

The Nature of Chat Reference

Introduction

You'll find that using IM technologies to communicate with your patrons is a little different than speaking to them over the phone or talking to them in person. When a walkup patron approaches the reference desk, we communicate back and forth using not only spoken language, but body language as well. A smile, a frown, or even the set of the shoulders can tell us a lot about the patron's comfort levels and attitude (and also the librarian's). On the phone, the patron and librarian can express enthusiasm, frustration, impatience, or exhaustion all by the tone of voice they choose to use.

In chat reference, we can neither see nor hear the patron's mood. Rather, we rely on the written word to ask and answer questions during the reference interview. For good public service, it is always important to remember that the patron may not be the quickest (or most accurate) typist, or the best speller, or even able to express themselves efficiently with the written word alone. Moreover, some patrons will be using the chat reference service for the first time, and may be intimidated or wary of this form of communication.

Starting the chat session

Timing is everything. When a patron's question first comes into the chat, it is important to acknowledge them within the first two minutes (if not immediately), to assure them that there is someone on the other end of the chat. Even if you're helping someone else when the chat comes in and can't dedicate all your attention to the new incoming chat, a quick hello will be enough to welcome the chat patron to the session (if you'd like, you can create a scripted reply for this, e.g. "Hello, I'm helping another patron at the moment and will be with you shortly"). Chat patrons don't mind waiting a few minutes while you're helping someone that came before them. They just want to be sure that the librarian is aware of their presence.

During the chat

While in a chat session, you'll often want to send the patron links or files to help them in their research. Keep in mind that when you do send the patron something, they will usually look at the link, file, etc. and not communicate with you for a minute or two. This is normal. After a couple of minutes, if the patron still hasn't sent back a response, you might write to them with something like, "Is that helpful?" or "Is this what you had in mind?", just to make sure that they don't have anything else to communicate. They will usually come back and say, "Yes! Thank you!" or "No, I'm looking for info about xxxx." At that point, just as in any reference interview, you can expand on the patron's query and get to the details of what they really want. One of the hardest things about being a reference librarian is knowing how to ask the right questions to 'solve the mystery' of the patron's query (sometimes the patron might not even know this when they begin their research). A great reference librarian not only answers questions, but also knows how to help the patron clarify his/her own thoughts.

A word about entering text: it's not necessary to write out a long, complex sentence in its completion before you send it to the patron.

Sometimes it's easier to write a few words out so that the patron can easily follow your train of thought without having to wait until you finish the entire sentence. See what I mean?

Ending the chat

From the chat conversation, you will be able to tell when you've satisfied the patron, even if only for the moment. Once you give them a resource or two, they will want to explore that resource and either thank you and tell you goodbye, or leave you on the line. Like was said before, if they leave you waiting for more than a minute or two, you can nudge them with something like, "Is that helpful?" If you don't get a response back from the patron (they're probably enthralled in the wonderful new resource you've given them), you can always write something like, "ok, I need to help another patron. Please feel free to chat the library again if you need more assistance. Good luck! Bye for now." At that point, you close the chat. If they need you again, they'll chat you again.

Resources

Here are a few articles that talk about chat reference:

<http://librariansatthegate.blogspot.com/2006/01/implementing-instant-message-im.html>

http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Online_Reference#Specific_Blog_Posts.2FArticles_to_Check_Out

<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral.cfm>

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a902697248>