

# Reference — The Right Way

For three days in August, thirty North Carolina librarians dedicated themselves to learning how to improve the accuracy of reference service. Representing public, academic, and one special library, these librarians met at the Quail Roost Conference Center near Durham with Sandy Stephan of the Maryland State Department of Education, Library Division, and Kenna Forsyth from the Baltimore County Public Library. The purpose of the workshop was to teach the participants behaviors that increase accuracy in reference transactions and, at the same time, to prepare the participants to train others in these behaviors. This three-day workshop was grounded in research-based and tested training which has been conducted in public libraries throughout Maryland.

Reference librarians react to reports of inaccuracy in reference service with emotions ranging from chagrin to skepticism to anger. We complain about "test" questions; we doubt that unobtrusive surveys can fairly measure the accuracy of our work. However, the evidence of at least six documented studies administered in various parts of the United States during the past twenty years is difficult to deny. These studies, summarized in an article by Terence Cowley,<sup>1</sup> have revealed an average accuracy rate in reference transactions of 56.4 percent.

Within the past several years two North Carolina librarians have published accounts of assessments of reference service. Patsy Hansel, in the Summer 1986 issue of *North Carolina Libraries*,<sup>2</sup> describes an unobtrusive survey that was conducted at all of the reference service points in the Cumberland County public library system. This project is noteworthy as a self-study undertaken for the purpose of evaluation and improvement. In the Cumberland County study, 74.7 percent of 162 questions were answered correctly.

In the Fall 1991 issue of *RQ*, Lydia Olszak's article, "Mistakes and Failures at the Reference Desk,"<sup>3</sup> summarizes a study that was undertaken at a large university. She reviews the manner in which reference staff in one academic library "define and manage mistakes that occur while [they are] answering reference questions at the reference desk."<sup>4</sup> Ms. Olszak's study is also an examination of reference accuracy in a broader professional context. Her most provocative thesis is that "reference librarians may view their ultimate goal as something other than simply providing a correct answer to a patron's question."<sup>5</sup>

The Maryland investigation of reference accuracy began in 1983 when the state library contracted with a private research firm to conduct an unobtrusive review of public library reference service. Trained surrogates asked the same forty questions in sixty libraries representing twenty-two of the state's twenty-four systems. Half of the questions were presented in person and half via the telephone. Overall, only fifty-five percent of the answers to the questions were complete and correct.

At the conclusion of the survey, staff from the state library assessed the data with respect to variables thought to be related to reference transaction outcomes. They looked for a correlation

between correct answers and any specific behaviors. After the significant behaviors were identified, a workshop was designed so that the behaviors related to correct answers could be taught to staff who worked at reference desks. Over two hundred staff from fourteen library systems were trained. In 1986, forty questions, almost identical to the 1983 set, were again asked in public libraries across the state. Library staff who had received training answered more than seventy-seven percent of the questions correctly; those who had not been trained responded correctly sixty percent of the time.

In addition to the information they yielded about the accuracy of reference service, the 1983 and 1986 Maryland surveys also refuted widely held beliefs

about factors thought to affect performance at the reference desk. The size of the reference collection, number of staff, degree of busyness, and duration of the reference transaction, all variables generally thought to be associated with accuracy, were not found to correlate significantly with correct answers. Furthermore, the studies demonstrated that accuracy in reference service depends primarily upon communication. Thus, accuracy is within the grasp of anyone who chooses to master the appropriate skills. According to the Maryland research, the following behaviors are most closely associated with correct answers:

## MODEL REFERENCE BEHAVIORS CHECKLIST<sup>6</sup>

### APPROACHABILITY

Smiles  
Makes eye contact  
Gives a friendly greeting  
Is at the same level as patron

### INFORMING

Speaks clearly and distinctly  
Checks with patron to be sure answer is understood  
Cites the source

### COMFORT

Speaks in relaxed tone  
Is mobile; goes with patron

### LISTENING

Does not interrupt patron  
Paraphrases or repeats to show understanding  
Asks clarifying questions if not sure of patron's questions

### INTEREST

Maintains eye contact  
Makes attentive comments  
Gives patron full attention

### SEARCHING

Finds answer in first source  
Searches in more than one source when necessary  
Keeps patron informed of search progress

### INQUIRING

Asks questions to probe  
Verifies specific question before searching

### FOLLOW-UP

Asks, "Does this completely answer your question?"

Another unobtrusive survey was conducted in Maryland in

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1990. Although a published report is not yet available, Sandy Stephan and Kenna Forsyth shared with the Quail Roost conference participants some of the preliminary findings and conclusions. Significantly, it has been learned that probing, verifying, and follow-up have been rated for the third time as the behaviors most critical to the provision of correct answers.

Attendance at the Quail Roost conference was underwritten by the North Carolina Library Association and the NCLA Reference and Adult Services Section. In return for this sponsorship, each of the participants made a commitment, with administrative backing, to offer the Maryland model training in their own library system and in at least one other system within three years. Librarians interested in learning more about Maryland model training in North Carolina should contact Allen Antone, Reference Department, Belk Library, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608. In the experience of the two trainers, it is unique that a grassroots interest in reference accuracy brought the Maryland model training to North Carolina. Dedication and enthusiasm will spread this commitment to reference accuracy across the state.

#### References

<sup>1</sup>Terence Crowley, "Half-Right Reference: Is It True?," *RQ* 25 (Fall 1985):59-67.

<sup>2</sup>Patsy Hansel, "Unobtrusive Evaluation for Improvement: the CCPL&IC Experience," *North Carolina Libraries* 44 (Summer 1986):69-75.

<sup>3</sup>Lydia Olszak, "Mistakes and Failures at the Reference Desk," *RQ* 31 (Fall 1991):39-49.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>6</sup>Ralph Gers and Lillie J. Seward, "I Heard You Say..." Peer Coaching for More Effective Reference Service," *Reference Librarian* 22 (1988):245-60.

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Keyes Metcalf, *Planning Academic and Research Library Buildings*.

(New York: McGraw, 1965), 416.

Susan K. Martin, "The Care and Feeding of the MARC Format," *American Libraries* 10 (September 1979): 498.

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