterns have always indicated that the more current years were the ones our patrons used most often. The accessibility of online versions of journals or government documents has also impacted the use of printed journals and documents. There is a growing preference for the digital over any other format.

Therefore it should come as no surprise that the services we provide to support the use of the collections may need to change, but the question remains as to how they should change and to what extent.

It seems ironic that just a few years ago we were trying to cope with the increased traffic at the reference desk by looking at new models of reference. We were concerned about technostress and burnout at the reference desk. The cause of both the increase in reference traffic and the decrease appears to be the same—the growth of online information

sources. It was only a few years ago that the majority of our patrons were encountering computers and computer-based resources for the first time in our libraries. Their lack of familiarity with both the hardware and the software created an instant demand for assistance at the reference desk. Increasingly, computer savvy clientele no longer need as much support to use the hardware. We are no longer talking about Generation X or Y, but Generation D, the digital generation.

A study done at Carnegie Mellon (albeit a very technologically sophisticated campus with a very technologically sophisticated patron-base) have found that upwards of 70 percent of their students and faculty access the library remotely. Focus groups at Swarthmore indicated a strong preference for studying in one's dorm room. While such behavior may not hold for all strata of society, particularly in view of the dig-

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ital divide, given that the majority of public library patrons are upper middle class, it should come as no surprise that their use of the library is changing too. With an ever growing number of home computers, Internet connections and digital products—not to mention legal and business sources on the Web—people are finding that their information needs can be met elsewhere and more conveniently than with a trip to their local library.

And yet anecdotal and other more systematic data-gathering techniques indicate that while our users may be technologically savvy, they lack critical understanding of the information environment. How many times have we heard students utter that they are not able to find anything on the Internet on their topic? Or faculty bemoan the inappropriate sources that pepper their students' papers? The fact is that we can easily justify our existence by pointing out our own value, but if users seek other paths for finding information, no amount of justification on our part will convince them to come back to the library and the reference desk. In some way, we have failed our users. If we really believe that we have significant value to add to our patron's quest for information, then we need to do a better job meeting their information needs—a better job than is done by Web portals and search engines. Better is not just qualitatively better and in the way we define it, but better in ways that our patrons value: better in terms of their time and effort.

So what do we need to do?

- ◆ We need to understand our users and their information-seeking behavior. Find users and nonusers and determine both their macro- and micro-level of behavior, i.e., what sources they choose and why, and how they search and evaluate information. The commercial sector is quite savvy when it comes to market research; we need to be more savvy too.
- ◆ We need to be there when our users need us. When are our patrons most likely to need information? Our students do much of their work between 11 P.M. and 3 A.M. Our main library closes at 1 A.M. and reference service ends at 10 P.M.
- ◆ We need to do collection development for Web-based resources with the same care and attention we pay to our print collections. Collection development of Web resources is so overwhelming that few libraries are able to sustain efforts to select and maintain subject guides.
- ◆ We need to be our patrons' Web portal, and that portal must be maintained. Our library's sites must be the Web site of first resort. We must provide direct links to resources that best meet the needs of our primary clientele and we need to organize those resources effectively.
- ◆ We need to customize our services. Think in the follow-

ing terms: what makes our library's digital reference service different from Ask Jeeves? Like broadcast TV, these services market to the masses.

- ◆ We need to be a player in the commercial sector that is developing search engines and digital collections.
- ◆ We can't wait around for perfect solutions; we must be ready to try imperfect solutions and revise.

And here's a story. Several years ago in 1992, when I was co-chairing the Coalition for Networks' Information Directory and Information Services working group, that group was deciding what was an appropriate initiative to move ahead toward some mechanisms for cataloging or organizing sites valuable to higher education. The idea of some sort of centralized service was roundly criticized. Indeed there were some useful efforts that grew out of the group, such as the Dublin Core. Meanwhile, Yahoo! was born.

In the Winter issue of this journal, Gail Schlachter noted that Yahoo! recently stated in a *Business Week* interview that it intends to be "the only place that anyone needs to get connected to anything." And she noted that while reference librarians might take exception to this, probably nobody else would. But we can't just think we do it better, we need to do it better and say we do it better or we need to get out of the way. ■