EFFECTIVE REFERENCE SERVICE IN LIBRARIES: THE ROLE OF THE REFERENCE LIBRARIAN

Mrs. Adaora J. Vdo-Anyamvu

Abstract

The reference librarian is the image maker of the library, he is also the intermediary between the library resources and their user. Therefore, it is argued that it will require the librarian to have a working knowledge of both the resources and the users before he can serve them effectively. This paper discusses the library resources and the users in addition to some of the qualities and roles which the librarian is expected to possess and play. It is advocated in conclusion that the reference librarian should endeavour to build a bridge between the information/resources available in the library and the users.

Introduction

The library has been referred to as a collection of books and other information materials gathered for the purpose of reading, study and reference.

Gone were the years precisely before the 19th century when preservation of library materials was the librarian's watchword. Ranganathan (1931), in his five laws of library science stated that "Books are for use" in other words, the librarian is concerned with the maximization of access to information by the user. Therefore, he goes an extra length to help. He is not expected to sit back and relax after providing the books, only to let the users help themselves as much as they are able.

The reference desk plays a Public Relations (PR) role for the library. As a service point, it is constantly in contact with the public. The way the librarian relates to the users speaks much about the library. Therefore, the effectiveness of reference service or otherwise will serve to attract users to the library or ward them off from it.

Edoka (2000), opines that the library has the responsibility to ensure that its resources and services are used. This matter is so fundamental that someone can define a library in terms of use, for instance, an establishment that has some one thousand items of information that are effectively used can be a library while another that has a million documents that are not placed so fundamental that someone can define a library in terms of use, for instance, an establishment that has some one thousand items of information that are effectively used can be a library while another that has a million documents that are not placed for use may simply be a museum or storehouse.

Reference work involves the interplay of three factors; viz: the library user, the reference collection/resources, and the reference librarian. The reference librarian plays the role of an intermediary between the library users and the world of information materials/resources in the library. His skill in matching the right resources with the right user will distinguish him as a reference librarian par excellence.

The Library Users/Customer

Those who use the library are variously called library users, clientele, client, customers, enquirers, patrons, readers, etc. They fall into different categories. In special libraries, the major categories are specialist and researchers. In academic libraries, user categories can be broadly said to be students, faculty and the entire academic community. Categorization of users in the public libraries cannot be definite as in the first two types of libraries. The public library has a heterogeneous clientele. This is because users of the public library are drawn from the general public made up of people with various backgrounds and interests. These include housewives, civil servants, students, businessman, teachers, children, layman etc.

A working knowledge of the users will enable the reference librarian serve them better. Information about users can be acquired through questionnaire, oral interview, analysis of questions asked, examination of curriculum and personal experience of the librarian.

However, for effective use of the library and its resources by users, the reference librarian can help in instructing the users. The aim's to teach users the use of the library so that they will be able to use it.

The Library Resources

The idea of reference sources being only books labeled "Ref" and kept in a special collection is no longer valid. In a general sense, and book in the library can be reference sources as stated by Okoro
(1999). The libraries can draw upon the stock of the library in tackling any query. But typically, there are what we call reference sources. These are highly specialized publications not intended to be read through page by page or at a sitting like textbooks. They are consulted for specific information. A general characteristic of these reference books is that most of them are arranged in alphabetical order so that the user can locate information easily. They are also accompanied by an index to aid quick retrieval of the information in the main body of the work.

These include dictionaries, encyclopedias, bibliographies index/abstracts, almanacs, yearbook/annual, dictionaries, handbooks/manuals biographical sources, geographical sources and government documents. For a better understanding, these reference sources will be explained.

I. Dictionaries: A dictionary is a reference book that lists standard words of English language (or another language) alphabetically gives meanings of words, spelling, pronunciation, origin/etymology, idiomatic use, etc. They are useful in giving information about words. There are genera! words dictionaries and subject dictionaries e.g. Oxford English Dictionary, Macmillan Dictionary of Biotechnology.

2. Encyclopedias: These are literary works that contain extensive information on all branches of knowledge usually arranged in alphabetical order. They are sources of background information. There are general and specific (subject) encyclopedias e.g. Encyclopedia of library and information Science.

3. Bibliographies: These are descriptive, systematic lists of books and other materials in a subject. They are guides to the literature in a particular field, either general or specific in nature. E.g. guide to reference books.

4. Indexes/Abstracts: Indexes are systematic listings that trace and identify materials. An abstract is a summary of an article or other pieces of writing. E.g. Social Science Index and Chemical Abstract.

5. Almanacs, Yearbooks and Annuals: There are compendium of useful statistics and data for that one year. They give information about persons, countries, subjects, events, etc. some are general in nature while some are special/ subject that is limited to a particular subject e.g. whitakers Almanac, Europe Yearbook, etc.

6. Directories: These give lists of organizations, persons, systematically arranged, usually classed or alphabetical order. They give address, functions, officers etc. for organizations.

7. Handbook and Manuals: Although these are similar, a handbook is usually a group of facts centered around one main theme or subject area while a manual is more equated with how do it. It would be fixing a flat tire or cooking a meal. E.g. handbook of Drugs for Nursing Practice.

8. Biographical Source: These are books about famous people or people distinguished in particular area of interest. The accounts given about persons in this source can be a source of inspiration and challenge to the reader. E.g. International Who's Who.

9. Geographical Source: These are books which contain maps and information about counties. These include atlases which not only contain maps but many illustrate themes such as historical development and specific centres. These also include gazetteers, dictionaries of places, names and guide books. E.g. Nigeria in Maps, World Atlas.

10. Government Document:- These are official publications ordered and published by the federal stated or local governments e.g. Gazettes. These are at times referred to in substantiating claims especially in legal documentary evidence.

Apart from these sources termed references sources, the librarian should be conversant with the
books/monographs which constitute the bulk of the library literature in most Nigerian libraries.

With advancement in technology, there are also other sources other than book materials which the librarian should acquaint himself with in order to effectively service the clientele in need of information stored in such resources. These are known as non-book materials or Multi-media which are further split into audios, visuals and audio-visuals. Examples include video tape, discs, slides, transparencies, etc. Their advantage lies in the fact that they can store a large amount of information in a small space and play a major role in stimulating the imagination of the receiver. They are also not without disadvantages. For example, use depends on the availability of electric power, in times of power failure, the user may be stranded if there is no alternative source of power.

The computer is now used to search standard bibliographies that are now on magnetic tape or disks rather than the familiar printed form. This format is referred to as machine readable. The librarian should be computer literate in order to harness true information stored in this medium.

Qualities of a Reference Librarian

Availability and knowledge of reference sources will help in reference work but not necessarily determine what is to be done (Okoro 1999). The information content of the resources listed above are great but only with adequate interpretation and/or explanation can the user make the most out of them. To be effective in office, the reference librarian needs to possess certain qualities. Some of these are in-born while some are acquired. The qualities are discussed as follows:

1. **He Should be Humane:** This has to do with treating the clientele as human beings. Reference work is not for misanthropes. A liking for people will help the librarian to accommodate all kinds of people that he comes in contact with in course of his daily activities in the library.

2. **Empathy:** This refers to the ability of the librarian to put himself in the position of the enquirer. The golden rule is applicable here. This is, doing to others as you would want to be done to you. This has got to do with being sensitive to the feelings, thoughts and experiences of another person. This will help him to understand and appreciate the user's need. However, this must not be partial.

3. **Curiosity:** This involves an interest in the user's query. Curiosity in this context means discovering what the reader really means. It can help him to frame the clientele queries as appropriate in order to get exactly they want.

4. **Initiative and Tact:** Having this quality will enable the librarian not always to follow the laid down rules. But he must be able to match events with conditions. Answers to queries must vary because there are different categories of users. The way he explains to a graduate should be quite different from that of an illiterate. Vernacular may be used.

5. **Inclusive:** A retentive memory is an asset to the reference librarian. Some out of the way piece of information which we came across some time ago may be precisely what is required to answer a reference question. In case of the librarian in charge of a library, this attribute will be useful in the deployment of staff in the various departments of the Library. It is knowing who should give better service and placing that person there.

6. **Patience/Perseverance:** This quality will help the librarian to cope with stresses and strain of reference work. He deals with all kinds of people, some fastidious, some ungrateful and some abusive. He has to be patient enough to accommodate all and he requires perseverance to consult many sources in pursuit of a bit of information in order to get answer to a user's query.

7. **Accuracy:** A good reference librarian must display enough accuracy in matching answers to queries. The enquirer expects to receive reliable information from the library. He is worse off than before he came, if he is given wrong information. A guard to this is to be acquainted with the resources available in the library. Regular consultations are required.

8. **In-depth Knowledge:** The has got to with having a deep knowledge of the resources in
various fields/subject areas not only in his library but also in other libraries so as to enhance inter-library loan and cooperation. Knowing the source that can help in answering a reference question is also important. To know things, he must move himself. This may entail leaving his area to move forward. The keenness in solving reference problem should make the librarian search for information.

9- **Good Communication:** Effectiveness in reference work requires the acquisition and possession of appropriate communication skills by the reference librarian. This can be verbal or non-verbal and listening skills. To listen effectively, one must be physically, psychologically and intellectually prepared. It also involves a mastery of the language of communication. The librarian's choice of words should be appropriate and should convey exactly his intention. Polite expressions are advocated. The user should not unnecessarily be interrupted as this may affect his trend of thought.

10. **Know a Bit Psychology:** This is the ability to read the mind of another and reading meaning into when people do, how they appear or from physical objects. This will help the librarian to known how to go about answering reference questions. In this case, using the same standard for all does not arise, tactics, tactics can be changed. The librarian must be crafty and be able to dictate when things are not normal.

**Conclusion**

Having seen the reference librarians as the image-maker of the library, there is every need for him to ensure that the goals and objectives of the library are achieved. The reference, librarians should work hard to eliminate much of the frustration experienced by the users searching for information. This sometimes may mean outright search for information by the librarian. That is, when and if requests are received for information, rather than ask the user to find his own sources, the librarian should perform a literature search and compile a bibliography and some of the actual documents in what may be called an "information packages" service for the user. Although this is a highly specialized service, it goes to indicate a significant way to encourage more use of the library. Goetsch (1998:143), pointed out that: "Librarians are well placed both situationally and intellectually to encourage their users own learning of critical, analytical and questioning skills, the ability to analyse a research question {Yes, the good old reference interview} apply critical thinking skills to investigating that question, and exploit information resources though knowledge of information organization is the forte of the reference librarian".

In conclusion, the reference librarian has to have knowledge of and like the two parties he brings together (the information materials and the users of the library). He should indeed anticipated the expectation of the library users and positively provide resources and services to fulfill them.

**References**


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