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Ideas, Hints, and Tips

Wesley Stewart

Georgia Perimeter College, Dunwoody, wesleystewart20@gmail.com

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Ideas, Hints & TIPS

In our various transactions with those we serve, reference interviews – both formal and information conversations – seem to have implicit, perhaps individually negotiated, “contracts.” Our assumptions about the “content” of a contract, namely, people’s expectations of one another in any of our transactions, can influence the effectiveness of the outcome. Librarians generally have a good idea about the details that may be needed to assist a “customer,” but customers – especially those less familiar with libraries in general – may need guidance to recognize their responsibilities in the contract for us to suitably provide the particular “product” sought.

One of the most frequent challenges that any librarian faces with reference service is people who are reluctant to ask or simply do not know how to ask for the assistance we can provide. Patrons may express only a vague idea of the sort of information or resource necessary for satisfying a specific need. For instance, a student may approach a librarian asking where she might locate the books on the Renaissance or any other broad topic, such as any source published between 1865 and the present.

When the student has in mind a particular topic, librarians may guide the student to state more clearly the specific incident, artist, writer, or other narrower subject. When customers provide more relevant information about their project or inquiry, we can better assist them in finding appropriate sources of information.

Other challenges are created when patrons fail to have a clear idea what to expect from reference services. When pondering several interactions between librarians and

students at our reference desk, I have begun to see significance in the unwritten contract.

What would you do if you were assisting a student at a reference desk, eyes focused on the computer screen, explaining the ways to search for the books and articles, and glancing at the student, you saw her ignoring you and furiously texting on her smart phone? This happened to a colleague, who suggested to the student that perhaps she could return on an occasion more convenient for receiving help with her project.

What if someone approached you with a list of four authors or topics, and after you found results for the first listed, he immediately asked, “So you don’t have anything on the other three?” It happened. On more than a single occasion, a student has asked for assistance in locating information and, when no acceptable results were available with the first or second searches performed by the librarian in a database, the student proceeded to tell the librarian what to do next.

Perhaps we would do well to rethink clarifying the purpose and necessity of our services for library patrons in an initial reference interview. Although it would be impossible to elaborate a philosophy of diligent inquiry in a brief interview, would it be so hard to tell a patron what we reasonably may be expected to do for them prior to launching searches in library catalogs or databases? ►►

— **T. Wesley Stewart**

*Georgia Perimeter College Library
and GLA Reference Services Interest Group*