

Ideas for staffing the Virtual Reference Desk



Where do you sit?

Sit in your office. If you are just getting used to your virtual reference software, you may find it helpful to be free of distractions. Sitting in your own workspace or office will help you concentrate on helping virtual patrons.

If there are long gaps in between patrons, you have the opportunity to spend your time working on something else, such as catching up on virtual-reference-related professional reading.

Librarians sitting at their own desks often feel like they are limited to answering questions with only online and web resources. Don't fall into that trap! Your experience with and knowledge of print reference sources is a necessary part of delivering great service. If you know you can answer a reference question with a print source that is across the room, building or campus, ask the patron to wait, or if it is busy at the virtual reference desk, ask if you can get back to them later. Use what you know.

Sit at the reference desk. Forget about *virtual reference* and just think of it as *reference*. Chat and e-mail are only another way you answer reference questions. The format is new, but the service is the same. Train everybody - whoever is on the desk is on the virtual desk.

Staffing your virtual reference service from your regular reference desk takes away a scheduling headache and ensures that all staff members develop the skills and experience to deliver fantastic online service.

You will also have access to your local print reference collection and everything else you are used to having for public service.

Sometimes we worry that an in-person patron won't understand we are busy with a virtual patron. All you have to do is smile and tell the person, "I'm working with another person online, please wait." If the in-person patron has an urgent need, you can say something similar to the virtual patron.

Sit at a telephone reference call center. If your library has a space (room, nook, closet) where staff answer telephone reference questions and have access to print reference sources, it might be the ideal place to staff the virtual reference desk.

You get the best of both worlds – access to print sources, integration with the regular routine, and the isolation to concentrate in the new environment.

