

Skipped Stations: A Reference User Exercise

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In work as a reference librarian, it is easy to forget that there is a user on the other side of the desk. By taking on the part of the user, one can experience how a reference librarian's actions can positively or negatively impact the user's search for information. For this exercise, I chose four libraries, as directed, and asked reference services at each of these libraries a question with which I was familiar, in order to experience the user's perspective.

While each of these libraries is a highly regarded public institution, not a single one of these reference interviews conformed perfectly to accepted standards as described by Ross and Dewdney in their text *Conducting the Reference Interview* or their article "Flying A Light Aircraft." In one instance, I did not receive an answer at all, and in the one instance where I was properly interviewed, the information provided was a combination of incorrect and difficult to find. My experience as a "user" successfully demonstrated the vast gap between textbook theory and how it is actually applied.

Question

My question was inspired by my curiosity about public transit in general and the New York subway system in particular. As a rider, I enjoy knowing the history of the stations I pass, and have been reading books and visiting websites on the subway's history for my own amusement for several years. Knowing the rather confusing history of the subway's development, and the typical rider's lack of knowledge of that history, I decided to ask what the oldest and newest stations in the city's subway system are. In a way, this is a trick question, as well: while the newest stations (Roosevelt Island and Lexington/63rd Street) are well documented, having opened on October 29, 1999, the oldest station is actually plural. The subway, when it opened on October 4, 1904, consisted of 28 stations, all of which were used during the first runs. However, since the first train left from the now-closed City Hall station, it

is that station which is considered the oldest. (By this definition, Brooklyn Bridge, the next station along the line, would be the oldest operating station today.) Pirmann (2006).

If queried further, I explained that the question arose during a lunchtime discussion with co-workers, and we were unable to find the answer. I fully expected to be asked questions to clarify the situation further, but I was to discover, this was not a guarantee.

Telephone Reference

Context

The telephone reference interview took place during a weekday, during my lunch hour, at approximately 1:30 pm. I called the phone reference service of a local public library system, after finding their phone number on their web site. The call was picked up after two rings, but instead of a person answering, which I had expected, I was greeted by a recorded message which suggested several other options, visiting a branch in person, informed me of the hours of operation of the branches, and detailed the restrictions on the telephone reference service. After approximately one minute and fifteen seconds of this message, I was told which button I could press to be connected to the telephone reference department, where I held for another two minutes.

Summary of Interview

The librarian who answered the phone offered only the word “Hello” as a greeting. I asked if I had reached the telephone reference department and the (I presume) librarian said, “Yeah,” in a tone that bordered on disdain. She did not introduce herself, offer any information, or ask me what I was looking for. After a moment of silence, I informed her of my question. I had barely finished speaking when she said, “Hold on,” and disappeared, putting me on hold. I waited approximately thirteen minutes, with no contact with the librarian. She returned abruptly

with another “Hello,” and immediately asked, “Are you still there?” before I had a chance to respond. When I replied in the affirmative, she informed me that my question was “very tricky” and she’d had to look in five separate books, but there wasn’t really an answer to my first question, and explained about the original 28 stations, giving me the correct opening date (October 27, 1904). I asked her if there was any way to narrow it down any further, such as which was the first station to have its construction completed, and she sighed, informing me that she thought they’d worked on them all at the same time, and that, “besides, I’d need to go find more books to figure that out.” Without pausing, she went on to explain that according to *Under the Sidewalks of New York*, 2nd edition, the two newest stations opened on October 29, 1989, on the F line: Roosevelt Island and Lexington/63rd St, adding that there was also a new tunnel opened under the East River in 1994 which was the subway’s newest section overall, and brought the total number of East River tunnels up to 12 (a fact that was actually new to me).

The librarian then suggested that if I wanted any further information I could contact the MTA Transit Museum, and asked me if I wanted the number. I told her that would be great, so she again told me to hold on, and put me on hold. I waited for two minutes, and then turned to my computer, Googled “MTA Transit Museum,” and found the phone number on their website in approximately thirty seconds. The librarian did not return until another two minutes later, with the telephone number I had already found. I thanked her and she replied, in a monotone, “Will that be all?” I said yes, and she hung up while I was repeating my thanks.

Reflections

While the answers received in this session was accurate, the entire session was awkward and difficult. From the moment the librarian answered the phone, her tone and curt speech left me feeling like I was interrupting her. There was absolutely no reference interview: she took me

entirely at my word, and did not ask a single question to clarify my query or its circumstances. In fact, she did not even specify she would be putting me on hold, she simply did so and left me wondering what had happened, and the wait was so long I began to wonder if she had simply gone out to get her own lunch while I was holding. While the librarian grew somewhat friendlier in the course of explaining what she had found, her overall tone was both defensive and disdainful at once: she seemed annoyed to be bothered, and was outright dismissive of my attempts to clarify her answer.

Despite the accurate answers she gave me, the negative tone and sheer disinterest left me both disappointed and angry. The fact that I was able to track down the offered telephone number via a Google search in a quarter of the time it took her to return the same answer left me wondering why I had even called in the first place.

There were some positive notes, however brief: the suggestion of contacting the Transit Museum was one that had not occurred to me, despite the fact that I have visited it recently. And the librarian's offering of a citation was appreciated, as it gave me a source I could return to if I wished to continue on in my "research." However, the librarian's unwillingness to ask any questions, and refusal to further pursue the subject, greatly outweighed those positives.

From a technical standpoint, this library might wish to consider shortening the opening voice message, and making it more welcoming: being greeted by a recording suggesting I visit a branch library rather than use the telephone service gave me the impression that my call wasn't welcome, and the constant long holds without any music, beeps, or recorded requests to remain on the line were troublesome: the only indication I had that the call had not been disconnected was the light on my own telephone. The librarian should conduct interviews, not dispense information. She didn't know if I needed station names, or dates, or if I needed a copy of the

information to show my co-workers – although I suspect she wouldn't have cared even if she knew. Her attitude and demeanor were, to be blunt, embarrassing to witness.

Chat Reference

Context

As with the telephone session, this session occurred during a weekday lunch hour. I selected a local public library system and followed the link on their website – three clicks later I was able to access the chat system, which loaded automatically in the window. The librarian began the session with a standard greeting: “Hello, welcome to our live online reference service. How may I help you today?” I typed my question out, and managed to inadvertently send it three times: there was a significant lag in the system and I was confused for several moments if my question had even been received, until I saw it appear three times in a row in the chat window.

Summary of Interview

The librarian did not comment on the triplicate question, but answered me with “Let me see what I can find, please give me a few moments to look that up.” Four minutes later, they returned, informing me that, “It looks like the oldest is the old city Hall station although I don't think it is currently in use,” and then told me they were going to look a little more. Another eight minutes elapsed before they returned, telling me: “All we can find on new stations is renovations and replacement for Fulton street [sic] and South Ferry. The most recent new stations we could find were Roosevelt Island (1989) and Jamaica Center/Parsons/Archer. (1988).” A. H. Tilden, personal communication (September 25, 2006.) This answer was, happily, entirely correct. I repeated Roosevelt Island, in confirmation, and the librarian added that both Roosevelt Island and Lexington/63rd were the same year. They added that they couldn't find anything on which of the stations currently in use is the oldest, and like the

librarian from the telephone session, suggested the Transit Museum, providing me their phone number right away. The entire session lasted twenty minutes.

Reflections

I was, in general, impressed with the chat process. The connection was occasionally cumbersome and the page had a tendency to spontaneous reload whenever a new message was sent by either party. However, it did not crash, and the chat program has a protocol to allow the librarian to “push” the webpage they are looking at into the user’s window, allowing them to share what they are researching. While my particular question did not result in using that protocol, the potential use of such a “push” could be an excellent addition to a reference chat.

The librarian was much more relaxed and welcoming, compared to my telephone experience, and specified before stepping away that they were looking up information and to give them a few moments – a vast improvement over the telephone librarian’s disappearing act. Unfortunately, this librarian also took my question at face value, and did not make any further inquiries as to the depth of information I required. Instead of looking for further information regarding the oldest station, the librarian could have asked me if the closed City Hall station was a sufficient answer, and saved themselves some research. However, I was pleased to see the librarian take extra steps to provide as much information as possible.

Technologically speaking, the automatic forwarding of the chat transcript to my email was another excellent feature that proved to be extremely helpful in analyzing this session. The greatest disadvantage of the chat was the dissociation: the librarian used a generic ID of the library name and their initials, and the effect was at times rather like I was simply chatting with an automated bot. The lags were also a difficulty: there was less of a sense of conversing in real time.

In-Person Reference

Context

The last completed reference transaction was at a major branch of a local public library system. I went there after leaving work for the day, arriving at approximately 6:15 on a weekday evening. I entered the building and looked for signs or a floor plan directing me to reference, but did not see anything, and all the visible staffers were occupied with patrons or tasks. The layout, however, was directing foot traffic towards the elevators and escalators. Following that led me upstairs, where I was able to easily find the reference desk. There was no line when I arrived, but the librarian was with a patron, so I waited, and several people proceeded to queue up behind me.

Summary of Interview

While I had to wait on line several minutes, the librarian made a point of making brief eye contact with each of us waiting, so I knew she was aware of my presence. I was greeted with a friendly smile when I reached the front of the line, and a very chipper “how can I help you?” I explained my question, explaining when asked that it was to settle a discussion that had arisen during a conversation with co-workers. She began to type, but asked me at the same time if I had tried the MTA website, which I confirmed I had. She continued using her computer, but proceeded to explain what she was searching for, apologizing at one point when her system crashed and asking for my patience while she rebooted. While rebooting, she asked me what my “co-workers” were saying the answer was, and if there was anything else we were wondering. I told her that we had found the first subway had left from City Hall, but we weren’t sure if it was the first one built, and that we thought the newest was in Queens. The librarian very enthusiastically said she was sure it was Wall Street, the “beautiful one with the arches,” that was

was the first. This is incorrect: Wall Street is a small station and without arches; City Hall, although closed, is widely regarded as the most beautiful station in the system due to its tilework, arches, and skylights. Pirmann (2006). Unable to correct her without breaking my cover, so to speak, I just nodded and repeated that I wanted to see what the books said.

After rebooting, the librarian presented me with three records: a circulating history book, a book on the tile artwork in the subways, and a reference history book specifically on the subways. She apologized for the fact that the books were on different floors, and suggested I begin with the reference book, which was on the same floor, when another source occurred to her: the New York City Encyclopedia, also in reference. She looked up the call number for that, and informed me that the New York State Encyclopedia would be next to it on the shelf, and that I might likely find an answer in either of those.

While the librarian was very attentive during these steps, she looked up to meet the eyes of the patron on line behind me and nodded to them while handing me the printouts, leaving me with a feeling of “being dismissed.” I had to step out of the way when the next patron stepped up and the librarian began helping her, so I left the desk.

The entire transaction took approximately five minutes, not counting a brief wait on line.

Reflections

This session was closest to “textbook” of the three completed sessions. The librarian greeted me, was friendly and welcoming, explained what she was searching and why, made further inquiries about the topic and how the answer would be applied, and went over each record print-out, explaining exactly where on each floor I could expect to find the book, and what information each book contained and how it applied to my query.

Unfortunately, the interview did not end as well, as the next user stepped up right away, adding to a general sense of bustle and hurry in a crowded building. The time of day, immediately at the end of the work day, would explain the crowds, but the librarian's rush to get me away from the desk and on to the next patron was a sour note in an otherwise positive interview – especially when she neglected to include a follow-up question at the close of the interview.

The accuracy of this interview was also, unfortunately, lacking. The librarian's off-the-cuff suggestion of the Wall Street station was entirely incorrect: the Wall Street station was not even part of the original 28 stations that were used on the subway's first day of operation. Despite the open questions of the reference interview, the books suggested were too old to have any information about the newest stations, and were spread out on three different floors, sending me on a wild goose chase just to find the resources. The closest I found to an answer was a map in the New York State Encyclopedia, showing track sections by construction date, and even that did not include individual stations. The librarian was so busy when I returned to the desk I left without asking for further sources, unwilling to wait for more potentially unhelpful information.

E-mail Reference

The e-mail reference section was a source of great frustration. I selected a local public library system that advertised e-mail reference on its website, and followed the instructions there, receiving an e-mailed confirmation of my question. Four days later I received no further response or indication of a forthcoming reply. I selected another library and sent the question in, but as of this writing no response has been received from there either. It barely needs saying that e-mail reference is utterly unsuccessful when the user receives no answer, and it is impossible to know if the difficulties are technical or library-related.

Preferred Reference Format

Of the three more technological forms of reference, the Chat interview was the most successful, and is my preferred format. The ability to “push” websites to the user and the availability of transcripts make this format the closest to In-Person reference, and the format is extremely useful to workers and students who need a question quickly answered but are unable to visit the library. The accuracy of the answers received in Chat format solidify its high ranking.

While the In-Person format did not yield correct information, it allowed me to interact directly with the librarian, and for both of us to use non-verbal cues during our transaction. I also appreciated being able to access the sources directly, without waiting long periods of time for an answer. While I was most impressed with the outcome of the Chat session, the In-Person reference interview was also gratifying.

While the Telephone format yielded accurate answers, the attitude of the librarian was so off-putting that it was hardly worth dealing with her to get that information. The E-mail format was a disaster, and the unreliability leaves me extremely hesitant to attempt it again.

Likelihood of Returning

I would definitely use the In-Person and Chat format of reference again. Based on my Telephone reference interview for this project, I would not utilize the telephone reference service at this library again, although I would consider trying other library systems’ services. I am not interested in e-mail service based on my experiences: the passage of time between transmitting one’s question and discovering there has been a problem – or, hypothetically, actually receiving an answer – outweighs any potential benefits.

Conclusion

In hindsight, the question asked was constructed very specifically: battling the impulse to give as much information as possible in forming my query – a habit developed after years of working as a page and a circulation clerk – proved to be more difficult than I had anticipated. If I were to repeat this exercise I would begin my query with a request for information about subways, rather than stating from the beginning what I was specifically seeking, in order to create further opportunities to determine the librarian's willingness to extend the reference interview.

Regardless of the construction of the query, or the amount of clarifying questions asked, the treatment accorded in the E-mail and Telephone reference interviews was inexcusable and could potentially drive a user away from using library services in the future. If I require reference assistance in the future, I will not rely on either of these services, but will return to those methods that apply Dewdney and Ross's theories in providing reference service.

References

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