

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.

L-net's collaborative reference model

With L-net, 24 of our 28 partner libraries share 30-40 two-hour shifts each week, covering 10am-6pm Monday-Friday. Each library covers 1-3 shifts a week and librarians from OCLC and the 24/7 reference cooperative (each with an MLS or equivalent) cover our mornings, evening and weekend hours.

15 libraries share in answering our e-mail reference questions. New questions are assigned to any library on a rotating basis. Questions can be referred anywhere in the system (and coming soon: out of the system).

It is routine for a librarian to answer questions for patrons from other libraries. To help us do this, we have a page of quick links (www.oregonlibraries.net/staff/docs/quick.shtml) that lists each library's home page, library catalog, databases page, and ask a librarian page.

We also have use OCLC's Policy Manual, which gives quick access to phone numbers, policies and collection strengths.

Another model for collaborative chat reference

One clear advantage to our current model is that each library is online 2-5 hours per week in exchange for 168 hours of service. There are training sessions and meetings to attend, but it's a big return for a small contribution.

The model works well for general reference and the kinds of questions any librarian can answer. There will always be times when the patron really does need to talk to a staff person at their local library. The patron might need in-depth help with their library's resources, want to know about a local event, or have a circulation question. In L-net, we have the ability to refer the question in those situations.

L-net received over 2,000 chat reference requests in May 2006. That's enough to keep us very busy, but what would we do if the number were closer to 20,000? One way to handle it would be to connect as many patrons as possible with their local librarians.

Each library would cover the virtual reference desk during all or most of its open hours. It's a greater staff commitment, but the patrons would get more out of it too, receiving local help when their library was open, and help from the general collaborative service when their library was closed.

Portland State University is taking this approach to staffing L-net. They cover their own "queue" when their regular reference desk is open. When their librarians are not online, PSU patrons get referred to L-net. When L-net

librarians are not online, they get referred to the 24/7 cooperative. See PSU's Reference Services page at www.lib.pdx.edu/aska/.

Who gets to be online?

Most libraries have more librarians interested in providing virtual reference service than they have shifts to let them staff.

Ideally, every librarian should be online for at least one shift at every other week. New librarians to the service might want to be online every week.

For a while, the Multnomah County Library had 12 librarians on their virtual reference team, but only two shifts each week. The result was that everyone got a shift every six weeks, the librarians were rusty, and the schedulers confused.

Here are some of our own libraries' creative solutions to this problem:

Take long turns. At the Corvallis-Benton County Library, librarians take two-month rotations covering the library's L-net shift. Librarian skills are fresh and the scheduler only has to worry about one person at a time. Multnomah has now adopted this model as well.

Share the wealth. The Eugene Public Library divides their two-hour shifts in half, giving each librarian on their team at least an hour of service a week.

Double up. At Deschutes Public Library Services, two librarians staff each shift, so the online librarian has a backup during busy times, people can take breaks, and everyone gets to answer a question.

It's just a job. Oregon State University tried solving the problem naturally by making their virtual reference shift the same as their regular reference shifts. All reference tasks were integrated into each shift, and everybody had the chance to build their skills.

Identify key providers. Virtual reference may not be for everyone. Existing lists of core competencies for providing virtual reference service can serve as a basis for choosing who gets to be online.