Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

A Case Study on How Reference Staffing and Visibility Models Impact Patron Behaviors

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Evidence Summary

A Case Study on How Reference Staffing and Visibility Models Impact Patron Behaviors

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Abstract

Objective – To determine if reference staffing models are a predictor of reference question rates and if academic library patrons' reference behaviors are linked to reference staffing models and desk visibility.

Design – A retrospective case study.

Setting – Two academic libraries at a large R3 public university in the state of Georgia, United States of America.

Subjects – 10,295 service transactions (chat and in-person, including non-reference transactions related to directional and technology questions) from the 2016 fiscal year and 6,568 service transactions (chat and in-person, including only chat non-reference transactions) from FY 2017.

Methods – Analysis of two years of service transaction data (July 2015 to June 2017) recorded by librarians using the reference analytics module of Springshare's LibAnswers at three locations (virtual 24/7 chat and two libraries with different physical locations, such as centrally-located or harder-to-find service points) for three kinds of reference service modes: chat, fully-staffed in-person services, and occasional "on-call" services. "Reference" transactions were classified using the Reference & User Services Association (RUSA) definition. Email, SMS/text, and Facebook inquiries were excluded from this study. One library, which had the same service model for the 2016-2017 fiscal years, served as the study's "control" so that an analysis of service model alterations could be conducted.

Main Results – The rate of chat reference remained steady, independent from the desk model employed. There was also an overall decline in reference questions from FY 2016 to FY 2017. For FY 2016, the average daily chat transaction rate was 16.1 inquiries (range: 0 inquiries for some days and up to 51 for others) compared to an average 20.5 inquiries at the two physical service locations (range: 0 to 95 inquiries per day). In FY 2017, the average daily chat transaction rate was 13.9 inquiries (range: 0 to 46 inquiries per day) compared to 6.8 transactions for the physical locations (range: 0 to 19 inquiries per day). For FY 2016, when the model shifted to on-call, the average daily chat transaction rate was 14 inquiries compared to the physical locations with 0 and .67 inquires per day. In FY 2017, the averages were 19.33 for chat compared to .33 and .33 for the physical locations.

Conclusion – For the two fiscal years studied here, question rates and reference behaviors seemed to be linked to staffing models. Patrons in this study preferred a staffed and visible desk and 24/7 chat, while "on-call" services were not favored. By replacing the visible desk with an on-call model, the library created a situation where chat was the only consistent reference service offering. As a result, patrons may have viewed the visible desk as being unreliable. The on-call service model appears to have negatively affected patron behavior since, according to the data presented, patrons' reference needs were best met by chat and a visibly staffed desk service model.

Commentary

This article opens by asking the question "is reference dead?" It is one of the most pressing issues in librarianship (Bowron & Weber, 2019; Seal, 2011). As the authors mention in their literature review, librarians have been prophesizing the collapse of the reference service since the dawn of the internet in the 1990s. If anyone can search the internet for information, why seek assistance from a librarian? This question persists and evolves through time.

To review this study, the critical appraisal tool design by Glynn (2006), appropriate for evaluating a retrospective case study involving quantitative data, was used. Data collection methods and the target population for the study were clearly stated, and the large number of reference transactions from multiple locations provided a substantial pool of data for analysis, though from a single institution, making it difficult to generalize and validate the findings without comparisons to others studies. Future investigations would be strengthened by improved sampling mechanisms and data from multiple institutions.

The authors used Springshare's LibAnswers to gather the information, which provided an effective tool for data collection. However, the accuracy of data entry into the system by librarians may have influenced the integrity of the data, a limitation the authors address to the best of their ability (p. 305). Furthermore, the inclusion/exclusion criteria for reference questions were based on the RUSA guidelines, a matter of interpretation also addressed by the authors (p. 305). Despite these limitations, the trends presented are clear, though the authors do not adequately address the overall decline in reference transactions during the years investigated. The decline could be a result of the staffing model alterations, but this is conjecture.

Are reference services dead? This study, while not answering this question fully, provides a backdrop for institutions considering this question, providing a methodology other libraries might use in analyzing service and visibility models, crucially important to current practice in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, where many libraries are struggling to find the closest equivalent to a "visible" reference desk in the virtual space.

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