

# THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW: COMMUNICATION AND THE PATRON

---

DALE J. PARUS  
WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

*The reference librarian has perhaps the toughest job in librarianship - staffing the information desk. He or she must provide information every day to a variety of patrons on countless subjects. In addition, there is no generic customer; every one differs in personal background, education and age. Some days (or hours or minutes), the reference professional may be asked questions that range from the trivial ("where is the restroom key?") to those that may be challenging ("what were the Seven Wonders of the world?"). The range of questions and the understaffing of many reference areas are enough to cause service problems at the information desk (Plotnick, 1985). Another obstacle can be the miscommunication between the client and the librarian, which is often caused by the patron's inability to verbalize his or her information need. This is where a tool, called the reference interview, enters the discipline of library science. The reference interview attempts to bridge the communication gap between the patron and the librarian. There are, however, differing opinions in the library community on the relative worth of the reference interview and how the technique should be executed. Therefore, this paper will show the contemporary views that have been written in the library science literature about the reference interview and its effects on client/librarian relations.*

There are a variety of reference services which require reference interviews, such as selective dissemination of information (SDI) and reader's advisory, and have specific goals and serve their purposes in the field of library science. However, they fall outside of the scope of this paper, which will focus on the situations that occur most frequently in the public library setting: interviews involving ready reference questions or research projects. Edmonds and Sutton (1991) define these types of reference interviews to be conversations between the patron and librarian to clarify the information need of the client. The librarian then locates and communicates the answer or otherwise fulfills the information need of the patron, sometimes providing bibliographic instruction. The interview may include a process called question negotiation, which is used to clear up any ambiguity in the subject, scope or purpose of the patron's inquiry.

Hauptman (1987) disagrees with the mainstream and argues that the importance of the reference interview is a myth. He supports his claim with the example of a personal study in which he states that only six cases out of 1,074 demanded an extensive interview (pp. 49- 50). Hauptman believes that the term "reference interview" should be used only when speaking of "classic" cases, not just when a simple answer is needed. Continuing, he says that he believes the reference interview may even obstruct the process:

There can be little doubt that patrons' queries must sometimes be clarified through concise questioning. This, however, is a far cry from a full-fledged, complex reference interview. As Fred Batt perceptively observes, "sometimes the reference interview impedes the flow of information." (p. 48)

Hauptman also scolds the library community for spending too much time on reference interview technique and demands that more time be spent on improving reference desk performance:

## PARUS/REFERENCE INTERVIEW

After begrudgingly conceding that brief questioning or even a full-fledged interview is, at times, useful, it is necessary to emphasize that too much misleading, abstract, and theoretical material on the subject is published. It is time for those involved in reference work to concentrate on substantive multi-disciplinary knowledge. Then they could provide responses, preferably correct ones, to carefully articulated questions. (p. 50)

Most of the literature, however, suggests that the reference interview is a crucial tool used to determine the information requirements of clients and is, therefore, an important element of the field of library science. This is not to say, however, that the authors are enamored with the results that reference librarians as a whole seem to be producing. Burton (1990) points out:

unobtrusive studies have shown that reference services in academic and public libraries provide correct responses to between 50 and 60 per cent of the questions put to them by users. So frequently has this result been found that it has been enshrined in the literature as the "55 per cent rule." (p. 203)

Several other studies (Hernon & McClure, 1987; State of Maryland, 1983; Childers & Crowley, 1971) concur with these results.

Unobtrusive testing began with the work of Webb and others in the 1960s (Hernon & McClure, 1987). The tests attempt to replicate the service that any user would receive when asking for service at an information desk. The researcher selects a controlled list of questions and an agent records the answers that are given by the staff member at the desk. All responses are counted, regardless if they were given by a librarian or a clerk. Hernon and McClure conclude that unobtrusive tests have consistently had "correct fill rates" of around 55% (pp. 20-21).

Some authorities, however, dispute the low marks given librarians through unobtrusive testing. Among them is Plotnick (1985), who argues that the tests produce a distorted image of reference service. Another dissenter is Field (1994), who opines that reference questions are successfully answered at a much higher rate, around 80%. Why the disparity? Field asserts that the person given the research question cannot go beyond the parameters of the survey. Furthermore, the testing agent has no vested interest in the answer. He or she cannot supply important ancillary information; therefore, the question may be answerable.

An illustration of the above would be if an agent were given a test question to find a cake recipe containing sauerkraut. The agent could not tell the librarian that it was a great-grandmother's recipe from the old country in Germany; conversely, a person with a vested interest in the question could. This specific information could direct the librarian to narrow his or her search strategy to 19th century German cookbooks, where an answer may be found.

Field (1994) also maintains that people in the real world want information packaged in a certain format, in a specified period of time, and in a certain amount. She claims that people will decline to search for an answer if it will consume more time than they are willing to devote to it, or if it is only available in a format (print, CD-ROM, online, microfiche) with which they are uncomfortable. Also, some patrons are satisfied with an answer that is in the ballpark and may decide not to sift through additional material for an answer that is more exact.

There are many reasons why the client may not receive the answer for which he or she was searching, but the most prevalent cause of unsuccessful reference encounters is miscommunication between the patron and the reference librarian. During a reference desk observation at a local public library, I witnessed what may be considered to be a severe communication problem between a patron and a librarian.

It is important to note that the main participants of the drama spoke English as a second language, each with the syntax of their native tongue. The patron, "Phil" (all names have been changed), was assumed to be a Filipino and the librarian, "Chelsea," was of Chinese ancestry. An additional point to note is that Chelsea is an occasional fill-in at Troy; her main employer is the Detroit Public Library.

Phil had been looking for a specific title, but had been unable to find it in the computer. He finally came to the reference desk for help. Chelsea was reading a magazine as Phil approached her. It was apparent

from the start that the language difficulty and a clash of personalities would make this an explosive confrontation.

Chelsea attempted to perform a title search, but as she could not obtain (either because of language problems or indifference) information to clarify the situation from Phil, the search was doomed to fail. Phil's frustration became apparent. He asked Chelsea loudly, "you are reading book (sic). Why don't you want to show me how to find what I want?"

It was evident that Phil wanted to learn how to use the library better. At this point, Chelsea did get up, guide Phil to a computer and tried to show him what she had done on the computer. I was not able to hear what happened during the instruction session, but in 10 minutes it was evident that there had been little success. Ultimately "Janice", a full-time librarian, deduced the correct title of the book that Phil wanted, located it at another branch, called over to have the book held at the circulation desk and gave Phil directions to the branch. Afterwards, Phil thanked her profusely - but not until he took another stab at Chelsea. "Why she not understand what I want? (sic)," he asked Janice. "She just wanted to read her book." Although the situation was very informative, it was dismaying to see a consummate case of miscommunication - and indifference - on my first day of reference observation.

The above scenario is a case where the major share of the blame for the miscommunication was with the librarian. But often, even a concerned and competent librarian will be at a loss when a client is unable to clearly express the information need that he or she has. This situation is more common, and is aggravated when the client has expectations that are impractical. Hicks (1992) explains this phenomenon. "We are in the business of service. The form that service takes must fulfill the expectations of the patron. It is important to remember that those expectations may be unreasonable or unrealistic." (p. 51)

In other cases, clients may not know the end result for which they are searching; they are still formulating their information need. Because of this uncertainty and embarrassment, customers often avoid asking the librarian for any help. Morris (1994) points out that

this is understandable: when an information need is ambiguous, it is also difficult to communicate. The thought of explaining something that you don't have a good grasp on - and explaining it to a near stranger (the information professional) - is an obvious deterrent. (p. 25)

Understandably, how does one express a need when one is unsure of what that need may be? What the client does know is that he has an information gap, and that he would like to have that gap filled as soon as possible. In her study of information processing, Kuhlthau (1991) explains the unconscious doubt of this patron: "The bibliographic paradigm is based on certainty and order, whereas user's problems are characterized by uncertainty and confusion" (p. 361). This tension may cloud the reference interview process, resulting in faulty searches and turning what may have been an easy, streamlined process into a prolonged struggle.

In regards to the low scores of reference librarians on unobtrusive studies, Blenkinsopp (1992) is concerned about the negative impact on the profession. "There is a growing body of literature bemoaning the performance of reference librarians, who (if we are to believe the unobtrusive studies) can manage to answer correctly only slightly more than fifty percent of reference questions" (p. 176). Whether the studies are valid or not, the numbers are widely circulated in the library community and are perceived as an embarrassment. In addition, similar quantitative probes have panned the performance of the reference librarian in his library for not knowing the surrounding community:

These same studies decry the inability of reference librarians to interview patrons properly. They further question why librarians are not referring patrons to other libraries or information sources when a lack of library materials or a lack of librarian's knowledge make an immediate answer impossible. (p. 181)

Blenkinsopp's immediate concern is that new reference librarians are undergoing their training in a "baptism of fire" environment and learning reference techniques basically on their own. But because the

## PARUS/REFERENCE INTERVIEW

test scores of all librarians have been so dismal, she supports the implementation of interactive behavior training programs for all reference librarians.

In a time when unobtrusive reference studies find that librarians answer slightly more than half of reference questions correctly and further studies verify that this accuracy rate can be improved with proper training, more care needs to be taken to provide a sound basis for reference service in the form of systematic, well-documented thorough reference training programs. (p. 176)

In response to the criticism, some institutions are moving in this direction. With the implementation of the System Training for Accurate Reference (STAR) some libraries are focusing on improving the interpersonal skills of their professionals. Isenstein (1992), the driving force behind STAR, writes that the program has been enormously successful in her library system, increasing the scores on tests of her reference staff from 60 to almost 80 percent (p. 35).

STAR relies on open communication with the patron - and repetition of the goal of the inquiry - to increase success rates. "The STAR program focuses on three model reference behaviors: asking probing, open-ended questions; verifying the reference questions through paraphrase/reiteration; and concluding with follow-up questioning of the patron to assure the reference question was answered" (Isenstein, 1992, p. 34).

Dewdney's (1988) research reveals that librarians who are trained in a technique called neutral questioning make the largest gains in providing improved reference service. Neutral questioning tries to avoid premature diagnoses of patron information requests. In her study, these librarians reached an effectiveness level (answers, instruction or referral) of more than 90 per cent.

In his presentation to professionals at Allerton Park (Ill.), Rettig (1991) called reference service the most ambiguous, and the most difficult to evaluate, service that a library provides. Information needs are relative; the exact same information may satisfy the information need of one patron, but maybe not the next.

What is a given is that patron expectations of reference personnel are high. The person at the reference station is expected to help patrons with the answers to their questions (isn't that why he/she is behind the desk, never mind that the person may only be a clerk temporarily filling in for a professional?). In addition, the patron is like any other person - he wants the information to be accurate, succinct and, above all else, right away. This is, of course, a trait of human nature.

In a perfect world, perhaps the reference librarian could pull off this amazing high wire feat. Sadly, in the real world, it is impossible. Sometimes the librarian is having a bad day; at other times, patron expectations may be unrealistic.

Rettig (1991) facetiously suggests that an imaginary invention of his is the answer to the perplexing problem of client/patron relations. He calls the invention the *lapsometer*, which can help the reference librarian achieve 100 percent accuracy in patron satisfaction:

[The lapsometer] should assure a perfect score in every instance, since the staff member will know immediately whether or not he or she is performing properly to meet a library user's needs. Given the proven capabilities of this instrument, there is really nothing left for anyone else to say about the why and how of evaluating public services and public services personnel in libraries. The lapsometer asks all the right questions, gives all the right answers, and provides all the needed solutions . . . Would that it were so easy! (p. 5)

The client/librarian link, however, is a human relationship, and communication must be established to complete the transaction. It is up to us, as librarians, to ensure that we do everything possible to keep the channels of communication open and flowing. As important as we are to clients, the clients are incremental in importance to us, for they are our lifeblood. If we do not care for their information need, they may turn somewhere else to satisfy it.

## PARUS/REFERENCE INTERVIEW

It is not enough for reference librarians to know the sources of information and how to use them. It is far more important that the discipline's professionals learn to listen and communicate more effectively with patrons. It is only then that we may better understand and provide for their information requirements.

## REFERENCES

- Blenkinsopp, H. (1992). How's the water?: The training of reference librarians. *The Reference Librarian*, 38, 175-182.
- Burton, P. (1990). Accuracy of information provision: The need for client-centered service. *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 22, 201-215.
- Dewdney, P. (1988). The effective reference interview. *Canadian Library Journal*, 45, 183-184.
- Edmonds, L., & Sutton, E. (1991). The reference interview. In R. Bopp & L. Smith (Eds.), *Reference and Information Sources* (pp. 42-58). Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.
- Field, J. (1994). [Lecture: Unobtrusive testing]. Unpublished lecture.
- Hauptman, R. (1987). The myth of the reference interview. In B. Katz & R. Fraley (Eds.), *Reference Services Today: From Interview to Burnout* (pp. 47-52). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.
- Heron, P., & McClure, C. (1987). *Unobtrusive testing and library reference services*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Hicks, J. (1992). Mediation in reference service to extend patron success. *The Reference Librarian*, 17, 49-64.
- Isenstein, L. (1992). Get your reference staff on the STAR track. *Library Journal*, 117, 34-37.
- Kuhlthau, C. (1991). Inside the search process: Information seeking from the user's perspective. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 42, 361-371.
- Morris, R. (1994). Toward a user-centered information service. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science*, 45, 20-30.
- Plotnick, A. (1985). Half-right reference. *American Libraries*, 16, 227.
- Rettig, J. (1991). Can we get there from here? In B. Allen (Ed.), *Evaluation of Public Services & Personnel* (pp. 3-23). Urbana-Champaign, IL: University of Illinois.