

Sailing Through

Context

Virtual reference service is no longer new and like face to face and telephone reference services, this service is very difficult to evaluate. Library literature abounds with assessment of the software used, the response time, the training standards and descriptions of the service, but there is precious little about the quality of the responses.

At the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), virtual reference service has been offered for 19 years. New software and new cooperative procedures were implemented in 2003, and after three years it was time to evaluate the new service.

? Ask A Librarian

Process

In the spring of 2006 the UIC Richard J. Daley Library Reference Department experimented with a method of assessment that is conceptually simple and yet not quite so simple to implement.

A percentage of email and chat reference transactions were selected and stripped of both patron and librarian identifying information. The Department evaluated the transactions using criteria rooted in the *RUSA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*, adding an information literacy component. Three departmental meetings were devoted to evaluating 30 email and chat transcripts. We:

I. Determined the type of question asked:

- Directional
- Ready Reference
- Research
- Instructional
- Technical/Access
- Circulation/ILL/Reserves
- Other

II. Began analysis and discussion by asking, "Is the response...?"

- Grammatically well written – Approachability/Interest
- Courteous in tone – Approachability/Interest
- Provided instruction – Information Literacy
- Correct and complete – Listening/Inquiring and Searching
- Referred when appropriate – Follow up

Virtual Reference

Complications

- It was difficult to arrive at a consensus on the type of question
- There was initial suspicion and defensiveness (which gave way to universal buy in)
- The transcripts we evaluated did not include subsequent in-person, e-mail, or telephone follow-up

Some Sample Questions and Responses

Patron	Do we carry any books on St. Augustine on free choice of the will? if so please let me know if there are any available in the library or a link to the full text. thank you.
Librarian	<p>Hello,</p> <p>Yes, we do have books about St. Augustine, and also there will be some electronic books. But, you do not say how in depth the information you seek must be.</p> <p>So, here are some options:</p> <p>In UICCAT, the library catalog, search for Augustine, as a subject search. You will find him referred to as Augustine, Saint, Bishop of Hippo. There will be 113 entries, and you can see which ones are most appropriate for your project.</p> <p>You will find many excellent websites as well, and here are a few:</p> <p>http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/jod/augustine.html</p> <p>http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02084a.htm</p> <p>http://www.gutenberg.org/catalog/</p> <p>Hope this helps,</p>

Type of Question:

- Ready Reference
- Research
- Instructional

The Response is:

- Grammatically well written – Approachability/Interest
- Courteous in tone – Approachability/Interest
- Provided instruction – Information Literacy
- Correct and complete – Listening/Inquiring and Searching

Assessment

Patron	How many sq. ft. is 45,000 square meters? I've used a converter calculator and still don't believe the answer. :-)
Librarian	Did you get 484,375.5 sq ft? The calculator gave me a number about twice that size. When I rethought the problem and did it by hand, I came out very close to our answer.
Patron	Much appreciated. A trivial question, but one I _have_ to be right about.

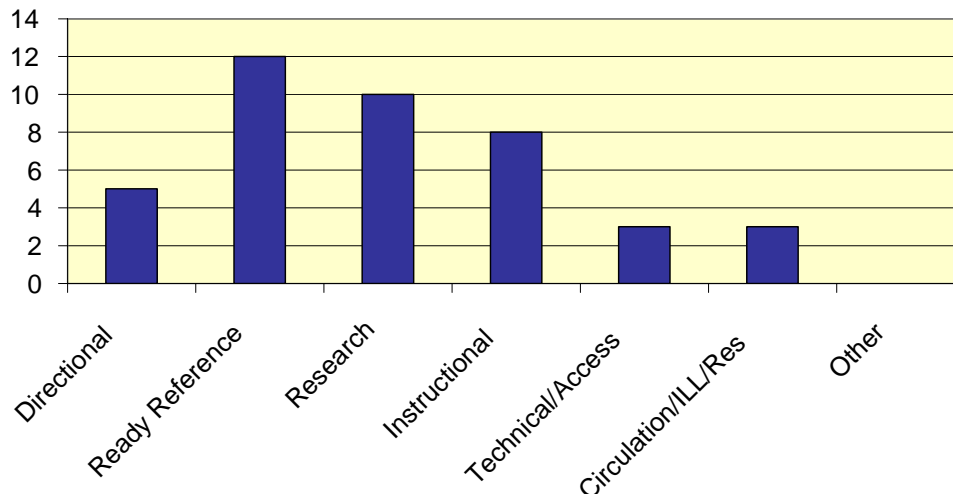
Type of Question:

- Ready Reference

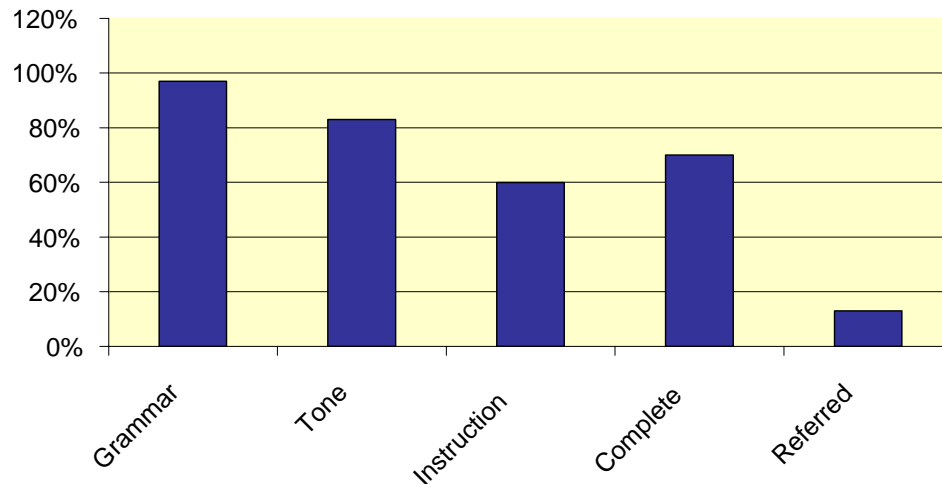
The Response is:

- Grammatically well written – Approachability/Interest
- Correct and complete – Listening/Inquiring and Searching

Types of Questions



Responses



Outcomes & Lessons Learned

- Virtual reference service, like all reference service, is difficult to assess
- Virtual reference assessment concretely highlights the importance of the reference interview
- It is important to stress that the service, not the librarian, is being evaluated
- There is a general agreement on what makes a response good
- There is always something to be learned by group analysis; it is an opportunity to openly discuss individual service standards, styles, and source preferences
- It was a morale builder because we found that response quality is high
- It was an enjoyable experience

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