

E-Mail Reference Service... HUH?

by

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Background

This article seeks to share thoughts that stemmed from my involvement in an e-mail reference service offered by the Monroe County Public Library (MCPL) in Bloomington, Indiana. The reference service, named "HUH?", began in the Spring of 1996 through the joint efforts of the MCPL and the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) at Indiana University on the Bloomington campus.

The acronym "HUH?" stands for "Helping Other Hoosiers." The name actually sparked from the creative thoughts of the MCPL staff while the literal meaning of the acronym was introduced by Dr. Thomas Gillespie, a faculty member of the SLIS. HUH? serves to provide quality electronic reference service to users who have access to either electronic mail or the World Wide Web. Questions can be submitted to HUH? twenty-four hours a day through the World Wide Web, whereas they are answered only when HUH? is staffed. The World Wide Web address of HUH? is <http://www.monroe.lib.in.us/reference/huh.html>, and its e-mail address is huh@monroe.lib.in.us. The MCPL's home page can be found at <http://www.monroe.lib.in.us/>.

Stumbling-Blocks Addressed

As with many other innovative projects, stumbling-blocks often emerge. Some of the difficulties encountered in the course of implementing HUH? were: low response rate, difficulty in conducting a reference interview through e-mail, and proper presentation of information.

1. Low Response Rate

The rate of response to reference questions as of Spring 1996 was not as high as was originally expected, and appeared to be a major difficulty for HUH?. Whereas the cause(s) of the low response rate was not known, it might be linked to three relevant factors: identification of information users; information needs assessment; and/or the readiness of potential users in the local community to use electronic forms of access.

A. Identification of Users

While e-mail access enables us to embrace users from both inside and outside the local community into our service boundary, identifying and prioritizing different groups of users to be served become vital. Only when the primary group(s) of users are identified would limited library resources then be utilized cost-effectively.

B. Information Needs Assessment

Apart from identifying users, we should also assess their information needs. This is to ensure that what we may have perceived to be the user's need, (which, however, may be unexpressed), is the users' actual need. Cargill (1992) reminded us of the need to know our patrons better and suggested that "we must organize services to meet the actual information needs, habits, and preferences of patrons — not what librarians think is wanted" (p.82). Thus we may then ask, for instance, what type of information service the local business community needs. Would they have ready reference questions pertaining to stocks, or business research questions on certain industries or lines of business?

C. Readiness of Potential Users

After identifying and/or prioritizing groups of users to be served and uncovering their information needs, we still need to tackle one more stumbling block: whether or not users have E-mail access to our electronic reference service. This obstacle is often not as large for the business sector as it is for household residents in the local community.

2. Difficulty in Conducting a Reference Interview

Goals of conducting a reference interview include determining the nature, quantity, as well as the level of information users need (Sutton & Holt, 1995); however, these goals may not be effectively achieved when the reference interview is conducted via e-mail, as e-mail does not allow verbal communication. Difficulties in conducting e-mail reference interviews have been addressed in the library and information science literature. For instance, Abels (1996) indicated that the lack of real-time interaction in an e-mail reference interview would cause a delay in response time and would require reference librarians to use "a different set of communication skills" (p. 348). Indeed, HUH? staff encountered such a case in which a user submitted a question that was not specific enough for the staff to answer. A staff member invited the user to further define his or her question, however, the question submitted later was only the original one, rephrased but still without specific details.

3. Proper Presentation of Information

There were times when the staff needed to figure out how the answer, once found, would best be relayed to the user. Areas of concern involved which style of writing would better reflect the image of a public library, how much information would be appropriate in an e-mail message, grammar and accuracy in typing, etc.

Survival Kit

Tremendous energies were devoted to HUH? by people both in the MCPL and from SLIS. A kit was used to introduce and implement the HUH? service. Included in the kit was information on the following: marketing of information, collaboration, flexibility, and procedures to follow.

1. Marketing of Information

A variety of strategies were adopted to market HUH? in the local community. They included, for example, sending out HUH? T-shirts and postcards to individuals and groups in the community, contacting local media such as radio stations, contacting local schools, sending advertising messages to on-line discussion lists, etc.

2. Collaboration

Many people were involved in the course of the HUH? project last spring. To name a few, Susan Jackson provided reference training for the HUH? staff, and Christopher Jackson dealt with technical issues. The many MCPL reference librarians who participated as team leaders in HUH? contributed to the quality of the service. Collaborative efforts were also observed within the HUH? team as the staff tried to help each other. Team members actually facilitated the process of searching for answers to reference questions, ensured the carrying out of appropriate procedures, gave other team members suggestions on how to phrase answers in appropriate ways, checked accuracy of typing, etc.

3. Flexibility

Flexibility can serve as a strategic tool to implement innovative projects such as HUH?. For instance, HUH? originally accepted reference questions only when it was staffed (two hours on a week-day). Later, its service hours were extended to twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, in an attempt to resolve the problem of unexpected low response rates.

4. Procedures

Specific procedures in conducting e-mail reference services are important for at least three reasons. Procedures are necessary for training e-mail reference staff, ensuring quality reference service, and creating or securing congruity in the library's "on-line image." With HUH?, procedures were written in a manual which gave the staff specific instructions on such things as when and how to open the "e-mail reference desk," whether or not to include users' questions in reply messages, what to do when there is not sufficient time to reply to reference questions, how to write the closing part of a reply message, whether or not to sign the staff's own name or initials, etc.

HUH?'s Value to the Library, the Community, and the Field

The HUH? service has value to the MCPL, the local community, and the library science field as a whole. To the library and the local community, HUH? service provides benefits in at least two ways. It helps to enhance the librarians' awareness of services and engages them in the actual process of marketing their services to the community; and it reaffirms the MCPL's commitment to provide quality e-mail reference service to the local community. To the library science field, HUH? adds to existing ventures in moving toward successful library services in the electronic age.

Conclusion

HUH? is among existing attempts to provide library reference service via e-mail. It exemplifies how a public library visualizes its role in its community and actually takes steps to realize its mission in the electronic age. While e-mail reference service is still in its infancy (Bushallow-Wilbur, DeVinney & Whitcomb, 1996), more study on such services are needed in order for us to gain insight into how we can improve library reference services electronically. Hopefully, the issues expressed here will help stimulate ideas from other library practitioners in the field.

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