The Thank You Study

User Feedback in E-mail Thank You Messages

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This exploratory study of unsolicited thank you messages from e-mail digital reference users analyzed the information provided in these messages for user perspectives on digital reference success, outcomes, and quality elements in answers. Digital reference interactions receiving thank you messages were also compared with nonthanked interactions. Results indicated that librarians who used more words in answers were more likely to receive a thank you response from users and that many other factors, such as e-mail or Web form use or the librarians' expressing thanks to the user, did not appear to impact the thank you rate.

Librarians who answer questions in e-mail digital reference services are familiar with the intriguing phenomenon of the e-mail thank you message. In most question-answering interactions via e-mail, librarians send an e-mail answer to a user's question and then never hear back again from the user, leaving the librarian wondering whether the answer was satisfactory or deficient in some way. However, occasionally the librarian receives a spontaneous, unsolicited e-mail thank you message from the user. Is it possible that these user thank you messages contain feedback that might benefit efforts in digital reference service evaluation, such as indications of digital reference interactions that were successful from the user perspective? This research examined thanked and nonthanked e-mail digital reference transcripts, and explored the textual content of users' thank you messages in evaluating the feedback provided by users in their digital reference thank you messages.

The setting for this study was the Internet Public Library (IPL), an entirely virtual library based at the University of Michigan (UMich) that has provided e-mail question-answering services for users around the world since March 1995.[1] Questions are submitted to the service via e-mail or Web forms and are answered primarily by volunteer professional librarians and graduate students in librarianship training who participate from universities across the United States and around the world. IPL transcripts of e-mail digital reference interactions between users and librarians include the user's initial question, the librarian's answer, internal system notations such as time and date stamps, and any subsequent responses by the user or the librarian. From January through December 2002, the period for which transcripts were sampled in this research study,

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5,400 questions were answered by IPL and thank you responses were received from 861 users—an overall thank you rate of 15.9 percent for the twelve months of 2002.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although thousands of libraries are now actively engaged in online question-answering via chat, e-mail, instant messaging, and other forms of digital reference, the research field is still very new. An early call for libraries to experiment with e-mail appeared in 1981, and by the mid-1980s the first librarians were engaged in chat and e-mail digital reference services at libraries such as those at University of Washington and the University of Maryland, and at the librarian-staffed Winstar Telebase chat service for online users of Prodigy and other Internet providers.[2] However, it was not until ten years later that the first research study explored the nature of the e-mail digital reference interaction in depth.[3]

Digital reference research primarily has focused on the interaction as occurring between question submission by the user and answer transmission by the librarian. However, a 2000 study of e-mail interactions at IPL noted the phenomenon of subsequent e-mail thank you messages from users sent back to the service after the digital reference interaction was already completed. Out of more than 2,300 e-mail questions to IPL for January–March 1999, users were observed to have sent back to the librarians 458 subsequent e-mail thank you messages—an approximately 20 percent overall thank you rate.[4]

The research literature in computer-mediated communications suggests that a communications mode such as e-mail with reduced sensory cues lowers awareness of others in the interaction and tends to produce more impersonal behavior.[5] In digital reference, the chat user who suddenly logs off during the interaction or the e-mail user who fails to respond to a clarification question might be seen as examples of the greater impersonality of reduced sensory cues in online communications. Thus, the 20 percent of e-mail users observed by Carter and Janes who made an extra effort to write back and thank the librarian even after the question-answering interaction was over may represent a potential window of insight into true digital reference user satisfaction. In providing a further exploration of users' e-mail digital reference thank you messages, this study explores possibilities for using thank you messages in the evaluation of digital reference services.

METHOD

This study analyzed 810 e-mail transcripts from IPL, including 558 thanked and 252 nonthanked digital reference interactions. The primary focus of this study was to examine the properties of thanked interactions, but a smaller sample of nonthanked interactions was also drawn for comparative purposes. Systematic random sampling techniques were utilized to ensure that random proportional samples of both thanked and nonthanked digital reference transcripts were drawn from each month in the dataset for January–December 2002. In phase 1 of the research study, the transcripts for thanked and nonthanked e-mail digital reference interactions were analyzed and compared for a variety of quantitative factors including answer speed, information provided by users, and response length by librarians. Contingency tables and chi-square statistics were utilized in determining the statistical significance of differences observed between thanked and nonthanked digital reference interactions. Where statistically significant differences were found, the Cramer's *V* statistic was calculated in order to test the strength of association between the variables.[6] The Cramer's *V* statistic was used as a measure of association strength because it norms for sensitivity of the chi-square test to large sample sizes.

In phase 2 of the research study, the sample of 558 thank you messages was also examined using qualitative coding for users' comments and assessments regarding their digital reference experience. A codebook for user-identified quality factors in digital reference service was designed based upon an extensive literature review of the research on reference evaluation and reference assessment. Intercoder reliability testing for the codebook was conducted during August and September 2003, and Cohen's Kappa was computed to correct for chance agreement, finding scores at or above the 70-percent satisfactory level for all three intercoding sessions (.70, .83, and .77).[7] Grounded theory was also used in open coding for themes and concepts emerging from the data.[8]

RESULTS: PHASE 1

The portrait of IPL users emerging from the first phase of analysis of the thanked and nonthanked transcripts indicates that the majority of users in the 2002 sample who described reasons for asking questions indicated that their information-seeking was not related to a school or academic assignment. Among the nonthanked sample, the proportion of education-related assignments was higher, possibly reflective of the lower thank you rate observed in the Carter and Janes study in 2000 for questions submitted through IPL's youth question form, but this difference in thanking rates for academic and nonacademic questions was not statistically significant.

In textual comments regarding their reasons for asking questions, users reported their reasons for information-seeking as including projects in writing or speaking, such as reports, articles, essays, presentations, and teaching; de-

Table 1. Academic Assignments

Provided School Use	Thanked	Non-Thanked	Totals
Academic Assignment	114 (32.6%)	71 (41.3%)	185
Non-School Related	236 (67.4%)	101 (58.7%)	337
Totals	350	172	522

χ^2 (df=1, N = 522) = 3.82, p = .051

sires to acquire items by purchase or loan; and other-directed activities such as dispute resolution or helping others. Imposed queries, or questions being asked in order to gather information for other people, were reported by 10.2 percent of the thanking users (n=57) and 6.7 percent of the non-thanking users (n=17).[9] Users described seeking information on behalf of friends and family members, including geographically distant acquaintances.

The majority of both thanking users (n=386, or 69.2 percent) and non-thanking users (n=183, or 72.6 percent) chose to submit their digital reference questions through IPL's Web-based question form, although a "plain e-mail option" was also available. Rates for thank you responses in the sampled transcripts were similar, showing no statistically significant differences for users submitting questions via plain e-mail or Web forms.

IPL's Web form is more detailed than forms used by most public and academic libraries and is designed to ask up-front the full range of questions recommended by Robert Taylor including question subject, user's goals and motivation, personal details, and preferences for answer types and formats.[10] In submitting and negotiating their questions with digital reference librarians, more than 60 percent of both the thanking and non-thanking users provided information equivalent to answering six or more of the fields on IPL's Web form. No statistically significant differences were observed in the extent to which the thanking and non-thanking users provided information to the librarians about their questions.

Users specified a deadline date in about half of the questions, and librarians were able to meet the requested deadlines in most of these cases (approximately 96 percent for both thanking and non-thanking users.) Differences in the patterns of deadlines requested by thanking and non-thanking users were not statistically significant. The majority of users specifying a deadline also indicated willingness to wait for at least one week for their e-mail answers. Expectations for speed of answer from the other half of the digital reference users who did not specify a preferred response time are unknown.

Overall, it was found that for both thanking and non-thanking users, at least half of the answers had been sent by librarians within the first three days. For thanking users, 50.2 percent had been sent an answer by the third day after submitting a question, while 57.5 percent of non-thanking users had been sent an answer in the same period. Differences in thanking versus non-thanking user behavior by answer speed were found to be statistically significant. To explore the strength of the relationship between thanking behavior and answer speed, the Cramer's *V* statistic was calculated, in which a finding of .10–.19 would indicate a weak relationship, .20–.39 would indicate a moderate relationship, .40–.59 would indicate a relatively strong relationship and .60 or above would indicate a strong relationship.[11] For answer speed and thanking behavior, the Cramer's *V* of .16 suggests a weak association between these variables.

Users were also observed to have a greater tendency to thank librarians who avoided using prewritten standard answers or FAQ responses. IPL has standard answer FAQ responses for some commonly asked questions that librarians can copy into an answer. In this study, twenty-five of thirty-four standard answer FAQ responses or three-fourths of all the standard answers failed to receive a thank you message from users. IPL uses subject codes to classify answer types, with FAQ answers as one subject-code grouping. In comparing the FAQ answer group (n=34) to three other answer subject-code groups of similar size in the sample, Humanities (n=39), Biography (n=47), and Business (n=50), statistically significant differences were found between thanking and non-thanking user behaviors with a relatively strong association to the subject-code answer type.

Table 2. Communication Mode and Thanking Status

Communication Mode	Thanked	Non-Thanked	Totals
E-mail	172 (71.4%)	69 (28.6%)	241
Web Form	386 (67.8%)	183 (32.2%)	569
Totals	558	252	810

χ^2 (*df*=1, *N* = 810) = .99, *p* = .321

Table 3. Information Provided by Users to Librarians

Information Provided	Thanked	Non-Thanked	Totals
Five or Fewer Fields	213 (38.2%)	77 (30.6%)	290
Six or More Fields	345 (61.8%)	175 (69.4%)	520
Totals	558	252	810

χ^2 (*df*=1, *N* = 810) = 4.38, *p* = .036

Table 4. User-Requested Deadlines

Specified Deadlines	Thanked	Non-Thanked	Totals
Less than 7 Days	76 (27.3%)	49 (34.3%)	125
7 Days or More	202 (72.7%)	94 (65.7%)	296
Totals	278	143	421

χ^2 (*df*=1, *N* = 421) = 2.17, *p* = .141

Table 5. Answer Speed

Days to Answer	Thanked	Non-Thanked	Totals
Same Day Answer	17.7% (n=99)	30.2% (n=76)	175
Next Day Answer	21.9% (n=122)	18.7% (n=47)	169
Third Day	10.6% (n=59)	8.7 % (n=22)	81
Totals	280	145	425

χ^2 (*df*=2, *N* = 425) = 11.49, *p* = .003, Cramer's *V* = .16

This is an intriguing result as FAQ or standard answer responses are very common among busy digital reference services. These FAQ answers also are often sent out quickly by digital reference service administrators as part of the initial triage process of sorting through incoming questions. In the Thank You Study sample, 34 of 810 answers were FAQ standard answers, while in general during 2002 at IPL, more than 600 questions, or approximately 11 percent of the 5,400 questions answered had received FAQ responses.

Users also appeared to have a greater tendency to thank librarians who used more words in their answers. More than half of the thanked librarians had exceeded two hundred words in their answers, as compared to only about one-third of the nonthanked librarians.

The difference in thanking behavior was found to be statistically significant, but with a weak association to the number of words used by the librarian. Other factors (for example, short FAQ answers with lower numbers of librarian words and other issues in the content of librarian responses) may play a role in these results.

As a side note, it was observed that most of the users expressed their questions in two hundred words or less, with only forty-one thanking users and only three non-thanking users exceeding two hundred words. The smallest number of words observed in a user's question was eight words in a question submitted by plain e-mail rather than the Web form, and the smallest number of words used by a librarian was thirty-four words in a nonthanked original answer.

Users generally responded quickly with their thank you messages upon receiving the librarian's answer. Nearly half of the thanking users responded with their thanks on the same day that the answer was sent, and another 30 percent responded the following day. Within three days from the time that the librarian's answer was sent out, 85 percent of the users had sent back their thank you messages, a result that raises questions as to whether users have thoroughly evaluated answers before sending back the thank you response.

Librarians thanking users in their answers (e.g., "thank you for your question") did not appear to have an impact on the thanking rate. Approximately 90 percent of both the thanked and nonthanked librarians were found to have used some variant of thanks or thank you in their answers to the users. This high number of librarians thanking users in their answers is consistent with IPLs proposed, and generally followed policy and guidelines for providing a consistent and friendly style of answers, including a recommended answer structure that incorporates thanks to the user.

RESULTS: PHASE 2

In the second phase of the study, the 558 user thank you messages were analyzed for specific comments about the digital reference interaction. Through an extensive review of the literature in reference assessment and reference evaluation, the researchers developed a list of possible digital reference quality factors and prepared and tested a codebook for qualitative coding of users' textual comments. The quality factors developed from the literature review and intercoder reliability testing were: clarity, completeness, expertise, helpfulness, instruction, precision, and speed.

Qualitative research mandates that researchers remain open to additional categories that may emerge from the data during coding and analysis. In this process, researchers added two major additional categories for users' actions and outcomes and also for users' socioemotional comments on the digital reference interaction. In the area of user actions and outcomes, codes were added for: user-reported outcomes, user actions, willingness to return to the service, and willingness to recommend the service to others. In the area of socioemotional content, codes were added for user comments regarding: emotion and affect, concerns about bothering the librarian, comments about the librarian as a person, and comments about maintaining contact with the librarian.

The first question to be answered in this research was whether user thank you messages contained any specific or evaluative user comments at all regarding the digital reference interaction. In analyzing the content of the messages, 157 of the 558 messages were found to contain no further information beyond basic expressions of "thanks" or "thank you." In some of these messages, a flatter affect was observed (lower-case letters, no punctuation, no capitalization) while others appeared more emphatic through the use of upper case, multiple exclamation marks, magnifiers such as "thanks a hundredfold" or interjections such as "WOW!" However, since no other specific user comments on the digital reference interaction appeared in the messages, the researchers did not further explore these nondetailed messages.

For the remaining 71.9 percent of the thank you messages that included more detailed user feedback regarding their experiences, the researchers observed 367 user comments on answer-quality factors, 209 comments about user actions and outcomes, and 149 user comments on social or emotional aspects of the digital reference interaction.

Helpfulness or usefulness of the answer was the quality factor most often mentioned by users, with 148 users referring to this aspect of the answer in their thank you messages. Specific ways in which users described the helpfulness of answers included "getting started," "direction," and "strategies," as well as "confirmation" and "verification."

Expertise of the librarian was commended by sixty-nine users, who spoke of the librarian as "exemplary" and "professional," and described the services received as "great research," "invaluable help," and "excellent service." Praise for the librarian's skill was also occasionally coupled with defensive or apologetic formulations such as "apologies for my lack of Web browsing skill," "I didn't look hard enough," "I didn't

dig deep enough," and "I didn't allow enough time."

Speed of the answer was the third most frequently mentioned answer-quality factor, with fifty-six users commenting on the quickness of the answer. Users described the answer as "prompt," "timely," and noted that it allowed them to move forward "without delay."

Precision of the answer in meeting information needs was described by forty-four users who noted the answer was "right on target," "just what I needed," or "exactly what I was looking for."

Completeness of the answer was noted by thirty-two users who described the digital reference answers they had received with terms such as "thorough," "exhaustive," "detailed," "in-depth," and "very complete."

The two answer-quality factors least mentioned by digital reference users were "instruction," involving showing techniques and methods by which information was found, and "clarity," referring to clear and understandable communication. Instruction was mentioned by seventeen users who spoke of learning "how to find sources," "how to do a better search," "search terms," and the ability to "use this approach in future." Only one user mentioned Clarity as a factor in describing an answer as "accessible."

In addition to commenting on quality factors in answers, users also provided feedback in their thank you messages regarding actions and outcomes. These included: user-reported outcomes, user actions, willingness to return to the service, and willingness to recommend the service to others.

Users discussed their actions or intended actions in response to answers in 104 of the 558 thank you messages. Actions described by users included plans to "follow up" and "take it forward," "go to the library" and "get in touch" with referral sources.

Outcomes resulting from information received in the answers were described by sixty-five users. A wide range of outcomes were reported, including academic achievement, dispute resolution, completion of projects, and improved skills. Users completed speeches, projects, and reports; prepared for teaching; described how they "found the book," "found the source," "got an A+"; and reported success in "settling a family argument" and even in "baking a better pie."

The user satisfaction measure of willingness to return has been previously tested in reference evaluation studies.[12] Willingness to recommend the service to others similarly has been considered suggestive of user satisfaction. Users expressed willingness to return to the

Table 6. FAQ Answers and Other Subject Code Answer Types

Answer Types	Thanked	Non-Thanked	Totals
Business	32 (64%)	18 (36%)	50
FAQ	9 (26.5%)	25 (73.5%)	34
Humanities	33 (84.6%)	6 (15.4%)	39
Biography	38 (65.9%)	9 (34.1%)	47
Totals	112	58	170

χ^2 (df=3, N = 170) = 34.35, p <.0005, Cramer's V = .45

Table 7. Librarian Use of Words

Librarian Word Counts	Thanked	Non-Thanked	Totals
200 Words or Less	244 (43.7%)	162 (64.3%)	406
201 Words or More	314 (56.3%)	90 (35.7%)	404
Totals	558	252	810

χ^2 (df=1, N = 810) = 29.35, p <.0005, Cramer's V = .19

Table 8. Thank You Response Speed

Thanking Speed	Same Day	Next Day	Third Day	3+ Days
Thanked (n=558)	266 (47.7%)	166 (29.7%)	47 (8.4%)	79 (14.2%)

Table 9. User-Identified Answer-Quality Factors in Thank You Messages

Helpfulness	Helpfulness or usefulness	148 (26.5%)
Expertise	Librarian's expertise & skill	69 (12.4%)
Speed	Quickness & timeliness	56 (10%)
Precision	Exactness & appropriateness	44 (7.9%)
Completeness	Amount of information	32 (5.7%)
Instruction	Teaching skills & techniques	17 (3%)
Clarity	Clarity of the answer	1 (.1%)

Table 10. User Actions and Outcomes in Thank You Messages

Action	Action responding to answer.	104 (18.6%)
Outcome	Outcome resulting from answer	65 (11.6%)
Return	Will return to the service	31 (5.6%)
Recommend	Will recommend the service	9 (1.6%)

Table 11. User Socio-Emotional Comments in Thank You Messages

Person	Librarian as a person	80 (14.3%)
Affect	Feelings about the interaction	47 (8.4%)
Let Know	Mentions continued contact	16 (2.8%)
Bother	Mentions bothering the librarian	6 (1.1%)

service in thirty-one of the thank you messages, while another nine users reported willingness to recommend the service to others. Users described having bookmarked the site or added the site to their Favorites, and commented on how the service had once again "come through" for them.

Users also commented in their thank you messages on the interpersonal interaction with the librarian and discussed their feelings about the interaction process. User feedback on the socio-emotional aspects of the digital reference interaction included comments about the librarian as a person in the interaction, affective comments about emotions and feelings, comments about maintaining contact with the librarian, and concerns about bothering the librarian.

E-mail has been described as a communications medium with reduced social presence cues in which a user's awareness of another person in the interaction may be diminished, leading to more impersonal behavior.[13] In this study, eighty users were observed to comment on the librarian in the digital reference interaction, describing the librarian as "kind and thoughtful," "wonderful," "considerate," "an angel," and "a saint."

Users also expressed in the thank you messages their emotional reactions to the interaction and the answer received, with forty-seven users describing feelings such as being "very happy," "thrilled," "delighted," and "pleased" and finding the digital reference process and results to be "fascinating" or "interesting."

Some users also mentioned continued communication with the librarian in their thank you messages, with sixteen users expressing an interest in "staying in touch" or "letting you know" the final results of the information-seeking process. Also, six users expressed their concerns about bothering the librarian—a response that librarians often encounter in face-to-face reference services. These online users employed words such as "trouble," "hassle," "bother," and "nuisance" in describing themselves and their digital reference questions.

DISCUSSION

In this study, digital reference transcripts were analyzed to explore user perspectives regarding online interactions with librarians, and to better understand the phenomenon of user thank you messages in e-mail reference services. Users were observed to incorporate a variety of evaluative feedback in their thank you messages, including comments on outcomes, actions, answer-quality factors, and socio-emotional aspects of the interaction with the librarian. Transcripts for thanked and nonthanked e-mail interactions were also analyzed and compared.

Researchers noted an overall thank rate of 15.9 percent for e-mail questions answered by the service in 2002. This suggests the possibility of comparing thank rates across institutions, services, and user groups. If user satisfaction with digital reference services correlates with user thank you messages, these thank rates could be used as an outcomes measure for evaluation of digital reference services. Additional research with digital reference users is needed to determine whether a user thank you is an effective indicator of user satisfaction as well as success in meeting information needs.

Nearly half of the thanking users in this study were observed to have sent their thank you response on the same day that the answer was received, and more than 80 percent had responded by the third subsequent day. This raises the question of whether users have taken sufficient time to evaluate the answer before sending their thank you responses. Future research is needed to more fully evaluate whether a thanking user's satisfaction with the librarian's answer might change with the passage of additional time: How does time affect user satisfaction with digital reference services? The "imposed query" represents an additional area in which a user's judgment could change as further feedback is received over time from the original questioner. In this study, sixty-four users (10 percent of the thanking and 6.7 percent of the non-thanking users) had volunteered the information that their question was asked on behalf of others, suggesting that the actual number of imposed queries among digital reference users could be higher.

Results of this study indicated that users most often cited helpfulness or usefulness as an important quality factor for digital reference answers, and that thanked librarians tended to use more words in answers. Standard answers or FAQ responses were also observed to receive fewer thank you responses from users. Additional research in exploring these dimensions of quality as users perceive them could provide valuable insights for digital reference service providers. Is a longer answer more likely to contain information that directly helps a user, or does the user perhaps perceive a longer answer as evidence of a librarian's hard work? Are pre-written FAQ standard answers truly not considered helpful by users, or do other factors affect users' responses to the answer?

Observations of users' socio-emotional content in this study also raise questions regarding users' perceptions and expectations of digital reference services. In a face-to-face reference desk setting where a librarian can be seen working on the computer or shuffling papers, it is not unusual for users to express concerns regarding bothering the librarian. However, in the online environment with no such visual cues present, users continued to express this concern as well as other defensive or apologetic formulations. Some users also referred to continued contact with their librarian, which is reminiscent of previous research by Southwick in which digital reference users described their preference for sending e-mail questions to a librarian whom they already knew.[14] Future research involving interviews with digital reference users could provide useful clarification in context to further illuminate how users perceive digital reference interactions.

CONCLUSION

This research, which was funded by the 2003 OCLC/ALISE Research Grant, observed the thank you rate at an online digital reference service and explored the information behaviors of digital reference users and the range of evaluative feedback they provided to librarians in their thank you messages. A codebook developed for analyzing thank you messages is available for download at the Thank You Study Web site.[15]

The results of this study raised questions about the use of FAQ standard answer responses, suggesting that further study of the efficacy of these responses in meeting users' needs would be of value. Higher thanking rates for librarians who used more words in their answers also raises questions as to whether users prefer longer answers, whether longer answers had a better chance of including the information that users needed, whether users perceived an extra effort from the librarians, or whether other factors such as short FAQ answers influenced results. The speed with which users sent back thanking responses also brings into question whether users had fully evaluated the answers before sending back their thank you message. Does a thank you indicate satisfaction from the user perspective, do users' indications of satisfaction correlate with success in meeting information needs, and is there a potentially important distinction to be made here between users' immediate versus long-term satisfaction with the answer received?

Additional areas of exploration for future research would include an examination of thank rates to ascertain whether these rates vary or are consistent among different types of services and institutions. A key need is to investigate thank you messages in conjunction with user interviews, in order to explore this phenomenon more fully from the user perspective and to further illuminate how users perceive and express their satisfaction with digital reference services. Bringing users' perspectives into the assessment of services will enrich our understanding of online information-seeking and improve our ability to meet digital reference users' needs in the future.

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