
Reference Service

Every Time It's Personal

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One of the most important—and most enduring— aspects of reference service is its personal nature. Reference service is an opportunity for a library patron to get expert help with information, usually without an appointment, and never with a service fee. That type of service is rare in today's world.

When a reference librarian helps someone, we focus directly on the needs of that one patron. It's usually one librarian working with one patron—one person at a time. We help each person with their specific question and make our service as personalized to that patron's needs as possible. We adapt our responses to the individual needs of each patron, even when the question has been asked before. Whether it is the first time anyone has ever asked the question or the umpteenth student working on the same assignment, we mold our responses to meet the needs of every individual person. This is how reference librarians operate—and what makes our service unique.

When we help people in that personal way, there are consequences. To the librarian, it may just be another in a string of questions—something to mark down on the statistics form before helping the next person in line. But to the patron, it is much more than that. To the patron, it is an experience of being helped and, even more importantly, an experience that someone cares about their need. This is what our patrons will remember—and what will bring them back again.

When Joan Durrance conducted her famous Willingness to Return studies back in the 1990s,¹ she found that patrons will go back to a librarian who tried to help them and who left them feeling positive about the experience. It did not matter if the librarian actually answered their question—it was the experience that mattered most. This is the primary consequence of making reference personal. This may also be why some libraries are now hiring “patron experience librarians” (or some variation on that name). This is another sign that we are starting to focus on the experience as opposed to the answer to the question.

And this is nothing new. When Samuel Green first wrote about librarians helping patrons,² he emphasized that it was the interaction between the librarian and the reader that was essential to serving patrons. Since this was two decades before Melvil Dewey invented the terms “reference service” and “reference librarian,” Green spoke of the desirableness of personal relations between librarians and readers. In my mind, that interaction is still desirable today and is what makes reference service still valuable to today's patrons. It is the personal relation that matters, not the question.

As reference librarians, it is natural for us to focus on the content of the question. Did we answer it? Was the answer correct? Did it help the patron? We want all those factors to be positive, but sometimes it does not matter. By making the transaction a positive experience, we make the patron feel that we care about them and their needs. For many patrons, they care more that we care than getting an answer to whatever question they asked.

Our caring also has consequences. Over time we build a community of people who will view the library in a very positive light. Those people will be adamant library supporters who will promote the library to their friends—and support it at decision-making time.

This was something that Samuel Green inherently understood. He realized that one of the biggest ways to promote the library in the community was to have the librarian interact directly with the people who use it. I see this as true today as it was in the 1870s. Today, we have more advanced means for interactions to occur. Transactions sometimes still happen face to face, but they can also be on the phone, over

email, in chat, through social media, or through any other form of communication technology available now or in the future. No matter what communication medium is used, the librarian should make the service personal for the patron. That is the real key to reference success.

So make each transaction personal. Do what it takes to engage the patron and make them feel as if we really care about their need. It is not difficult to do that. Listen to the patron and respond in ways that make the user feel listened to. Because when we care about our patrons, they will care about the library. And when patrons care about the library, the library will have a solid future.

References

1. Joan C. Durrance, "Factors That Influence Reference Success: What Makes Questioners Willing to Return?," *Reference Librarian* 23, no. 49/50 (November 1995): 243–65.
2. Samuel S. Green, "Personal Relations Between Librarians and Readers," *Library Journal* 1 (October 1876): 74–81.