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Joyce Ward & Patricia Barbier

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Best Practices in Chat Reference Used by Florida’s Ask a Librarian Virtual Reference Librarians

JOYCE WARD
Winter Park Public Library, Winter Park, FL

PATRICIA BARBIER
M. M. Bennett Library, St. Petersberg College, St. Petersberg, FL

Chat reference has presented a unique set of problems for reference librarians. Lacking the visual and auditory cues of face-to-face or telephone reference interactions, librarians providing service for the virtual desk have developed digital techniques and resourceful maneuvers to help them navigate this new frontier. Still, many chat librarians find it difficult to conduct a meaningful transaction using just words, software components, and a mastery of online resources. Technical and communication problems further complicate their efforts. However, virtual reference librarians are rising to the occasion and engaging in exemplary chat transactions that conform to the highest standards of service.

KEYWORDS chat reference, non-intrusive chat reference study, reference interview, virtual reference librarian survey, chat reference communication problems, chat transcripts, chat reference technical problems

INTRODUCTION

“Ask a Librarian” is a statewide service that provides Florida residents with live virtual reference. This online service is available from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m. eastern standard time Sunday through Thursday and from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Address correspondence to Joyce Ward, 2352 Sun Valley Circle, Winter Park, FL 32792. E-mail: joycemward@gmail.com

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eastern standard time Friday and Saturday. There are currently 98 participating libraries from across the state.

Ask a Librarian is a highly successful service for the citizens of the state of Florida. By the end of May 2009, the busiest month ever, the service had answered more than 187,000 e-mails and chats since its inception in July 2003. In a user survey collected at the end of January 2009, 95% of users reported they plan to use Ask a Librarian again, which was up from 88% the previous year. Therefore, what is contributing to the success? The service is fortunate to have a dynamic and proactive Virtual Reference manager, but likewise the attitude and competence of librarians who conduct transactions is commendable.

Although Ask a Librarian has become a valuable resource for both academic library users and public library users in the state of Florida, providing exemplary service in this relatively new format has been challenging. Through training and quickly gained experience, the librarians who staff the service, a combination of public and academic librarians, have shown great resourcefulness in answering questions or walking patrons through steps to find the right answer.

For direct patron feedback in evaluating the Chat Service, the official coordinators of Florida’s statewide Ask a Librarian service implement regular Customer Satisfaction surveys. In addition, a quality assurance workgroup was also created when the service began. On a monthly basis, the quality assurance committee members, who serve on a voluntary basis, nominate and vote on transcripts that they read to choose the best exemplary chats in the brief, detailed, and teaching categories. These exemplary chat transcripts that are awarded each month give recognition to the librarians who show excellent practice when managing real-time reference questions. A gift card to Amazon.com is a reward given to the winners along with a certificate of recognition at the annual Florida Ask a Librarian User Forum.

Publishing the nominations and exemplary chats in the Librarians’ Toolbox (a secure site in Ask a Librarian accessible only to librarians who use the service) also supports the ongoing learning process for all staffing librarians. Good samples are always available for all librarians who are seeking to improve their online reference skills. In addition to this databank of good sample chats, one of the Florida statewide coordinators sends out regular training Thank God It’s Friday (TGIF) Tips on using the software. The quality assurance workgroup has two unpaid coordinators. All members, including the coordinators, regularly staff the service, giving them an appreciation of the workload.

Basic criteria for judging the chat transcripts mirror in many ways the revised Reference and User Services Association’s (2003) “Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference Information Service Providers.” However, the quality assurance workgroup developed a more detailed list of competencies specific to virtual reference service and more readily applicable to
the selection process for exemplary chats. Following are the quality assurance guidelines used in the nomination and final selection of exemplary chats:

- Demonstrate the following qualities:
  - Accuracy
  - Authority
  - Objectivity
  - Currency
  - Coverage

- Perform a reference interview with the patron, asking questions to clarify the information need.
- Answer calls as quickly as possible while staying communicative with the user.
- Try to keep sessions to 20 minutes or less.
- Use information from library resources whenever possible (proprietary databases are better than Google or Yahoo).
- Always use a reference source to locate the answer to a question and always give the caller the name of the source.
- If unable to locate an authoritative answer to a question in a timely fashion, either get back to the patron in a few hours (do a follow-up) or refer the question to local library.
- Establish and maintain good rapport with patrons through the following:
  - Word contact
  - Enthusiasm
  - Empathy

During the monthly transcript readings, the coordinators documented some distinct problem areas. Although some problems can sabotage a chat, there are times when a virtual reference librarian, using various techniques, can maneuver through them. The documented transcripts provided in this article provide wonderful examples for virtual reference librarians hoping to improve their chatting ability.

RELATED LITERATURE

A review of the literature found several interesting and pertinent articles that employed various techniques to analyze and illustrate how chat transcript readings can be used effectively to improve the quality of virtual reference transactions. Ward’s (2003) study used transcript reading in training to help librarians improve their reference transactions. White, Abels, and Kaske
(2003) conducted a pilot unobtrusive study that encompassed the entire virtual experience to analyze the quality of service. Houlson, McCready, and Pfahl (2006) completed a study that consisted of a qualitative analysis of transcripts in an academic setting and focused on enhancing patron needs.

However, Jensen (2004) stated that “Time spent by investigators devising questions and training people in how to ask them would be better used in developing descriptive taxonomies of actual question types and in analyzing transcripts” (143). Long-term research in a statewide system using a large volume of transcripts in their natural setting, as was done in this study, is still rare. Of note, however, is a study involving real questions and answers. Arnold and Kaske (2005) evaluated the “correctness” of librarians’ responses to chat questions. The authors state that “Chat service transcripts provide an excellent way to examine the quality of reference transactions for any library or group of libraries” (Arnold and Kaske 2005, 177).

LIBRARIAN PERCEPTIONS

Since the inception of the quality assurance workgroup, the coordinators have individually read more than 5,000 chats. In addition, both coordinators have served as virtual reference librarians for Ask a Librarian for the past five years. It was found in these analyses and in participating in chat interactions that a perfect transcript is rare and that various problems can interfere with the transaction. Success can still be achieved despite technical problems such as when co-browsing (also known as screenshare in some virtual reference software) malfunctions or when a patron needs local information from a library unfamiliar to the librarian staffing the statewide virtual desk.

To validate the findings from their own study, in August 2008 the quality assurance coordinators conducted a survey to determine the experience, challenges, techniques used, and rewards of the librarians who staff the Ask a Librarian chat desk. During the survey, the following question was asked: What is your biggest challenge during an Ask a Librarian chat session? Seventy-four librarians responded and a majority consistently reported the following challenges:

“The most challenging aspect of staffing chat is when the software doesn’t work properly or the numbers for accessing another institution’s database don’t work.”

“Chatting with someone who thinks I am in their library.”

“When technical issues interfere with assisting the student.”

“Using our software, especially for co-browsing has been the most challenging aspect.”

“Getting from a patron exactly what they want, while not seeing them and having to do it via chat.”

“Helping patrons get into their library’s online databases.”
“Doing a reference interview and really understanding the question. The back and forth needed is much easier in person.”

“Technology. Librarian computers don’t always work correctly and definitely patron computers may not deal well with technology . . . horrible when responses happen too slowly [sic].”

The common pitfalls that hinder quality chats (identified from countless quality assurance monthly readings and the librarian survey) are frequently attributable to failures in following the established guidelines and the inability to compensate for software technical issues.

Following are the most frequently occurring pitfalls to an exemplary chat that were identified by the quality assurance coordinators:

1. Incomplete reference interview
2. Forgetting to check local information (in the knowledgebase)
3. Technical problems
   A. Patron and librarian disconnect which can happen at the outset or any time
   B. Co-browse/Screenshare won’t load or function
4. Poor rapport between librarian and patron

During the librarian survey the following question was also asked: What techniques do you use during an Ask a Librarian chat session? Following are some sample techniques submitted:

“I’m still working on it but here it is: (1) stay calm; (2) try to fully understand what’s being asked; (3) be friendly and professional; (4) take the time to do a good job using the resources available to you; [and] (5) ask for assistance when you need it.”

“Being certain you understand the scope of the question.”

“Constantly soliciting feedback, also generously cutting and pasting.”

“As with face-to-face reference, the reference interview is crucial to ascertaining what the customer is actually looking for. Doing it in chat format requires more intuitive ‘listening’ as the tone of voice and facial expressions are missing.”

“Including the customer in on the research. I give the customer the link to the pages as I review them for an answer. It is the patron that spots the information they were looking for on the page.”

“The ability to view users’ information, such as what library they are a member of prior to initiating a chat. Also the KnowledgeBase—Whenever I have a question about library policies, procedures, how to use the catalog or database I always check the KnowledgeBase so that I can assist the patron using what they have access to.”

“Multi-tasking is both the most useful and one of the most challenging techniques. Keeping the customer informed and ‘on-board’ with the search and actually performing the search at the same time. Actually caring about the customer and the question goes a long way.”
THE REFERENCE INTERVIEW

Given the lack of face-to-face cues in an online reference transaction, the reference interview may well increase in importance. Desai and Graves (2008) noted “It is a truism of reference practice that patrons’ initial questions seldom express their real information needs and few questions asked in an academic library are strictly factual” (245).

Wikoff (2008) also stated that “Reference interviews efficiently reveal what is needed so that librarians do not waste time searching for information that users do not need” (232). However, a chat reference transaction can easily go astray, taking more time than necessary when assumptions are made and a reference interview is inadequate.

Finally and most importantly, Bobrowsky, Beck, and Grant (2005) stated that “Chat reference lacks the essential human interaction that makes face-to-face reference a complex and wonderful phenomenon. A successful chat transaction depends on the librarian’s ability to compensate for those missing cues” (184).

The quality assurance coordinators have chosen the following techniques as most useful for navigating through a successful reference interview:

1. Focus on the Question. Make sure you get the necessary information about the question before beginning a search.
2. Determine the age, academic level, and needs of the patron. This is necessary to locate appropriate information.
3. Relax. Engage the patron through questions or co-browsing and build rapport and a level of comfort.

The following transcript shows how to encompass these techniques in an actual chat. (In this and other chat transcripts identifiers have been replaced with generic placeholders.)

Focus on the Question

Patron:  im [I'm] looking for a paperback version of a book that no one can seem to locate
Librarian:  Greetings, Patron, and welcome to Ask a Librarian! I’m Librarian, from the (city omitted) area, and I am here to help you.
Librarian:  What is the book?
Patron:  darth maul shadow hunter is the title, there is an ebook that proceeded [sic] this book and it was printed in the paperback version but not the hard cover
Librarian:  Let me check. One of the Star Wars books, right?
Patron:  yes
Librarian: It looks like there are two different paperback editions of *Darth Maul: Shadow Hunter*, both printed in 2001.

Librarian: I just searched for it on Amazon.com, just to make sure they even exist.

Determine Patron Needs

Librarian: Do you want to get it through your local library or were you just checking?

Patron: I would like to get it through the library, they have made a couple of attempts to locate it but always get sent the hardcover

Librarian: What is the difference?

Librarian: I know libraries tend to prefer getting the hardcovers because they are more durable, and stand up better to repeated readings.

Librarian: That’s probably why.

Librarian: I wouldn’t be surprised if there are just more easily obtainable hardcover copies out there.

Patron: the paperback has an additional book printed in it that was originally an ebook. the hard cover does not

Librarian: Oh!

Librarian: Well, of those two that I showed you on the Amazon link, do you know which one is the edition with the extra e-book?

Patron: any suggestions?

Librarian: Is it even one of those?

Patron: not sure, neither edition says anything about the additional text

Librarian: I couldn’t find that either.

Librarian: Let me check a few more resources.

Relax

Patron: \( k \)

Librarian: If we can pinpoint the exact paperback edition you need, you can fill out an inter-library loan request with the specific ISBN # from that edition.

Librarian: One moment, please.

Librarian: Also Includes: *Darth Maul: Saboteur* by James Luceno?

Patron: that’s it!!!!

Librarian: I cheated -- I looked it up on Wikipedia.

Patron: that’s where I found out about it

Librarian: It says this mass market paperback edition has the ISBN#:

Patron: ha ha

Librarian: So when you request it again, tell them specifically you want the paperback with the 10-digit ISBN of xxxxxxxxxx.

Librarian: Hopefully it will work for you this time!
Patron: thank you so much!!
Librarian: Can I help you with anything else right now?
Patron: that’s it for now thanks again!!!
Librarian: Thank you for using Ask a Librarian, we hope you come again, and may the Force be with you.

CHECKING LOCAL INFORMATION

Because the Ask a Librarian service is statewide, librarians may encounter questions that are different from the ones they would normally encounter at their home library. Academic and public library patrons’ questions have a different focus, with college students’ emphasis on scholarly research and public library patrons covering the complete gamut of topics from ready reference, genealogy, business support, to tax forms. For this reason, an academic desk was set up alongside the public collaborative desk during day hours. This move was highly successful, although crossover staffing still occurs during shortages of either desk. An indispensable tool that allows all staffing librarians to assist patrons with their library-specific questions is the KnowledgeBase, a collection of web sites from each library in the Ask a Librarian network represented. The KnowledgeBase is available only to librarians staffing the desk and can be accessed through the Agent Console screen of the InstantService software (Instant Service, Inc., Seattle, WA) used by Ask a Librarian. The library web sites provided offer information about the basic policies specific to the library (e.g., how database passwords are obtained, the library’s web site, and contact telephone numbers).

In addition, the Florida State Library maintains a set of information databases available to all public library patrons. These databases are licensed by Ask a Librarian for co-browsing use during a chat interaction.

Librarians who do not familiarize themselves quickly with the local information in the KnowledgeBase risk missing an opportunity to help a patron. Information can be quickly cut and pasted from the KnowledgeBase into the chat transaction, saving time searching the library web site. The information in the KnowledgeBase is standardized for all libraries, so the format is easy to manipulate and access. One category in the KnowledgeBase lists electronic resources and even includes a username and password for librarians to obtain temporary access to these. However, a librarian new to the service may tell the patron prematurely “I cannot help you because I am not at your home library.” The key is to slow down and look at the patron’s web site. Most librarians are adept at navigating other libraries’ web sites, and many libraries have similar policies or post answers to policy questions on their web sites that can be found even when they are not open.

There are many instances when referring people through telephone or email to their local library is the only correct avenue. Patrons are reminded
on the entry to the chat login page that “you may receive assistance from a librarian who does not work for your local library.” However, the expectation is that the librarians will use their enhanced searching skills to seek to uncover answers on the patron’s home web site concerning policies.

The techniques identified by the quality assurance coordinators that are most useful when helping someone outside of the librarian’s own library are as follows:

1. Have a positive attitude. Let the patron know you will try to help.
2. Make use of the Chat Service KnowledgeBase of local information. This is where you can check other libraries’ holdings. Use your general knowledge of library web sites as well.
3. Make use of your service software. Sometimes co-browsing or screen-share can help a patron understand better than words.

The transcript below encompasses these techniques in this pleasantly executed chat.

Have a Positive Attitude

Patron: Hello can I read a book from my pc online instead of going personal[ly] to a library
Librarian: Hi there! I'm Librarian and I will assist you today.
Librarian: I see you want to read a book online.
Librarian: Well, most libraries subscribe to netlibrary.com where you can read books online.
Librarian: However, you do need an account and we will have to see if your particular book is available through that web site.
Patron: I need to read about catholic encyclopedia
Librarian: Is that the name of the book or do you want an encyclopedia that discusses the Catholic religion?
Patron: yes
Librarian: Sorry, I didn’t get that. Are you looking for an encyclopedia?
Patron: yes catholic encyclopedia

Make Use of the Knowledge Base of Local Information

Librarian: Okay, one moment while I visit your library’s site.
Librarian: Still checking to see how you can access ebooks . . .
Patron: ok thank you
Librarian: I found the page where you have to log-in in order to use ebooks. You will need your library card number. I can send you the page and attempt to walk you through the process or if you want I can share your screen and we can do it together.
Make Use of the Service Software

Patron: yes please
Librarian: Would you like me to share your screen so we can do it together?
  Patron: Yes and thank you
  Patron: I am sorry I am not fast typing
Librarian: Ok. Do you see the Share My Screen Button on the bottom of your chat screen? You will have to click that in order for us to proceed.
Librarian: That’s okay! You’re doing fine.
Librarian: Let me know when you have clicked that button.
  Patron: I did it
Librarian: Great. It will be just a moment.
Librarian: While we’re setting up, you will need your library card number.
Librarian: Do you have it handy?
  Patron: I have it with me
Librarian: Great. I’m going to go to your library’s site and we will proceed from there.
  Patron: Should I click the link?
Librarian: Sure.
Librarian: I will bring up the login page now.
  Patron: Am I going to see you typing from that page
Librarian: Yes.
Librarian: It’s best if only one of us types at a time.
  Patron: OK but what and where should I type?
Librarian: Bring up your library’s page again. I will bring up your login screen. Once we’re on that screen, then type your library card number.
Librarian: Yay! We’re here!
Librarian: Now, I will bring up the encyclopedia.
Librarian: Okay, so this is the Encyclopedia of Catholicism.
Librarian: You can go page by page or click on a particular chapter link to your left.
Librarian: Are you looking for something in particular?
  Patron: Yes about trinity and do they have it in spanish?
Librarian: Okay. Well, let’s take a look at the A to Z entries to see if they have a heading for that.
  Patron: it say the connection is interrupted
Librarian: We may have to go out and try again.
Librarian: One moment while I try to navigate the site.
Librarian: It’s closing the book now.
Librarian: Once it’s closed we’ll try to go back in.
Librarian: We can flip through the pages to see if “Trinity” is there.
Librarian: Or we can use a keyword search to locate the term.
Patron: thank you as you wish
Librarian: Okay, I think we’ll try a key word search.
Librarian: Well, that didn’t work so well. So we’ll try to see if there’s an entry.
Librarian: To go from page to page, I’m clicking next in the upper right corner of the screen.
Patron: I have to go back to work I am really really thankfull [sic] with you for trying and teachme [sic]
Librarian: You’re more than welcome. I think if you try again on your own, the system will work a lot better and faster.
Librarian: Do you think you’ll be okay to try again later?
Patron: Have a wonderful day and Even I know thi(s) is your job You are doing more than that
Librarian: It was a pleasure. Thanks for using our service. Have a great day!
Patron: I will try later by myself or I try to reach you great day to you
Librarian: Yes, please do!
Librarian: Bye.

DEALING WITH TECHNICAL ISSUES

Another secret to a good virtual transaction is knowing and feeling comfortable with the software and other features of your chat service; then and only then will a Virtual Reference (VR) librarian be prepared to meet the inevitable challenges that come with using technology. The following guidelines chosen by the quality assurance coordinators will illustrate how knowledge and resourcefulness contribute to a successful chat even when the technology fails.

1. Find another way to help when the virtual reference technology is malfunctioning. The patron doesn’t need bells and whistles, just an answer.
2. Know the software and the chat service resources so there is a Plan B in case something doesn’t work. WorldCat often works when catalogs are down. Ask a Librarian staff may use the Florida Electronic Library and the Gale shared databases when college databases are not available or when the students do not know how to login to their academic databases.
3. Reassure the patron that you want to help. Remember to think “your problem is my problem.”

Through persistence and knowledge of the State of Florida Electronic Library, the next librarian, whose chat is cited below, gave the student another option when co-browsing or screenshare was not functioning. Florida has a group of databases for the use of all public library card holders, which the
librarian showed when she realized that there was an incompatibility with the chat co-browsing software and college databases. Librarians are resourceful. Reference interviewing guides the direction of the research. Continuous communication occurs despite patrons who stop “to fix the washer.”

Find Another Way to Help When Technology Fails

Patron: I’m looking for information on the Southern Grotesque Movement for a research paper.
Librarian: Hello. Welcome to Ask a Librarian! Please wait a moment while I read your question.
Librarian: Thank you for your question; can you please provide me a little more information about this movement, in terms of the subject discipline? Is this pertaining to art?
Patron: it pertains to literature. Flannery O’connor is one of the best known authors.
Librarian: Okay, thank you; can you please hold for a moment while I search?
Librarian: I’m still searching; thank you for your patience.
Librarian: Are you in need of more information about the movement or relevant authors?
Patron: more information about the movement
Librarian: okay
Librarian: I’ve tried literature resource center, but nothing specific to the movement is in the hits; I’m going to try another database.
Patron: okay
Librarian: I found one article in lit. resource center that actually expounds a little on the movement; I’m going to try using our co-browse feature to try and show you through your library holdings.
Librarian: Are you able to see the new screen?
Librarian: Are you there?
Patron: yes had to fix the washer
Librarian: Okay :-) 
Librarian: Which campus library do you use?
Patron: main
Librarian: Are you able to see the login screen?
Patron: have to click one moment
Patron: I’m getting an error page
Librarian: After clicking on the Log on screen link?
Patron: yes
Librarian: Are you using your SSN as the ID (without dashes) and the last 4 of your SSN as the password?
Patron: there isn’t any place to type that info. I’m on How to find an article with a click here for log on screen
Librarian: Oh; you’ll need to click the “click here for log on screen” link and then enter your username and password.
Patron: that’s when i’m getting the error message

Plan B
Librarian: Okay; we’ll need to try this again. Because your library has the screen open in a new window, I am unable to see what you see once you try logging in. If I can get you in by yourself, I can at least walk you through it by using my own database as a guide.
Librarian: Let me try refreshing our screen and see if that helps.
Librarian: Okay; I refreshed and clicked the link myself. I have the new window opened; so, let’s see what happens.
Patron: internet cannot display the page
Librarian: Okay; are you using internet explorer?
Patron: yes and vista
Librarian: OK; let me see if I can find some other resources to use instead.
Patron: okay
Librarian: Here are three full-text articles on the movement; can you hold for just a moment?
Patron: yes
Librarian: thank you for waiting; do any of these sources fit your needs?
Patron: I’ve open the first and scanned. It only mentions the words S.G, but doesn’t go into what the movement is
Librarian: Okay; I think I found another way to access the college resources; let me try this option.
Librarian: Sorry, I just noticed you are still reviewing; let me know if anything is useful.
Librarian: Is this source helpful?
Patron: the third paragraph goes into some detail
Librarian: okay; this database is Expanded Academic ASAP; it’s available free to all Florida public library users with your library card number as your ID to login. You can copy and paste any text that you think is useful for your paper. Let me know when you would like to move on to try accessing the college sources again.
Patron: okay it seems that they are interchanging Gothic for Grotesque

Let Them Know You Want to Help
Librarian: Yes, I noticed this as well. I think we may have to search using two different terms to expand our hits. Would you like to try a search for the “southern gothic” before we move on?
Patron: yes, but I’m sorry my printer is not function correctly so I’m working on that at the same time
Librarian: I understand; there is an email link that will allow you to email the article to yourself so that you can print later. It’s on the top right hand side of the page in the “Tools” box.

BUILDING RAPPORT

The previously mentioned August 2008 quality assurance coordinators’ survey showed, as expected, that Ask a Librarian is now using experienced librarians, with more than 63% reporting three or more years of staffing and 45% reporting a high comfort level. The survey was given before Ask a Librarian changed chat service providers, so there was a high level of dissatisfaction with technical issues, which was expected. There was also some concern with the large number of questions that require local library help.

However, one component that emerges in all of the exemplary chats that we read is the positive attitude and the willingness to help of the librarian staffing the desk. This attitude is shown vividly in many of the answers to the following survey question: What is the most rewarding aspect of an Ask a Librarian chat?

“On September 18, I had some questions from middle schoolers on rather obscure inventors and inventions. I was able to provide them some wonderful websites with which they were not familiar. They said I was ‘cool’ and ‘awesome.’”

“It is nice when you can direct a person to the resources they need and make their day a little easier.”

“When a patron actually feels they got some value from us. A patron named ‘Punk princess’ tells me the site I’ve given her is ‘very cool.’”

“It provides a unique service to library patrons who, for some reason might not have access to a traditional library facility, while simultaneously promoting librarians to be technologically savvy. It is so cutting-edge.”

“That we do it at all . . .”

“I like the creativity that the online live environment causes me to draw upon. Keeping my reflexes up.”

“I like surprising people with good and quick answers. I like the variety of questions. I like my fellow operators.”

“Being able to assist a user who was on her boat and only had access to the small library collection near the dock.”

“I believe that all librarians will need to be fluent in remote reference by the end of the decade.”

“I think the service is tremendously helpful for academic libraries with distance learning programs. I was able to help one of our college’s students the other day to find articles that he needed although he was working from home.”

“Available 24/7 and almost always staffed with smart, talented librarians!!”
The attitudes of the librarians who staff the Ask a Librarian desk help to account for the growing use and the wonderful database of exemplary chats. The final technique when technology or other online obstacles are confronted during a virtual reference interaction is to remember that keeping a positive attitude can make the experience on the chat desk a lot more fun, help build rapport with the patron, and enable the VR librarian to become a reference/research life-saver for chat users.

CONCLUSION

Chat is here to stay. Businesses use chat service to offer assistance. Patrons like it and librarians have adapted and fine-tuned their skills so they can reach out to patrons beyond the traditional reference desk. A study of virtual reference transactions in their natural setting is essential to understand and visualize the obstacles facing the virtual reference librarian. Pitfalls such as neophyte researchers, technical mine fields, incomplete questions, and a need for local information in a statewide service challenge librarians to adapt and develop techniques to maneuver these obstacles. This article has defined and illustrated how the process can best be met and conquered by a resourceful virtual reference librarian.

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