DIGITAL REFERENCE SERVICES: Current and Future Directions

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Overview

- Campus environment
- Reference services at UCSF
- Email reference
- Web-based tools
- Advantages and challenges of digital reference
- Real-time web reference
- Issues to consider
- Future directions: UCSF
Campus Environment

- Diverse clientele
- Dispersed campus – many remote locations
- Primary clientele policy
Reference Services at UCSF

- Triage approach to reference services
- Limited reference desk hours
- Staffing
  - Information services librarians
  - Education coordinators
- Personal consultations
- Reference questions are most often complex queries
Email Reference Service

- Began service in April 1997
- Links throughout the library’s web site
  - ref@library.ucsf.edu
  - info@library.ucsf.edu
- Publicity
- Triage approach
- 24-hour turnaround time
Email Reference: Examples

- Complex search strategies
- Remote access / electronic resources
- Statistical information
- Finding physicians or specialists in a field
- Information on obscure journals
- Finding conference papers and abstracts
Email Reference: Statistics

- Data from 1998-2000
- 1998 – 206 requests
- 1999 – 250 requests
- 2000 – 260 requests
- 65% - information questions
- 35% - reference questions
Web-based Tools

- Web site provides access to digital resources
- Connects the library with remote users
- A way to enhance reference services
  - Reference web pages
  - Online pathfinders
  - Links to online knowledge resources
Reference Web Pages

- Ask a reference question online
- Request a personal consultation
- Online pathfinders or webliographies
  - Drug information resources
  - California health statistics
  - Consumer health information
  - Grants resources
Reference Web Pages (2)

- Virtual reference collection
  - Subset of the library’s knowledge resources
  - Peer-reviewed web sites selected for content and organized by subject on GALEN II
- San Francisco bay area resources
- Guides to searching Medline and other databases
Advantages of Digital Reference

- Provides an additional point of service
- Convenient for remote users
- Allows access to both resources and services in the digital environment
- Forges relationships between the library and individuals on campus
- Answers to frequently-asked questions can be stored for easy retrieval
Challenges of Digital Reference

- The electronic reference interview can be inefficient
- Absence of visual / emotional clues
- Question may not be clearly stated
- Question asked may not be the question the user really wants answered
Challenges of Digital Reference (2)

- Complex questions can require considerable time to answer
- Complex questions often require a phone call or personal consultation
- Some users may expect instantaneous service
Real-time Web Reference

- Live chat
- Web contact center software
  - Comes from private industry
  - Performs the same function as telephone call centers
  - Allows pushing web pages to user, form filling, or taking control of the client’s browser
Real-time Web Reference (2)

- MCLS project
  - Webline software tested
  - Have recently purchased and are testing eGain software
- UC libraries involvement
- Virtual Reference Desk
  - http://www.vrd.org/
Issues to Consider

- Technical issues
- Training
- Staffing
- Cost
- Privacy issues
- Collaborative projects
- Evaluation methods
Future Directions: UCSF

- Development of a digital reference plan
- Database software to automatically sort inquiries into categories
- Development of a searchable FAQ file
- Enhance web reference tools
- Develop patron satisfaction measurement and other evaluation methods
- Real-time web reference