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E-mail Reference: Refocus and Revise. Experiences from Gelman Library

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The term "virtual reference" has emerged as the latest catchphrase within the library profession. The frequency in which this topic appears in the library literature, listservs, and conference programs reflects the serious interest among librarians. While definitions vary, there is general agreement that virtual reference includes providing reference assistance through the use of e-mail or chat room software, also referred to as live reference. Although recent attention to virtual reference has focused on live reference services, it is worthwhile to take a closer look at what may be construed as the predecessor this service, e-mail reference. This paper will provide an overview of a recent assessment of Gelman Library's e-mail reference service, highlight recent revisions made to the service, and address the impact of those changes.

Gelman Library, George Washington University's main library, launched an e-mail reference service in the spring of 1996. Overall, the number of e-mail questions received was quite low. In August of 2000, an assessment of the e-mail reference service was initiated. Two reference librarians assigned to monitoring the service conducted the assessment with the assistance of the library's Webmaster. The objective of the assessment included an evaluation of the current status of the service to determine what revisions needed to be made to increase the number of patrons that used the service. Although general statistics had been maintained to track the number of e-mail questions received in the past, the data offered little insight into why the service failed to attract interest.

Therefore, the first step in assessing the service was to collect benchmark data. The following data was tracked from August 2000 through January 2001 1.) Date and time question was sent; 2.) Patron affiliation

with the university (faculty, student, staff, or other); 3.) Subject of the question; 4.) Number of e-mails sent before the question was resolved; 5.) Approximate time spent by the librarian responding to the question, and; 6.) Type of question based on categories used at the Reference Desk (ready reference, extended reference, directional, or other).

The second step in assessing the e-mail reference service involved revisiting earlier decisions made when the service was initially designed. The historic context of e-mail reference services across all libraries served as an appropriate starting point. When e-mail reference services were first introduced in the 1980's, librarians were concerned that they would be inundated with e-mail questions. As a result, the service was often buried deep within a library's web site. A second concern expressed by librarians was that the reference interview and question negotiation would be compromised. As a preventive measure, many e-mail reference services were limited to factual questions and inquiries regarding library services.

The design of Gelman Library's e-mail reference service reflected these concerns. Accordingly, the following strategic design elements were incorporated into the initial design of Gelman Library's e-mail reference service:
- An obvious and direct link to the e-mail reference form was not available on the library's home page. The link that ultimately led a patron from the library's home page to the e-mail reference form was entitled "Ask Us."
- The e-mail reference form was three clicks from the library's home page.
- Upon clicking on "Ask Us,"' the patron was presented with a page offering multiple links to sources of reference assistance. One of the options was entitled "E-mail reference."
- When a patron finally reached the form, patrons were presented with restrictions on the types of questions that could be asked via e-mail reference. The service was limited to brief, factual questions. Other types of questions were to be addressed in person at the Reference Desk.

Looking at the design of the service from a patron's perspective, we speculated that perhaps patrons were not readily identifying that an e-mail reference service existed. Further, patrons may have been confused or discouraged by the restrictions placed on the type of questions that could be sent through the e-mail reference service. Therefore, the following revision were made to the e-mail reference service:
- The "Ask Us" link on the Gelman Library home page was changed to "Ask a Librarian" in hopes that patrons will associate this with our e-mail reference service.
- The "Ask a Librarian" link now leads directly to the e-mail reference form.
- When consulting with the Webmaster regarding the proposed layout, it was discovered that many patrons were sending e-mail reference questions to the Webmaster's link located at the bottom of the web site that invited patrons to send comments or questions regarding the web page. It was therefore decided more efficient to have e-mail sent through this link automatically forward the e-mail to the reference account.
- Restrictions were removed regarding the type of questions that can be asked. The new form invites states: If you have a question about using the library, need a specific piece of information, or aren't sure how to begin a research project, ask a librarian.
- The "Talk to a Librarian Now" section offers alternatives to obtaining reference assistance via e-mail, but is no longer presented as the primary focus of the page as was the case in the past.

The revisions were made to the e-mail reference service effective February 2001 and the results were astounding as the volume of e-mail reference questions received skyrocketed. Table 1 below reveals that the number of e-mail reference questions almost doubled between February and May when revisions were made to the service. Making the service more visible on the library's homepage, redirecting the e-mail sent from the Webmaster's comments link to the e-mail reference account, and removing restrictions as to the type of questions that were permitted proved to be a success.

Month	Aug.	Sept.	Oct.	Nov.	Dec.	Jan.	Feb.	March	April	May
# Of E-mail questions received	27	47	39	30	30	25	53	62	69	66

It is difficult to determine if the use of this service increased more because of improved visibility on Gelman Library's web site or because restrictions were removed regarding the type of questions that could be asked. However, it is interesting to note the implications of the latter point. Eliminating the restrictions on the type of e-mail reference questions that could be asked reflects a change in the traditional way of offering reference assistance. Most academic libraries place few limits, if any, on the type of reference assistance that is offered to an in-person patron, while restrictions tend to be placed on virtual patrons who conduct their research from outside the library. In essence, in-person patrons were provided with preferential treatment. However, removing restrictions on the type of reference questions that can be sent through the e-mail reference service suggests that the distinction between the type of reference assistance that offered to the in-person patron and the virtual patron is becoming less important.

In the past, the way in which reference services have been designed suggests that librarians have perceived the virtual patron as different from the in-person patron. However, at the same time, libraries continued to make their resources available online, beginning with the catalog. Today, patrons have come to expect remote access to the library's databases and demand the ability to conduct other library transactions such placing interlibrary loan requests or renewing books. As libraries provide online access to their resources and services, it sends a message to patrons that research can be conducted outside the library. Therefore, it only makes sense to provide access to a librarian as well in this forum.

Traditional reference services must undergo radical changes in the near future to accommodate the needs and demands of the remote user. Refocusing and revising current reference services, such as e-mail reference, is one step in this direction.