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Mystery shoppers test the reference service in a public library – Reasons, Methods, Results, Effects

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Reasons: Why should we evaluate the reference service….?

„ … in order to survive"

see: empty public libraries - less face-to-face reference questions in American research libraries

Keen competition

„… libraries are … what our patrons often turn to only after the internet has failed them."

→ The reference service should be one of the essential reasons why people visit the library

Evaluation methods

1. Unobtrusive Reference Testing
see: Dewdney/Sheldrick, University of Western Ontario (1994): Outcome measure of user satisfaction

- 1. Rating with a questionnaire with a seven point scale
    - The extent to which the librarian was friendly or pleasant
    - How well he or she understood the question
    - The helpfulness, the answer provided
    - The extent to which the patrons felt satisfied
    - The patrons' willingness to return to the same librarian in the future

- 2. A two-page account of their visit

- 3. Summary/lists: what were the helpful facts and non-helpful facts

Evaluation methods

2. Analysis referring to the American Library Association
„Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers"

- ***Approachability:***
  Example: *Does the librarian acknowledge patrons through the use of a friendly greeting to initiate conversation?*
- ***Interest:***
  Example: *Do you have the feeling that the librarian takes his/her time in order to give a satisfying answer?*
- ***Listening/Inquiring:***
  Example: *Does he/she ask you questions in order to specify your need?*
- ***Searching:***
  Example: *Does he/she explain to you what sources he/she is using for research?*
- ***Follow-up:***
  Example: *Does he/she inquire whether the answer was helpful?*

- see: http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral.cfm

Evaluation methods

Advantages of these methods?

- The patrons's viewpoint: Patrons can observe and rate these issues

- The focus on the quality of the interaction as pre-condition for a satisfying outcome for the user

- The focus on all criteria which influence the quality of this interaction

- The results, which identify exactly the need of changing/improving considerably

Realisation of the evaluation

- 5 students from Stuttgart in cooperation with a German public library and 20 students from an other university

- period of the entire project: 4 months

- period of the evaluation at the reference desks: 3 weeks → a total of 78 tests

- time for each reference situation: ca. 1 hour (testing, reporting, judging)

Which results can be achieved?

Results of the rating with a questionnaire: positive rating

Results of the information desk	
friendlyness	89 %
comprehensibility	86 %
helpfulness	77 %
satisfaction	81 %
willingness to return	87 %

Which results can be achieved?

Figures from the questionnaires (examples of asked questions)

Process of listening/inquiring	positive	negative
The librarian identifies the goals or objectives of the patron's research, when appropriate.	21%	79%
The librarian rephrases the question or request and asks for confirmation to ensure that it is understood.	41%	59%
Process of searching		
The librarian finds out what patrons have already tried, and encourages patrons to contribute ideas.	13%	87%
The librarian explains the sources to be used.	45%	55%
The librarian explains the search strategy and sequence to the patrons.	38%	62%
The librarian asks the patrons if additional information is needed after an initial result is found.	40%	60%
Follow up		
The librarian encourages the patrons to return if they have further questions.	40%	60%

Which results can be achieved?

Results of the two-page accounts: quotations

- 'The librarian was very friendly and looked me in the eye while talking. She was honestly trying to help me to get a meaningful result.'

- 'There was no real information interview, there was no further inquiry, and the librarian didn't ask me if I was satisfied with the information. She didn't ask where I had already searched for and didn't offered to return if I have further questions.'

- 'It was annoying just sitting there and didn't know what the librarian actually did.'

- 'Unfortunately, the perfect finish is missing, e.g. questions about satisfaction with the information or results, and there was no encouragement that I could come again for further information.'

Which results can be achieved?

**Lists with helpful and non-helpful facts
from the Information Desks**

Helpful facts

- Explaining the search
- Trying different ways of searching

- Offering to reserve required books
- Mentioning other possibilities, e.g. the state library

- Holding eye contact

Non-helpful facts

- Superficial search
- No search in the OPAC

- No written information
- No mention of other possibilities

- Rushed librarian
- Describing vaguely where to find the required book

Which results can be achieved?

Comparison with results of a former evaluation

→ positive rating

Results of the information desk	2004	2009	increase
friendlyness	80 %	89 %	**+ 9 %**
comprehensibility	82 %	86 %	**+ 4 %**
helpfulness	75 %	77 %	**+ 2 %**
satisfaction	72 %	81 %	**+ 9 %**
willingness to return	71 %	87 %	**+ 16 %**

Which results can be achieved?

Our recommendations

- Involve the patron into the reference-process by
  - turning the monitor screen
  - handing out information material and commenting on it
  - clarifying confusing terminology and avoiding excessive jargon
  - always encouraging the patron to return if there are further questions

- Involve the patron into the searching-process
  - rephrase the question or request and ask for confirmation to ensure that it is understood
  - ask closed and/or clarifying questions to identify the goals of the patron's research
  - explain the search strategy and sequence to the patron
  - ask the patron if his/her questions have been completely answered

Which results can be achieved?

Our recommendations

- Use all information sources that are available and not just the online catalogue

- Make the patron feel comfortable during the reference situation
  - stop all other activities when the patron approaches
  - focus and demonstrate attention on the patron's needs by establishing initial eye contact with him/her
  - acknowledge other patrons waiting for service

How can these results be used?

- Trainings for library staff in order to improve lacks in the interaction of the reference service

- Workshops with library staff to develop quality standards

- Reorganization of reference service

- Publication of evaluation, methods and results
  - in the library
  - in professional journals

- Comparison with other results
  - of other libraries
  - of former evaluations

What did we learn?

- We could see the positive effects of quality standards, which have been developed after the evaluation in 2004

- We learned how important (periodical) evaluations of the reference service are

- We saw the reference service from the reader`s view, a valuable experience for our prospective work routine

- method skills, teamwork and project management

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