Is it time to throw out the reference desk?

In a rapidly changing climate infused with an explosion of both information and new technologies, it is time for libraries to consider new models for providing reference services. Though patrons’ needs for information still exist, the methods of seeking this information and venues for providing reference support have changed. Sonntag and Palsson (2007) explain, “…the librarian’s underlying goal has not changed, but the arenas in which s/he must apply the goal have overwhelmingly expanded and continue to do so. Sitting behind a desk may no longer be the best way to provide quality service…” (p. 4).

With the growth of the Internet and remote access to online databases and electronic journals, there has been a decrease in the physical use of the library and the reference desk. Data collected by the Association of Research Libraries (2009) indicate that from 1991 to 2008 there has been a 47 percent decline in reference transactions over this 17 year period. Further, in a recent survey of 191 academic librarians working in mid-sized university libraries, Banks and Pracht (2008) noted that 44 percent of the survey respondents acknowledged a drop in the number of reference questions asked at their institutions (p. 54). Despite this dramatic decrease, 60 percent of the respondents in the Banks and Pracht (2008) study indicated the number of reference desk staff has remained the same in the last three years (p. 54). In reviewing the data, it appears that the time is ripe for implementing new models for providing reference services. Not only may these new models better address the needs of today’s patrons, but will make better use of reference librarians’ time and expertise as well.

While the number of reference desk transactions has been on the decline, this is not to say that the need for professionally trained librarians has correlatively decreased. Instead, the duties of today’s librarians must be modified to reflect the needs of their patrons. Many true reference
interactions are quite involved and require more time than they may have in the past. Fritch and Mandernack (2001) explain, “Often questions require more time to answer because users must be trained on how to search electronic resources such as online databases. These in-depth answers have been referred to as “mini-instruction sessions”…” (p. 294-295). Further, in their survey study of academic librarians, Banks and Pracht (2008) found that the main theme about the changes in librarians’ duties centered on,

…spending more time on instruction, spending less time sitting at the reference desk to answer questions, and doing what was needed to keep up with the explosion of web pages, nontraditional types of reference like virtual reference and e-mail reference, computer software programs, and online databases (p. 58).

As librarians’ expertise is pulled in many changing directions, more time must be made available to allow these individuals to attend to their newly evolving roles. In response to this, many libraries are moving to new reference models which provide assistance and information “just in time” rather than sitting at a reference desk “just in case” (Davidson and Mikelson, 2009, p. 351).

As many academic libraries make the transition to “just in time” reference, the trend has been to staff the reference desks, to a large degree, with paraprofessionals or student staff. Reference librarians, then, provide services to patrons on an “on-call” or appointment basis, thereby freeing up the bulk of their time for instruction or larger scale library-related projects. Temple University justified a transition to staff their reference desk with non-professionals after reviewing reference desk data for a month. While the reference desk fielded just over 4,400 questions in a month, only 243 involved extensive interaction and research, about 2,300 were simpler reference questions, and more than 1,800 were deemed directional (Carlson, 2007, p. 28). This transition is occurring across the country. Banks and Pracht (2008) found, 62 percent of the 191 academic librarians they surveyed noted the use of non-degreed personnel at the
reference desks in their institutions (p. 54). This staffing trend, however, does not come without its challenges. At the University of California Merced, Davidson and Mikelson (2009) noted,

Perhaps the most challenging part of training our student assistants has been teaching them to properly refer difficult questions. ...some student assistants fail to refer questions to librarians for fear of looking incompetent, because they know the librarians are busy, or because they do not realize early on that they are not equipped to answer the question (p. 352).

With a stable staff, increased training, mentoring, and experience, perhaps academic libraries will find success in staffing their reference desks with non-degreed personnel.

Many libraries are experimenting with more radical models for providing reference services. Throughout the literature, it has been noted that many academic libraries are eliminating the traditional reference desk altogether and are moving to single points of service (one-stop-shopping) for their patrons. In this model, paraprofessionals and student employees perform circulation operations, provide basic reference, and refer more complex questions to library staff. Another reference model has been developed at Simon and Fraser University whereby librarians have established a mobile reference service in which a librarian with a laptop offers reference services in two locations outside of the library (via wireless network) where students spend time (Wong and O’Shea, 2004, p. 92). At the Westerville Public Library in Ohio, librarians are taking the transaction to the patron, rather than expecting the patron to navigate the library’s systems and structures. They maintain an “Ask Here” station, but equip reference staff with wireless headsets and tablet PCs that provide access to the OPAC and databases (Pierce, 2006, p. 39). Libraries across the country, it seems, are recognizing the need for new models of reference service, though there is a great deal of disparity about how to best address this need.

Despite an increasing number of models for providing reference services found in the literature, the question remains as to whether libraries should keep or eliminate the traditional
reference desk. In support of keeping the reference desk, DeGroote, Hitchcock, and McGowan (2007), in a qualitative and quantitative study of data collected in an academic health sciences library, found, “Although digital reference lends itself to providing assistance to the remote user, the physical library is still the place where most questions are asked” (p. 26). These researchers further state, “… in the midst of continued changes in users’ needs, expectations, and habits, it (the physical reference desk) remains a central facet of public service in the health sciences library (p. 28). These findings are reinforced by a study conducted by Granfield and Robertson (2008) of 348 library users (30 percent virtual users and 70 percent reference desk users) at two universities in Toronto. They found that the reference desk continues to be the most popular method of getting help in the library, though the findings confirm that virtual reference satisfies a niche for some users (p. 51). Based upon the findings of these two studies, maintaining the physical reference desk within libraries remains a central need.

In conclusion, in today’s rapidly changing information environment, library professionals are recognizing an ever increasing need for developing new models for providing reference services. Staffing reference desks full time with professional librarians may no longer be the best use of library resources, as the majority of questions answered at the reference desk are those which may be readily answered by well-trained paraprofessionals or student assistants. Staffing the reference desk with non-degreed personnel allows professionally trained librarians to provide “just in time” reference rather than sitting at the reference desk “just in case.” While many libraries across the country are experimenting with eliminating the reference desk, literature suggests that the physical reference desk still maintains a highly valued purpose within the library. Therefore, it may not yet be time to “throw out the reference desk.”
References


