
Personal Service in an Impersonal World

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One aspect of library service—and especially reference service—that often gets overlooked is its personal nature. Reference service is designed to provide one-on-one support to members of the community that the library serves. Whether in person, online, or over the phone, the library deals with each request independently. Assistance is designed to meet the needs of each person at their time and place of need, providing information and resources at a level that they will understand. This type of service is rare in today's world.

The reference interview, which is the core of the reference process, works best when the user and the librarian can communicate directly one-on-one about the user's need. The librarian uses questioning techniques to identify and expand on what the user initially asks. Whether that user is a mother looking for books for her elementary school children, a businessperson seeking information on local parking regulations, a recent immigrant learning English, a college student needing APA citation formats, or the tenth high school student of the afternoon writing a paper on climate change, librarians treat each request separately and uniquely. What may start out sounding like a dozen other requests ends up going in a totally different direction due to the librarian's ability to figure out the user's unique interest and take on the topic. This is the skill that differentiates us as librarians from many other professionals.

Joan Durrance, retired professor at the School of Information at the University of Michigan, developed the Willingness to Return model for reference success.¹ In her studies, she found that people who get the wrong answer still will be willing to ask the librarian a future question if they felt that the librarian was personable and made an effort to help. Her studies clearly demonstrated that the librarian's attitude was more important than the answer to whatever question was being asked. They also indicate that it was personal service that users valued, not the subject content of their query.

Very few—and perhaps no—other institutions provide the same level of personal service that libraries offer. We provide access to information, technology, music, videos, newspapers, journals, and yes, books to everyone and anyone who comes through our doors or who visit our websites. We suggest search strategies and offer help in evaluating what those searches retrieve. We also provide physical spaces for our community, ranging from meeting rooms and exhibit spaces to tables and chairs, restrooms, and warmth (or cooling, depending on location and the time of year). Libraries are places where our users can work, play, read, recharge, or just hang out.

A REFERENCE FOR THAT

In addition, we do all of this at no direct cost to the user. Anyone in the community—and even people outside that community—can use our computers, read our books, watch our films, listen to our music, and get expert research assistance without being charged for the right to do so. Yes, there is a cost to libraries. Members of the community pay taxes or tuition to support the library. But anyone can come in and get help whenever it is needed without having to pay for the direct cost of that help. Reference service and libraries are open to all. Libraries mean the most to those who have the least.

And in the light of the recent election, when public discourse in the United States reached the lowest level in our lifetime, this is what gives me hope. Libraries will continue to be here, helping anyone and everyone who asks. We help Republicans and Democrats, anarchists and fascists. We help without judgement and without cost. Reference service is personal and that is how I hope it will remain. We will continue to work with our community members one person at a time. Service such as that not only helps the individual, it builds a better community at the same time. Libraries will continue to be places where everyone in the community will feel welcomed. And that is exactly what this nation needs right now.

"A REACTION," NICOLETTE WARISSE SOSULSKI

As Dave has stated, this personal and personalized service, customizable and able to turn on a dime, is central to what keeps people coming back to libraries. Community members and members of library staff get to know each other through direct experience and through mutual observation (yes, they are always watching us—especially the “regulars” on the public computers!).

We on the desks think of collection items or services that might be welcome or useful to a patron—I have several patrons for whom I have an open request to “just put something on hold for me if you think I will like it, because I probably will!” So, sometimes they get notifications that a CD or a book is waiting for them that they were not expecting—“it’s like Christmas!” One police officer has a standing request for “whatever you think is good” on leadership, social justice, or jazz; a bar manager and social events planner looks for novels in the art world, true crime, and historical and forensic mysteries; a soccer mom loves surprises of “excellent rubbish”; or a deceptively demure grandma who “needs heat!”

Sometimes the reference interaction gets customized a different way—a way that no machine or even a real librarian distance transaction can match. The person looking for the solution to a tricky Microsoft Word formatting issue gets that—and résumé assistance for the résumé she was formatting. The person in an unsuccessful search for a particular German cookbook gets a recipe for rotkohl that is characteristic of the region of Germany that his grandmother came

from, along with a discussion of what the addition of currant jelly adds to the final product (for those of you out there who have not made rotkohl, I am here to tell you that the currant jelly is *sehr wichtig!*).

If you are working with a patron with health or financial issues—and I order for both of those collections—they may have been eyeing the desk for hours or days to waiting for the exact right time to ask their question. They wait for the right librarian, whom they have seen behave in a nonjudgmental, compassionate manner, and who seems knowledgeable on the subject, judging from interactions with other patrons; when the patron does not have a line or when there is a backup at the desk so the patron can take time with the following question:

- How can I learn more about how to support my son as he goes through the transgender process to become my daughter? Or
- My son, who lives out of state, is having a really rough time with anxiety issues and called me for help to find a therapist who will do the therapy sessions while hiking (fortunately this was in Colorado, where this is not completely uncommon). I have been hoping that I would see you on the desk!

Sometimes the patron is in crisis, and the situation is one in which information finding may take second place to taking care of the patron first.

- I need to find the text of this poem from my grandson’s friend’s Facebook page so that I can blow it up in large enough print to read at my grandson’s funeral tomorrow or I need a computer to transcribe it from my phone. I am scared that if I try to read it from my phone when I am upset I will mess it up.
- My husband’s Alzheimer’s is getting worse and I do not think I can take it anymore.
- I just got served with divorce papers. I have not worked for twenty-five years—he did not want me to work—and now he is leaving. I can’t afford a lawyer, so I am going to have to handle this myself. I am scared.
- I can’t get through on the fax to the state aid office and unless I do, I cannot get the aid money to feed my kids. I could only listen to this patron, give her advice about food pantries, and find crayons, bookmarks, and coloring pages for her two toddlers—the fax for this office does not meet capacity, so people may have to wait hours for their faxes to go through. My own attempts over two hours to find an alternative fax number resulted in my being repeatedly transferred into queues which I had already informed the person to whom I was speaking went directly to a full voicemail.
- Do you all have a grief and loss section?

These examples, so far, have been ones that might be immediately identifiable as public library interactions, but

student patrons, be they from grade school or master's programs, online programs or brick-and-mortar institutions, often need their own kind of relationship building before getting to the nuts and bolts of the reference transaction, as insecurity, worry, and outright panic are not uncommon.

- I have been looking for six days on Google and on the library database [the whole distinction between library web page, database, search engine, and catalog, though self-evident to us, is far from so to many students] and my paper is due tomorrow and I need three more sources and I am going to fail.
- I just started school again so that I can move from an LPN to a BSN, but the last time I was in school there were catalog cards. I am a good nurse but I am afraid will never get there because I just do not know how to find things on the computer and I need all these articles and books on globalism and I don't know how to find this kind of stuff.
- This is my very first online class and I do not know how to get the kinds of articles my professor is saying are

there. I might not be ready to go back to school.

- Help! I need more stuff on ligers. I picked ligers because they are cool but I can't find anything for my PowerPoint. My teacher says I have to learn to be responsible about picking topics. Can you please find me something????

This relationship building as part of the personal reference interaction is central to our vocation and avocation as service professionals and librarians. Remember that in these times of uncertainty, the relationship we are forming with the members of our communities—that personal relationship—may make us key stalwart allies to many in our patron base who are insecure and anxious about all areas of their lives, information-related and otherwise. It's not just the info—it's you!

Reference

1. J. C. Durrance, "Factors That Influence Reference Success: What Makes Questioners Willing to Return?," *Reference Librarian* 23, no. 49/50 (1995): 243–65.