

Rip Van Winkle at the Reference Desk?

Anna Donnally

Gone are the days when North Carolina was known as the Rip Van Winkle state, a backwards, somnolent place where change occurred with agonizing slowness and progress was a dirty word. Today our state is a leader in the New South; economic development and demographic changes are reshaping North Carolina. Projections indicate that the state should generate more than 510,000 new jobs by the end of the century, most in the trade and services sectors.¹ During the 1980s and 1990s indications are that net immigration should average approximately 39,000 per year.² By the year 2000, nearly one million North Carolinians will be aged 65 or over.³ Reference librarians in public libraries across North Carolina undoubtedly disseminate such information daily with very little, if any thought as to how these changes are or should be affecting the services they provide. Our state has changed. Have we? Is Rip Van Winkle manning the reference desk?

Much has been written about reference and information service to carefully delineated groups of library users whose patronage of our institutions is perceived as limited. Fresh services have been devised for their seduction. Now, in the midst of a ubiquitous "Information Age," in a region which is changing both economically and demographically, it seems high time to ask ourselves: Has reference service in North Carolina's public libraries changed to serve a changing clientele? Are we seeking to serve growing segments of our population or are we preaching to the converted? Two frequently discussed types of library users, business people and the elderly, reflect the economic and demographic shifts occurring in North Carolina. Are our methods of information provision in step with their needs? How has the *modus operandi* of the public library reference department been altered in response to the perceived special needs of these users?

There may be 349 answers to these questions; one for each public library in the Tar Heel state. However, even a cursory look at trends reflected

in the literature and at various programs across the state indicates that certain methods and services are prevalent, that new ideas are being tried and that there exists, in libraries all over North Carolina, a commitment to advancement. Change may be gradual and relatively unspectacular but, on the whole, it appears that public librarians are aware of shifts in their clientele and are working to see to it that the demands of these users do not go unanswered.

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Older Adults

Media ballyhoo regarding North Carolina's desirability as a retirement spot has undoubtedly contributed to the forty-six percent increase in the state's over-65 population, the eighth highest rise nationally.⁴ But behind the press coverage and the statistics are the demands that these people will place on libraries and other service institutions. While public service librarians are uniquely situated so as to literally be able to observe changes in their clientele, it is imperative that changes occur on our side of the reference desk as well. Recognizing that stereotyping is inimical to good public service, the Reference and Adult Services Division of the American Library Association's committee on Library Services to an Aging Population has adopted guidelines which begin by stressing the importance of a positive attitude toward serving older patrons.⁵

Many of the library services designed specifically with older adults in mind fall outside the purview of reference in its strictest sense. Collections of large print books and periodicals have become the rule, rather than the exception, in most public libraries. In fact, a recent survey by Diane Thompson on serving older adults in North Carolina public libraries indicates that ninety-five percent of the state's public libraries provide large

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print materials to users⁶. Likewise, outreach service to the homebound and the institutionalized is a common component of service to the elderly. Library-sponsored programs on topics ranging from financial planning for retirement to workshops for senior caregivers have proven beneficial not only to the participants, but to the library by linking it with others who work with older adults.

Where retirement is big business, the provision of information to retirees is booming. Many people who have relocated upon retirement tend to be active in their new communities. Reference departments have traditionally been centers of information about community organizations and events. Many libraries have seized this opportunity to enhance their roles as community information centers. By connecting older adults with agencies and groups who can help with health, financial, consumer, and other problems, the public library's role as a referral center has proven to be a significant service to these clients. Ready reference service, especially the provision of telephone reference, is of particular importance to the elderly, many of whom may not be highly mobile. While the format of the information sought by older adults may not differ dramatically from that of many other patrons, the need may be more acute since, in some cases, the client has been physically removed from the personal information network upon which he or she once relied. In addition, individuals who are recently retired often require information which will help with the social and economic changes implicit in such a dramatic transition.

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Librarians have found it necessary to become familiar with agencies and organizations which provide services for older adults. Local councils on aging, nursing homes, retirement communities, meal sites, and the like are important resources for librarians seeking to serve older adults. All too often, staff members in such organizations are unaware of the services provided by their local libraries. Public librarians need to market their institutions to these professionals as well as to their clients.

Sources, print and non-print, both for caregivers and the elderly concerning the health, behavior, economic well-being, leisure and life-

long learning for seniors are vital acquisitions for the reference department. Collection development should be pursued with formal as well as informal educational needs and recreational reading in mind. In some areas, unique programs for this special population, such as the Center for Creative Retirement at the University of North Carolina—Asheville, while not directly connected to the public library, have created new information needs for its senior patrons. Other academic programs like Elderhostel may require the library to serve as a formal education support center for patrons not often considered primary users of such materials.

In addition to being consumers of library services, retirees are among the most active and visible library volunteers. It is important to note that the ALA Guidelines advocate employment of older adults at all levels and that libraries "request volunteer help only when funding is not available for paid positions."⁷

While changes in reference service as a result of an influx of older adults may not be as pronounced as in other areas of library activity (collection development, programming, outreach), their presence has had a significant impact. As Diane Thompson concludes, "There is a trend of increasing services to older adults in the areas of extension, special materials, and information and referral."⁸ Information professionals in libraries of all sizes must pay serious attention to senior citizens and must ensure that attitudes are free of stereotypes and that sources and methods of service are compatible with these users, both physically and intellectually. And, most importantly, librarians must raise the library consciousness of the older adults in their communities.

Business

Nowhere has the impact of the "Information Age" been more profound than on the role of the public library as a provider of information to business and industry. For complex reasons involving both economics and professional pride, public libraries have marketed themselves to the business community more aggressively than to any other pool of prospective users. After all, we reason, why should librarians, information professionals, be passed over by those who are, perhaps, the most voracious consumers of information? Assistant State Librarian Howard McGinn writes, "Library services are vital to economic growth. The acceptance of this fact by library and business communities is a problem."⁹

Recognition of our present and potential services to business may be slow in coming. In fact,

we may not yet have arrived at the ideal formula for serving this vast clientele effectively. And, of course, there are those who maintain that so-called "traditional" reference service is incapable of providing the business world with the information it requires. The purpose here is not to debate this, but to point out that public libraries are taking steps in the right direction. Efforts to introduce business reference into public libraries of all sizes have dramatically affected the ways in which we operate.

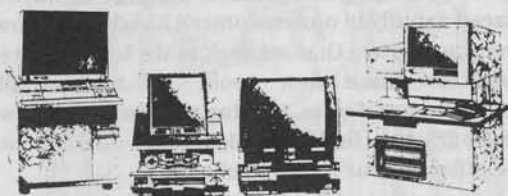
"The Library must learn how to use non-traditional resources, experts, and the telephone..."¹⁰ stresses Matthew Lesko. While we may not always follow his first two prescriptions, reference librarians, like business people, depend on their phones both as a means of procuring the necessary information and as a method for referral. Though it may seem prosaic to many of our more sophisticated colleagues, an increased reliance on the telephone as a reference tool has had a dramatic (and often overlooked) impact on the success of many smaller public libraries' service to business. Not only does it provide us with sources outside our institutions, it links us quickly and cheaply with the businesses we serve. When, for example, the manager of a local golf course can pick up the phone and ask the reference librarian for the name and telephone number of the nearest manufacturer of golf pins and flags, it is the next best thing to having *Thomas Register* in the pro shop. In fact, it is probably quicker to call the library and definitely cheaper.

The expeditious and economical availability of business information via electronic sources has served as a catalyst for the instigation of online search services in many libraries. In public libraries, businesses have been among the most enthusiastic users of these databases. This is especially true outside of the state's major metropolitan areas, where special libraries supported by businesses are more scarce. Regardless of the volumes which have been written about the impact of the online revolution, it bears repeating that the availability of these sources has transformed the ways in which the public library reference staff thinks, operates, and succeeds. In institutions where budgetary constraints limit business sources to a few carefully chosen tools, access to systems such as DIALOG, BRS, and InfoMaster means that staff members can be introduced not only to previously unknown tools but to new methods of formulating search strategies. In addition, the results are often presented to users in more immediately usable forms. Rather than guiding patrons to sources and providing instruc-



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tion in their uses, electronic databases often enable staff members to deliver precisely the information sought minus extraneous material; the pearl without oyster or shell.

As with online searching, the impact of business users upon public libraries has been keenly felt in the areas of networking and document delivery. Thanks to the North Carolina Information Network and to the State Library's procurement of telefacsimile machines, many public libraries are able to offer an impressive array of services including electronic mail, bulletin boards, an automated purchasing directory, and FAX.

Through public libraries across the state, vendors and businesses are able to learn about commodities and contracts advertised for bid by the Division of Purchase and Contract. This service can be a boon to small businesses in remote parts of North Carolina seeking to expand their markets.

By providing for virtually instantaneous transmittal of information, telefacsimile capability means that the public library can play a role in helping business and professional people provide optimum service to their customers. It also means that we are doing the same for our clients. Cooperation among libraries of all types is an integral part of such services. We are able to go beyond mere identification and location of a given item. We can, in many cases, arrange to have it placed rapidly in our customer's hands. It is, however, imperative that we seek more sophisticated uses for these new tools. As telefacsimile machines proliferate, the day may come when we find ourselves faxing needed texts directly into the offices of our business clients.

... changes in North Carolina's economic climate have changed the ways in which public libraries function.

Access to FAX, the automated purchasing directory, and other such tools coupled with the expertise to use them effectively are key components in the library package that is marketed to business and industry. Also fundamental are the print sources which have become fixtures in most of the state's public library reference collections. One would be hard pressed to find a library without at least one business directory, despite the fact that such sources are not mentioned in the *Standards for North Carolina Public Libraries*.

While library departments and branches devoted exclusively to business are not yet, and

may never be, the norm in North Carolina's public libraries, discrete business reference collections are not uncommon. That these collections include publications of local, state and federal governments, specialized publishers, and trade and technical associations is not surprising as library staff members at all levels have grown in sophistication with respect to the data required by business. With an understanding of the tools and their users has come greater knowledge of the jargon, attitudes and practices of the business world.

Libraries must be sensitive institutions, evolving as their users evolve.

Marketing library services has, at the very least, invaded the consciousness of every public librarian. The necessity of reaching businesses in the same way that they reach their customers affects the manner in which librarians conceive, plan, and execute services. It is not enough to announce that an investment seminar will be held at the library. The beneficial aspects of the program must be made explicit and the library must follow up with information about the resources available for the small investor. Hand-in-hand with programming is promotion. While a given library may be unable to develop a full-blown media blitz designed to entice local business people, conventional wisdom regarding word-of-mouth suggests that a strategy of "talking up" library services can be quite effective.

Clearly, changes in North Carolina's economic climate have changed the ways in which public libraries function. The public library has many roles to fill in addition to its commitment to the needs of business. Nevertheless, there have been changes, some subtle, some dramatic, in how reference departments operate because of their business clients.

Conclusion

As the local environments of North Carolina's public libraries change economically, demographically and otherwise, services must change. Libraries must be sensitive institutions, evolving as their users evolve. Alterations in the demographic and economic makeup of a library's user base alters the library. As the state's population of senior citizens grows, public library services develop accordingly. As emphasis on attracting new business and industry to North Carolina increases, the public library community's determination to prove itself an asset in the process

increases. Those concerned with the provision of reference services must respond to these demands in innovative ways.

And so, to return to the question asked at the outset, have public librarians been, like Rip Van Winkle, slumbering, complacent about our services, while patrons and potential users disregard us? On a statewide level, the answer is no. There have been improvements. Nevertheless, we have not succeeded as completely as we should have. Locally, librarians must be aware of the changing needs of our patrons. Each institution must examine and evaluate its services, not only for the types of users discussed here, but for all its constituents, and then must challenge itself to move forward. If public library reference service is to fulfill its mission to serve, we cannot afford to mimic Irving's lackadaisical Rip. We cannot, as Van Winkle so often did, dismiss the problem by shrugging our shoulders, shaking our heads, casting up our eyes, and doing nothing. We must capitalize on the gains made thus far to ensure that the information services we provide are effective, efficient and appropriate for all.

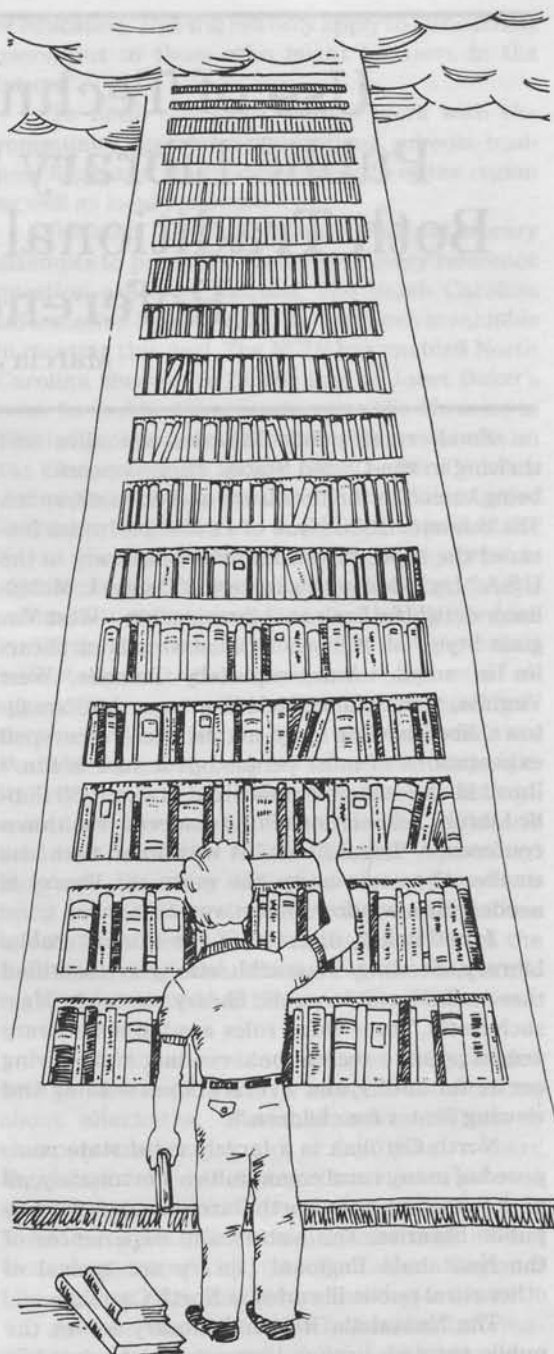
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