

Reference Renaissance

Current and
Future Trends



Edited by Marie L. Rodford and R. David Lankes

You Bought It, Now Sell It: Creating a Reference Renaissance in the Public Library by Marketing Collections and Services

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Overview

This chapter details and examines the initiatives of two New Mexico public libraries in marketing their reference collections and services to increase their relevancy in the Internet era. Los Alamos County Library System integrated heretofore separate print and electronic reference collections into keyword areas without altogether abandoning the Dewey Decimal System. Staff created many engaging displays of reference materials. Farmington Public Library packaged their reference delivery methods into one convenient unit called Just Ask, incorporating in-person, telephone, e-mail, and instant messaging avenues. Marketing to library staff as well as to patrons was very important to both initiatives. Though it is early for definitive answers, in-house usage of reference books and patron satisfaction with recommended Web sites have clearly increased the relevance of the reference collection in Los Alamos. Similarly, patron usage of the Just Ask Web site and the instant messaging service have increased the relevance of reference services at Farmington. Continuing efforts to improve usage are ongoing in both libraries.

Introduction

Since the start of the third millennium, reference librarians have been warned of their irrelevance. As Steve Coffman stated, "There can be no doubt that reference librarians, as we know them—those of us who sit behind desks for five or six hours a day... waiting for people to walk up and ask us questions—those reference librarians are toast" (Anhang & Coffman, 2002, p. 51). However, there is also no doubt that reference collections in both print and electronic formats and reference services in terms of enhanced technologies are today providing us with

an unprecedented wealth of resources with which to satisfy our patrons' informational and recreational needs, if only our patrons would realize it. As John Barnes of Gale/Cengage has stated, "Our greatest challenge is reaching users to raise their awareness of the credible, accurate reference resources available..." (Polanka, 2008, p. 130). This chapter showcases the initiatives of two New Mexico public libraries in reaching out to patrons and meeting them on their own terms by merchandising reference collections and services.

Marketing Collections

Los Alamos County Library System is located in Los Alamos, New Mexico, a town of almost 19,000 residents. The library system, which consists of a central library and one branch, is a crown jewel of the town and is well supported by the community. Los Alamos is a company town, home to Los Alamos National Laboratory, many of whose workers commute to Los Alamos and use the public library, swelling its service area to a population of 25,000. The local population is highly educated (over one-third have a graduate degree) and technologically oriented. The community holds the library to very high standards. The print reference collection is mainly housed at the central library, Mesa Public Library, and consists of some 6,000 volumes. The library also provides access to 85 separate databases.

The Problem

Print materials continue to form the core of the public library reference collection. In the Subject Listings to the *2008 Library Journal Reference Supplement*, 320 publications are listed. Of these, 61 percent are available in print format only, and yet we see that neither staff nor patrons turn first to print materials to answer their reference questions. The Internet is easily available, either at home or at the local public library, and it is easy to type search terms into Google, getting results quickly if unevenly. Information on the Internet may be more current than that in print materials. Furthermore, it is impossible to search a book by keyword, forcing us to think about the correct term for the subject in question and to use the book's index.

Reference e-books represent an improvement in terms of convenience in that patrons can access them remotely and can search them by keyword. Yet they too are static files, published in PDF form, and they are vulnerable to becoming outdated. At this point, they get little usage in our public library.

Online databases share the advantages of searchability and can be as current as the Web, but they require some patience in learning their best applications and can be very expensive. They require constant marketing to give a good return on investment. Databases are forever changing, and staff must be sure to monitor the databases for these changes so that they can properly instruct patrons on how

to use them. This can be a tall order as libraries acquire more and more databases, although assigning specific staff members to watch one or two databases each and report changes back to other staff members may keep anyone from feeling overwhelmed by the rate of change. Most important, library staff need to remember that we have the databases and which ones are best suited to answer which types of questions.

The Opportunity

At the same time as this problem has come to the forefront, the idea of marketing for the public library has arisen. Most recent public library conference programs contain presentations on marketing the circulating collection, usually by arranging it on a retail model and trying to minimize the influence of classification schemes such as the Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC). The sanctity of the reference collection has no doubt saved it from these mildly subversive ideas, but this sanctity has also prevented people from using it as the solid and well-considered resource that it is.

Inspired by both the stories of merchandising success at the 2008 Public Library Association Conference and by the call at their PLA/3M Leadership Institute to be bold and to experiment, the reference staff discussed the possibility of rearranging the print reference collection into subject categories while not entirely abandoning DDC. In addition, we planned to post in these subject areas lists of our relevant subscription databases and the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) recommended Web sites for information on these subjects. Our goal was to make sure that all users of the reference collection are aware of all the resources available and are introduced to them all in one place.

The Initiative: Integrating and Marketing the Reference Collection

In order to achieve this goal, three staff members formed a project team and decided to rearrange the physical reference collection to reflect more of the keyword way people are thinking about information retrieval today—the Internet search engine factor. We also planned to integrate the different types of reference material formats by placing signs and lists of online resources next to the books, thus selling our reference collection as a complete package. Our plan “focused on creating a user-centered arrangement of information regardless of format” (Dickinson & George, 2006, p. 167). We envisioned a hybrid reference collection with “seamless access to resources regardless of format” (Levrault, 2006, p. 21). With this in mind, it made sense for us to start offering patrons the content we have in the way that they prefer to get it.

Integrating the reference collection was easier said than done, with one part being virtual and one part being physical. Having decided to organize the collection by keyword, we faced the problem of deciding which of various possible

keywords would get the greatest number of hits. We could only imagine the tagging clouds for each book. This issue brought to mind the section heading "Everything Has Its Places" from the book *Everything Is Miscellaneous* (Weinberger, 2007, p. 23).

Rather than abandoning the DDC entirely, we brought subjects together where Dewey had separated them. Books on aging from the medical and the sociology section were placed together in the sociology section; books on public health were moved to the medical section to join other health materials; books on weapons were moved from the technology and sports sections to join their companions in the military section; and books on jobs and companies where people might seek jobs were joined. In doing so, we sometimes discovered that we had two editions of the same book classified in two different call numbers because of changes in DDC that had taken place through the years. We were thus able to weed an entire cart of books and free up much-needed space in our reference collection. We did not remove the DDC numbers from the spine labels and relabel the books, as this was a pilot project, and we did not want to impose extra work on our technical services staff until we were sure it was necessary.

End-of-range signs with DDC numbers were replaced by signs with subject keywords. Shelf label signs were placed where each new topic started on the shelves. This new arrangement gave us the freedom to decide that no longer would attractive new reference books be shelved on the bottom, away from notice, just because that's where they fell in the DDC arrangement. Older sets such as *Essay and General Literature Index* were moved to the bottom and new books with attractive covers were placed on top, some with covers facing out. Additional new books were displayed on easels and on a handsome display shelf no longer needed in another part of the library.

We checked all the RUSA Best Free Reference Web Sites lists, keeping the sites that were still operational and free and classifying them into the same keywords we had used for the books. We then laminated and posted signs with these Web site listings near the related books. We also added onto the Web site signs the applicable online databases and e-book titles in our collection, allowing us to tap into the cross-marketing potential of our arrangement and to highlight all of our resources. This helped both staff and patrons to focus informational searches. We designed a new brochure with the RUSA Best Free Reference Web Sites for distribution to our patrons, and we are in the process of adding these to our Web site.

Though reference staff has not yet taken the step of allowing our reference books to circulate, we have put up signs offering to copy ten pages free for patrons. We have the same policy on our online catalogs that connect to our databases. We are hoping this gives people the "permission" they seem sometimes to need even to consider looking at reference books. All of this was done in the

spirit of adventure. Most of the collection was rearranged in one weekend, and the Web sites/e-books/databases posters were placed during the following week.

Reactions

During the next few months, we felt free to rearrange what seemed to be hindering rather than helping people's use of the collection. We had so many books on display, for instance, that people who tried to consult reference books had no place to put them down in order to read them. Remediating this situation was quite easy, by cutting down on the number of display books.

While some staff found this new arrangement liberating and empowering, it was mystifying for some of our long-term staff members who had struggled to learn DDC, were now comfortable with it, and were not able to adjust easily to the keyword way of thinking when it comes to print materials. To help with this issue, we created a list of all of the subjects in their shelf order and put in the exact titles of the most used books in their new places in the order. We were resistant to creating this list at first, but we decided that perhaps it would serve as an interim measure to help staff adjust to a new way of thinking. We may also place additional spine labels on each book with the relevant keyword. We have welcomed staff suggestions for alternative arrangements, where they feel a different subject placement would serve users better.

Everyone loves the displays, and patrons have been especially appreciative of the new arrangement, with one patron remarking that we had "doubled the value of the library." There has been much interest in the listings of reliable Web sites, and much more browsing of beautiful reference books, some of which we have had for years while they have gone unnoticed. For instance, staff has repeatedly brought the *Dictionary of Imaginary Places* back to our area from other parts of the library. Before this project, it had languished on the shelf since 2000. It is clear that we have introduced reference books as recreational reading, and we are now considering establishing a comfortable seating area near the reference shelves.

For the first time, everyone is talking about the reference collection. The impacts on budget (almost none, as most of our materials were already in the library) and staff time have been minimal compared to the thought-provoking staff reactions and to the rejuvenation of a stodgy collection. We encourage others to experiment with the venerable reference collection. We also benefited from the support of our library director, who sends some staff to attend conferences each year and who considers the application of a new idea gained at these conferences to be a good return on investment.

Assessment

Our main goal was to make sure that all users of the reference collection are aware of all resources available and are introduced to them all in one place.

Though we are certain that everyone is noticing our reference collection, we would like to assess if this new awareness has resulted in an increase in its usage.

Our means of statistically based assessment are imperfect. We cannot measure the checkouts of reference books, as we do not allow them to be checked out. However, we can measure the in-house use, and to that end we placed collection baskets throughout our reference shelves imploring patrons not to shelve their materials but to place them in the baskets for us to tally. We do not get full compliance with this request, but it does provide us with some numbers. We can thus compare the six-month period May–October 2008 with the same period in 2007 (see Table 18.1).

Our reference checkout statistics, as extracted from our Horizon catalog, provide two measures: Reference Out-House (OH), reflecting usage where patrons must identify themselves and ask staff to provide the materials, usually from behind the reference desk, and Reference In-House (IH), reflecting the usage of general reference books by staff and patrons. Although overall use of reference books increased by only 5.9 percent, in-house use of reference books increased a significant 17.2 percent.

Even with these encouraging results, the reference team is continuing to explore ways to better market an integrated reference collection and to keep our resources relevant and foremost in our own and our patrons’ minds.

Marketing Services

Farmington Public Library has served a multicultural community in the Four Corners area since 1921, comprised of a cultural climate that includes Spanish speakers and a diverse Native American population that includes the Navajo and Ute tribal nations. Since its inception, the library and its community have grown to over 100,000 people served by a collection of almost 200,000 items. After moving into a new, 50,000 square foot building in 2003, the library won New Mexico’s Best New Building award for Interior and Best Lighting. Farmington

Table 18.1. Reference Collection Usage, 2007 and 2008

2007	May	June	July	August	September	October	Totals
Out of House	30	36	35	45	28	31	205
In House	119	109	131	82	108	144	693
2008	May	June	July	August	September	October	Totals
Out of House	25	23	17	26	24	24	139
In House	92	127	131	172	172	118	812

Public Library is unique in that it is a large, state-of-the-art facility housed in a relatively rural area; its community base includes the city of Farmington, with its population of roughly 40,000, and also the surrounding towns of Aztec, Bloomfield, and Shiprock. The entire branch system is made up of almost 200 employees who serve the main library as well as the libraries located in the other three towns.

Merchandising Reference Services

In taking a look at what role the library's reference desk will play in the twenty-first century, the Adult Services staff at Farmington Public Library sought ways to increase usage of our reference services, which include face-to-face reference transactions, telephone reference interviews, e-mail correspondence, and instant messaging (IM). In late 2007, when IM was first implemented, we set up a plan to repackage all four services into in one convenient unit, allowing us to reach our users at their point of need instead of waiting for them to come to us. In meeting this end, there have been many strategies that have proven most effective.

Make It Memorable

Our objective was to design a marketing initiative that would entice as many people as possible. This necessitated the design of an eye-catching Web page that would identify all four services in one convenient location, and library Web sites are frequently highlighted as an important resource for marketing virtual reference programs (MacDonald, van Duinkerken, & Stephens, 2008).

Adult Services staff members met to determine how we would devise an easily accessible and user-friendly Web site, which in turn spawned the discussion of a memorable logo, an icon that patrons could click on to access the page. It was decided that a logo in the shape of a puzzle piece with the slogan "Puzzled? Just Ask!" would have the best chance of sparking interest. Space and convenience issues on the Web page necessitated the shortening of the slogan to *Just Ask*, and thus the Just Ask puzzle piece was born. We put the logo in as many locations as possible to ensure both patrons and staff would see it. It has been found at the reference desk, worn by staff members, seen on the library's homepage, and, of course, featured on the Just Ask page, viewable at www.infoway.org/reference/justask.asp.

Promote Internally to Staff

Farmington Public Library does not have a lot of signage because we have encouraged our staff to act as "human signs" when talking with patrons. For this reason, it was more effective for our institution to promote Just Ask internally before introducing it to the public. To ensure staff members were on board, we used different methods to show the functionality of the service.

SHOW, DON'T TELL

To introduce Just Ask to staff, we held hands-on demonstration sessions within

each department. We modeled the custom-cut puzzle piece pins we had purchased for staff to wear, showed them how to access Just Ask from the library's homepage, and demonstrated the usability of the Just Ask page by instant messaging a librarian through our interactive chat widget. Once staff saw firsthand what the Just Ask pins represented, they were better able to explain it in a way that made sense to patrons.

DEMONSTRATE THE FUNCTIONALITY AND RELEVANCE OF THE SERVICE

We also encouraged staff to promote our instant messaging feature through promotional items called Cordmen, little plastic figurines used to hold headphone cords. Each Cordman has our IM username on it to encourage people to add us as a buddy. It has been important for us to convey to staff that they need to demonstrate what the Cordmen represent instead of just handing them to patrons without explanation. Cordmen were thus placed behind the service desks to enable staff members to start a conversation with patrons about IM and Just Ask.

REVISIT AND REITERATE AS NECESSARY

Once a service has been successfully implemented, it is helpful to periodically revisit promotional avenues with staff members. A prime opportunity to reinforce Just Ask occurred when staff members would gather every day about 15 minutes before opening for what we have dubbed "The Daily Show." We devised weekly trivia questions for staff that connected Just Ask with "Daily Show" announcements. As an example, one question involved finding out what the Cherry Blossom Festival celebrated, and a prize of free tea was given to the first staff member who approached with the correct answer while wearing his or her Just Ask pin. This encouraged staff to wear their pins, sparked their awareness of Just Ask, and provided them with further incentives to promote the service to patrons.

Promote Externally to Patrons

Once staff was on board, we concentrated on external promotion using the following strategies.

KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE AND MEET THEM AT THEIR POINT OF NEED

Since we knew that college students could benefit from virtual reference services, we sought ways to reach this target demographic. Our local community college has its own radio station, and it proved a reliable medium. We highly recommend local radio interviews with librarians. Such opportunities allow us to do something both memorable and out of the ordinary and to ensure that library products and services will be better remembered outside of library walls. People are more likely to use a service when it becomes a necessity. For this reason, the timing of promotion is essential in meeting patrons at their point of need. Since our main radio

audience was students, we waited until finals week to advertise Just Ask. Not surprisingly, we saw a large surge in use at a time when students were more likely to ask reference questions.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

We included an announcement of Just Ask in our monthly e-mail to teachers, since another target demographic included K-12 schools. When constructing these announcements, it is important to keep the syntax and diction as simple and direct as possible in order to make the message more memorable. To get the word out to the general public, we made similar announcements in our library newsletter and printed quick blurbs on our self-check receipts.

PROVIDE INCENTIVES TO USE LIBRARY SERVICES

As a public library, we reach out to the families in our community through what are known as "Prime Time" sessions. In these gatherings, we provide the incentive of a free dinner to discuss how the library can benefit them as a community. Each session includes calling the reference desk on speakerphone, library "commercials," and story readings for children. Due to the wide scope of "Prime Time," each host wore a Just Ask pin and gave out Cordmen to guests. A couple of hosts even opted to demonstrate the Just Ask page. Similar demonstrations of this nature were also given to our local Rotary Club. In essence, Farmington Public Library aims to provide incentives for potential patrons to use services by focusing on *their* needs and making the library about *them*.

Assessment

With any new initiative, it is important to monitor progress. Since October 2007, we have been measuring the use of Just Ask via IM, seen in the Table 18.2.

The exchanges classified under "IM" represent patron communication with the desk via instant messenger applications such as America Online (AIM), Yahoo, and Windows Live. The "Plugoo" interactions represent a different demographic who chose the interactive Plugoo chat widget, an Internet-based window that allowed them to communicate instantly via the library's Web page. The table indicates that the latter method was preferred. Surges in IM use, such as those seen in November and March, occurred after we revisited our Just Ask promotion efforts and reintroduced the service to staff. Due to the recent nature of this project, we are still in the process of exploring other methods of assessing its effectiveness.

Conclusion

These two projects, and the way they have been marketed, showcase two different initiatives that are producing similar results in terms of an upswing in usage of reference collections and services, with proven appeal to their communities.

**Table 18.2. Comparison of IM to Plugoo Use by Time of Day,
Late 2007–Early 2008**

	9 a.m.–11 a.m.		11 a.m.–1 p.m.		1 p.m.–3 p.m.		3 p.m.–5 p.m.		5 p.m.–9 p.m.	
DATE	IM	Plugoo	IM	Plugoo	IM	Plugoo	IM	Plugoo	IM	Plugoo
Oct. 2007	0	1	0	1	1	1	2	2	0	4
Nov. 2007	2	3	0	5	2	2	0	5	1	4
Dec. 2007	0	3	0	1	0	2	0	2	0	4
Jan. 2008	1	2	0	2	0	1	2	0	0	0
Feb. 2008	1	0	0	3	1	2	0	0	1	1
Mar. 2008	0	3	0	0	0	0	1	1	1	2
Apr. 2008	0	1	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
May 2008	0	1	1	1	0	6	0	6	0	3
Jun. 2008	0	1	1	3	0	2	0	4	1	2
Jul. 2008	0	3	0	3	2	5	6	7	0	2
Aug. 2008	1	3	0	1	0	5	2	4	1	5
Sep. 2008	0	1	0	2	2	1	0	2	0	1
TOTAL	5	22	3	22	8	27	13	34	5	29
Grand Total: 168										

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