Reference Services and Readers’ Advisory

Many library patrons use the traditional services of reference and readers' advisory. Library Directors should be aware of new trends.

Reference Services

*The Desk and Beyond: Next Generation Reference Services*, ed. by Sarah K. Steiner and M. Leslie Madden. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2008. Available through Access Pennsylvania Database. Although this was intended for the academic library, much information is useful for public libraries such as solution based reference, wikis and instant messaging.

Murphy, Sarah Anne. *The Librarian as Information Consultant: Transforming Reference for the Information Age*. Chicago, American Library Association, 20

The table of contents and some text from the book are available on the publisher's website. Available through Access Pennsylvania Database. "Today's reference librarian must work in a whole new way—not only service-focused and businesslike, but even entrepreneurial."

Forget tomorrow, how should reference services be structured today? Joan Frye Williams and George Needham presented “Resurrecting Reference,” an Infopeople webinar on July 31, 2008. There's a podcast, accompanying slides and handouts. This material has been created for the Infopeople Project supported by the U.S. Institute of Museum and Library Services under the provisions of the Library Services and Technology Act, administered in California by the State Librarian.


*Redesigning Today’s Public Services: Focus on Reference* [videodisc, 90 min.] Glen Ellyn, IL: College of DuPage, 2010. Available through Access Pennsylvania Database. Originally broadcast as a teleconference, November 12, 2010. Marie L. Radford, Ph.D., Associate Professor, School of Communication & Information, Rutgers University, discusses redesigning library public services with a focus on reference and its interaction with other library public services.

“Ore on the Web,” is a virtual reference training program developed by the Ohio Library Council with partial funding from the State Library of Ohio with support from LSTA.


Sara Davidson’s slides from an ALA Annual 2008 presentation discuss reference services at the library at the new University of California campus at Merced. She points how out the new technologies impact reference work, and this is transferrable to public libraries. For example: “We value persistent, asynchronous, multi-user forms of communication. In simpler terms, we are asking how we can answer those repeated questions in more efficient ways than at a reference desk with librarian….. We value our librarians as managers who work on broad solutions. In order to have time, to dedicate to these solutions, we decided that staffing a traditional reference desk multiple hours a day was probably not the best use of our time. We want to provide information just in time without sitting at a reference desk just in case.”


“Best Practices in Virtual Reference,” streaming video segments from the ALA MidWinter 2009 OCLC Symposium, consists of “two innovative approaches to improving reference service for our users: building a better search engine using the knowledge of reference librarians, and building a multilingual, multinational reference service.” The presentations are by David Lankes, director of the Information Institute of Syracuse, and Paul Ulrich, Berlin Central and Regional Library.

The Reference and Users Services Association of the American Library Association has issued “Guidelines for Implementing and Maintaining Virtual Reference Services.” This document covers planning, budgeting as well as implementation.

North Texas Library Partners posted a copy of an article by Tony New, Information Resources Librarian, Bedford Public Library, “Revolution at the Reference Desk.” He has embedded a chart comparing the past to current practice and includes a comprehensive bibliography.
In order to quickly recall valuable web sites library staff often use delicious social bookmarking service to keep their favorite sites together for sharing purposes. Other libraries such as Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh post ready reference links.


“Text a Librarian” service has become popular with public libraries. For examples of this service, enter “text a librarian” in Google. Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, James V. Brown Library and the Free Library of Philadelphia are among the Pennsylvania Libraries providing this service.

Although lots of books have been written on traditional reference services, many seem dated. If you want to check out some classic titles, go to the The ALA Store and select Reference and Users Services from the Public Library section. One title of interest deals with the evaluation of reference services. Whitlatch, Jo Bell. Evaluating Reference Services: A Practical Guide. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2000. Available through Access Pennsylvania Database.

WebJunction Courses

WebJunction Pennsylvania provides a large selection of free online workshops and training courses available to library employees, library board members, and trustees in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. This service is supported by a grant from the Office of Commonwealth Libraries. Log on to your account for access to courses such as:

- Basic Web-based Reference (LibraryU)
- Social Networking for Users
- Millennium to Evergreen
- Access PA Database Online Beginner Training Course
- Power Library: AP Images
- Understanding and Promoting Ask Here PA

Readers’ Advisory

Saricks, Joyce G. Readers’Advisory Service in the Public Library. 3rd. ed. Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2005. Available through Access Pennsylvania Database. This is the standard text on readers’ advisory work. An overview and table of contents are available on the publisher’s website.

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The New Jersey Regional Library Cooperatives presented a workshop, “Reader's Advisory: The Complete Spectrum, a Focus on Fiction Event,” with Mary K. Chelton and Duncan Smith. Several handouts are available including book talking, training, a bibliography and a “to do and not to do list.”

The Ohio Library’s Council online training, “Ore on the Web,” has a section on readers’ advisory work. The program was developed by the Ohio Library Council with partial funding from the State Library of Ohio with support from LSTA.

The Nova Scotia Provincial Library’s handouts from their “Adult Readers Advisory Training” stresses “appeal.” Their extensive training manual is also available. Indirect readers’ advisory is also discussed.

Ann C. Theis, Collection Management Administrator, Chesterfield County Public Library, VA is the website contact for the comprehensive site, “readersadvisory.org.”


Although Nancy Pearl is best known for her love of reading and book recommendations and perhaps her doll, her website is a must look and see.


Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (COSLA) issued a report, COSLA: eBook Feasibility Study for Public Libraries, 2010 which has the rallying cry: "We want to create our destiny." Library Journal's article on this seminal report is comprehensive:

The American Library Association released a report that examines the critical issues underlying equitable access to digital content, “E-content: The Digital Dialogue.” The report, published as a supplement to American Libraries magazine, explores various licensing models and the state of librarian-publisher relations.

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- Access PA Database Online Beginner Training Course
- Weeding the Library Collection (LibraryU)