

Chapter 20

Changes in Customer Behavior: A Case Study in Reference Service at the Santa Monica Public Library

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ABSTRACT

Today's library customers exhibit a decreasing tendency to regard the public library as the primary local repository of research information. The rise of the Internet is at the root of this and many other changes that have taken place in public libraries during the past twenty years. Customer preferences have shifted away from print tools in favor of the simplest available online tools. A pervasive user expectation is that information access should be free, easy, and immediate. Information literacy issues continue to occupy a growing portion of librarians' time. As customer needs and expectations evolve, so must the library's services and products.

INTRODUCTION

The goal of this case study is to explore how reference services over the past two decades have evolved at the Santa Monica Public Library. It begins with an overview of the library, the reference department, and its services. It describes changes in expectations and experiences of both

staff and customers. Changes prompted by the popularization of the Internet and World Wide Web receive special consideration. Other areas covered include computer literacy classes, the reference interview, print vs. online reference tools, collection development, and the creation of digitized local history resources. Primary objectives are to provide context by outlining evolving practices in one reference department, to presage future trends, and evaluate priorities.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-61350-308-9.ch020

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

As the adult collection grew in size and complexity, residents needed more assistance in using the library, and reference service became an important part of the overall service. At first librarians helped users choose and find books in the local collection. Then they provided answers from library reference books to those in need of information. Later they were able to locate materials anywhere... and produce them via interlibrary loan. Today they are able to research complex questions through a sophisticated network of information and referral sources, both inside and outside the library... and still provide the basic service of helping users find the books they want. (Braby & Hunt, 1990, p. 50)

When these words were published just over 20 years ago, the Santa Monica Public Library (SMPL) Reference Department had an established reputation as a provider of top quality reference service, including dedicated telephone and email service points. Santa Monica is a city of 94,000 occupying 8.3 square miles in the western part of the Greater Los Angeles Metropolitan Area. The library system offers free public library services to all California residents. It consists of one main library and three branch libraries, currently housing approximately 430,000 items. The reference department is located in the Main Library.

SMPL has been fortunate in the level of sustained support it has received from the city and in the sense of stewardship demonstrated by successive library directors. To date there have been only eight directors in the course of the library's 120-year history. This has resulted in a high degree of continuity that has fostered an atmosphere of stability, supportiveness, and innovation. The library consistently ranks near the top of the scales of measures published by the California State Library in its annual *California Library Statistics*. Examples of these measures are fulltime staff and materials budget per capita.

While never shy about innovating, the SMPL Reference Department has a long history of sustaining the tradition of providing free, high quality one-on-one reference service directly to library customers. The work group focuses intently on such actions as practicing active listening skills, asking open-ended questions to "get at the question behind the question," and conferring with colleagues about improving reference services. What happens as the interview progresses, however, has changed noticeably in recent years.

Prior to the popular ascendancy of the Internet in the mid-1990s, it was essential for reference librarians to master the content, structure, and navigation of myriad print reference sources. Following a reference interview during which relevant resources were determined, staff was expected to spend time orienting the customer in the use of the given work(s). Examples of large reference sets maintained at SMPL at that time were the *Facts On File News Digest*, the *National Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, and the *SIRS Social Issues Resources Series*. (The print editions of all three of these sets are no longer part of the collection. The library continues at this time to subscribe to an online version of *Facts On File*.) When the situation warranted, the librarian would undertake a potentially costly DIALOG online search or refer the question to a second-level reference center managed by the California State Library.

Reference staff also created and maintained offline ready reference files of hard-to-find information. One popular example was a file of the current and historical value of the Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers and for the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Santa Ana Metropolitan Statistical Area. This kind of information was cumbersome to access and maintain. It was typically beyond the reach of all but the most determined individuals. The reference staff received dozens of requests for CPI quotes alone each year. This is but one example from an extensive set of so-called "vertical files" that occupied at least five

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