Reference Around the Clock: Is It in Your Future?

By Richard M. Dougherty

THE AVAILABILITY OF 24/7 REFERENCE IS LESS CRUCIAL THAN THE CAPABILITY TO OFFER IT

T he Internet is invigorating reference and information services as no other development in this generation. Librarians now have the opportunity, using real-time virtual reference systems software, to demonstrate their professional expertise in new ways. If done well, virtual reference (VR), using computers to offer remote reference service, presents an opportunity to gain a new group of library supporters.

A few years ago many people, including myself, were not particularly optimistic about the future of library reference work. The sudden rise of the Internet and resources such as Ask Jeeves and Refdesk.com sent shock waves throughout the profession. These new services, available 24/7 from companies with seemingly deep pockets full of hard cash, caught the profession off-guard. How could libraries compete with these free, round-the-clock online resources? Even some

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- Staffing the service.
- Acquiring the technology.
- Training staff.
- Promoting the service.
- Wrestling with policy issues.

public and academic library officials openly predicted the doom of libraries.

How in just a few short years did we get from discussions of our demise to the actual offering of 24/7 service? To the profession's credit, the shock and denial wore off quickly. Librarians did not intend to stand pat and deny the future. We began to act by capitalizing on our traditional strengths as information specialists. Who knows more about Web resources than almost any other profession? Who has the qualifications to mediate and evaluate information resources? Who has the knowledge to ensure that sources are relevant and authoritative? Librarians do, obviously.

Before long we began to read and hear about projects such as the 24/7 reference service launched by California's Metropolitan Cooperative Library System in July 2000. Then the Library of Congress announced its ambitious Collaborative Digital Reference Services (CDRS) project (*AL*, Jan. 2001, p. 22–23). This demonstration project is particularly significant because it can show the power of libraries working together to share scarce intellectual expertise. Even the commercial companies can't match such talent. Today over 1,000 libraries already
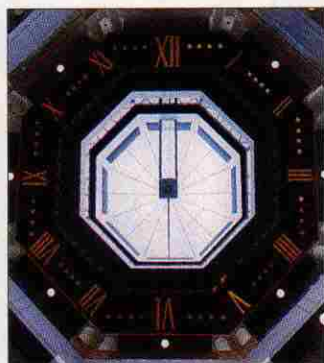
offer some version of virtual reference, more are in the works, and over 30 versions of virtual reference software are in use and are constantly fine-tuned.

Today most attention seems riveted on the phenomenon of 24/7 services finally becoming available. This focus is understandable, considering the 24-hour availability of the Web resources with which they compete. But is 24/7 really the key issue? Why do services have to be available 24/7? Is such a level of access needed? Is it justified economically? A friend asked me recently, "Why not 22/7 or 18/7 or 20/6?"

I believe skepticism about the need for such extensive availability is reasonable. Most library users still prefer "traditional" (9 a.m. to 9 p.m.) library hours. But times change. Client use and expectations change. Such VR services can be seen as an investment in the future.

To my mind the matter of *availability* is

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much less important than is our *capability* to offer virtual reference services in real time to patrons and other information seekers. I want to see libraries and/or groups of libraries develop the capability. It is that promise that excites me.

How many hours a day or days a week the service needs to be available will depend on the type and size of library, the needs of its clients, and the resources available. With all the collaborative projects out there, libraries should not try to go it alone. Look for partnerships. If you can't offer VR now, at least keep it in mind; when your clients demand it, you will want to be ready. Libraries should not get hung up on the idea that VR services have to be 24/7 in order to start offering them. If and when the demand warrants 24/7 service, I'm sure that libraries will find ways to rise to the challenge of expanding the hours.

The need to have the capability to offer these services also points out the need for transformational changes in reference departments. This is readily apparent because patrons have made it very clear about how they seek and obtain information: Almost without exception, their source of first choice is the Internet; they want the search process to be easy and quick; they want to be able to search for information directly from home, office, or dorm; and they want to be able to search successfully at the last minute.

Change will accelerate

At the same time, while all the talk in Libraryland may center on virtual reference 24/7, there has already been a great deal of change taking place in reference work. In the reference and change workshops I've conducted over the past five years, I always ask participants to list duties that were typical for reference librarians 10 years ago and to contrast those duties with those of today's reference librarian. The same answers reappear, in different words, every time.

Ten years ago a typical set of duties included:
➤ answering reference questions at the desk or by telephone,
➤ offering various forms of bibliographic instruction,
➤ consulting online catalogs and teaching users how to use them, and
➤ working on collection development and evaluation of print resources.

Today the duties of a typical reference librarian include:
➤ face-to-face, e-mail, and Internet reference services,
➤ technical tasks, including functioning as a Webmaster; preparing tutorials; learning how to use new software; and designing gateways; and
➤ more and more training of other staff, of users, of oneself.

The important point is that many libraries are currently engaged in organizational change. Moreover, based on reactions and feedback we received from two recent live teleconferences offered by the College of DuPage in Glen Ellyn, Illinois (background on which is available at www.cod.edu/teleconf/virtual/), organizational change in reference units is going to accelerate as more libraries begin to prepare for real-time virtual reference.

Preparing for VR is a complicated process. There are myriad administrative issues to consider. The following tasks are only a sampling:
➤ staffing the service,
➤ acquiring the technology,
➤ creating training programs for staff,
➤ promoting the service,
➤ providing an efficient physical layout,
➤ dealing with cost and quality issues, and
➤ wrestling with policy issues such as copyright, licensing, access by children, and health and legal information.

As important as these tasks are, I believe that one of the greatest challenges planners will have to face and overcome is the perception by staff that they are already overwhelmed and simply cannot take on yet another activity. There are no magic bullets, but there are a number of options available to reference managers to save money and/or time. For example:
➤ time management: work with staff to use their time more efficiently, and
➤ simplifying and streamlining existing processes and procedures. Yesterday this was called "work simplification"; today it is known as "reengineering" processes and procedures.

Offering virtual reference services might require libraries to do more than streamline existing processes and procedures. It may be necessary to expand reference staffing. Yes, it might cost more money. If the parent institution provides additional funding, the needs of reference will have to take precedence over other library needs. If additional funds are not provided, the administration may have to reallocate funds internally. For example, outsourcing of technical service functions has been used to free staff and money for reallocation.

My first recommendation to an administration that is grappling with reallocating staff and funds is to involve staff members at all levels actively in the planning process. Junior staff and, yes, clerical staff and even student assistants often have excellent ideas about what work can be eliminated and what changes can be made. Junior staff can see things that senior staff miss. Old-timers are more likely to be locked into the mindset of "That is the way we have always done that," or, "It ain't broke, why fix it?" But surprisingly, I've found that managers rarely create planning environments that really tap the expertise and enthusiasm of junior staff. This failure is one of the great missed organizational opportunities.

Let us indeed develop our potential for providing reference services in a virtual environment. Let us build on the traditions of face-to-face reference that continue to serve us well. Let us keep in mind that we can't compete with the number of transactions a commercial Web service can accommodate, but we can provide the value-added information services only available from trained and experienced librarians. We don't need to measure success in terms of sheer numbers; we can measure it on the basis of substantive answers to informational questions we are able to deliver to our patrons. ❖