Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Analysis of Question Type Can Help Inform Chat Staffing Decisions

Meert-Williston, D., & Sandieson, R. (2019). Online Chat Reference: Question Type and the Implication for Staffing in a Large Academic Library. The Reference Librarian, 60(1), 51-61. http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02763877.2018.1515688

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![E] **Evidence Based Library and Information Practice**

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A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – Determine the type of online chat questions to help inform staffing decisions for chat reference service considering their library's service mandate.

Design – Content analysis of consortial online chat questions.

Setting – Large academic library in Canada.

Subjects – Analysis included 2,734 chat question transcripts.

Methods – The authors analyzed chat question transcripts from patrons at the institution for the period of time from September 2013 to August 2014. The authors coded transcripts by question type using a coding tool created by the authors. For transcripts that fit more than one question type, the authors chose the most prominent type.

Main Results – The authors coded the chat questions as follows: service (51%), reference (25%), citation (9%), technology (7%), and miscellaneous (8%). The majority of service questions were informational, followed by account related questions. Most of the

reference chat questions were ready reference with only 16% (4% of the total number of chat questions) being in-depth. After removing miscellaneous questions, those that required a high level of expertise (in-depth reference, instructional, copyright, or citation) equaled 19%.

Conclusion – At this institution, one in five chat questions needed a high level of expertise. Library assistants with sufficient expertise could effectively answer circulation and general reference questions. With training they could triage complex questions.

Commentary

This evidence summary used the CAT critical appraisal tool (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014). The authors clearly state the objectives for this study. However, the mandate for the library is not stated explicitly. As the authors' conclusion takes into account their service mandate, it would be helpful to have a clear statement of the mandate. It appears that the service mandate is to provide as high a level of expertise as possible (complete reference service) rather than simply directing users to resources. The literature review provides adequate background on staffing the reference desk, staffing chat reference, and whether question type should impact staffing regardless of medium.

The data collected is for an entire year which provides a broad view of the types of questions asked at the institution. The authors developed a comprehensive coding scheme to evaluate the questions which they provide in an appendix. The authors do not discuss the development of the coding schema, whether they did pilot testing to test reliability, or if the coding was done in duplicate. Percentages and raw data are provided in tabular and graphic representations. They are easy to read and present the results clearly. In order to calculate the number of questions requiring a high level of expertise, the authors remove the miscellaneous questions resulting in a percentage of 19%. It is not clear why the miscellaneous questions should be removed. When left in, the percentage drops to 17%.

One potential limitation of this article is the absence of analysis by student status. However, this information may not be collected automatically. The authors note a potential critique of their study: lack of a comparison of virtual and in-person questions. They suggest this would be an interesting study on its own. The Bishop and Bartlett (2015) study that the authors cite analyzed question type in a variety of media (chat, email, phone and in-person). The authors also note that the types of questions asked may be influenced by the medium itself. Fennewald (2006) found that question type distribution differed between in-person and online questions.

The authors state an institution should consider cost vs. outcome when making staffing decisions for chat. However, the authors do not articulate what their cost and outcome variables are (presumably staffing and service quality respectively). Including a statement such as the following would have summed up their study nicely: With less than 20% of questions requiring a high level of expertise, the library can maintain high quality chat service by staffing with trained library assistants rather than librarians. The authors do discuss other factors that could influence staffing decisions in addition to question type: total staff, staff expertise levels, library service mandate, and patron expectations. This is noteworthy as studies mentioned in the literature review found similar question type distributions but had different staffing models.

This paper adds a comprehensive analysis of chat question type to the growing body of literature. Question type can be helpful in determining staffing for chat but other factors should also be considered.

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