SPEC

Reference Service Statistics & Assessment

A SPEC Kit compiled by

Eric Novotny
History Librarian
Pennsylvania State University

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<pubs@arl.org>

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SPEC

SURVEY

ASSOCIATION OF RESEARCH LIBRARIES
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Executive Summary

Introduction

Research libraries have been gathering data on reference transactions for decades. This venerable practice has gained renewed attention in recent years as many academic libraries have experienced a sharp reduction in the number of transactions recorded. The cause and meaning of this widespread occurrence has sparked considerable discussion in the profession.

This SPEC survey examines and documents how ARL member libraries are collecting and using their data on reference service transactions. For the purposes of this survey, a reference transaction was defined as an information contact that involves the knowledge, use, recommendations, interpretation, or instruction in the use of one or more information sources by a member of the library staff. The transaction can take place at a reference desk, via online chat, individual consultation, mail, or telephone. The definition does not include simple directional questions, bibliographic instruction presentations to groups, or database and Web site usage.

In the summer of 2002, this survey was distributed to the 124 ARL member libraries. A total of 77 responses (62%) were received. It was hoped that the survey results would reveal current best practices, but instead, they revealed a situation in flux. It is now hoped that the results will stimulate reflection on how the profession can develop more satisfactory methods for recording and assessing the reference encounter.

Reference Data Collection Techniques

Reference transactions no longer occur solely at a reference desk and libraries are attempting to capture data from a number of service points. Not surprisingly, every one of the responding libraries offers reference service in person at a desk. Telephone and e-mail are utilized by every library that responded, while the vast majority (91%) also offers service via mail and by appointment. Although not as ubiquitous as other methods, chat reference and reference question Web forms are available in many of the libraries (55% and 71%, respectively).

Respondents were asked to identify the methods by which this wide variety of reference service is evaluated. By far the most common measure is the number of reference transactions (96%). Surveys, including LibQUAL+™, are the next most popular technique for assessing performance. Other assessment techniques, such as focus groups and patron interviews, have been less widely adopted. For those respondents who record data on reference transactions, the overwhelming majority (99%) do so manually, using the traditional tick mark on a piece of paper. The collection method is changing somewhat as new technologies are used to deliver reference service. For example, a substantial number of libraries reported using software to automate the data-gathering process for chat reference interactions.

Data Collection Periods

While the respondents uniformly report that they collect data on the number of reference transactions, there is great variety in when the data is recorded. Slightly over half (51%) reported collecting data on reference transactions throughout the entire year. Others reported employing a diverse set of collection periods. Some collect data during designated sampling days only, while others collect some basic data throughout the year and more specific data only during sampling periods (e.g., for reporting statistics to ARL). Other libraries collect data on chat reference throughout the year while using sampling periods for desk and telephone interactions. Many commented that techniques varied within the library, with different service units developing individualized approaches tailored to their specific data needs. From the responses it is clear that ARL libraries have not reached a consensus on how often reference transaction data should be recorded.

The two most prevalent reasons given for collecting statistics beyond the short periods designated for ARL statistics sampling were the need to gather data over a longer time period (79%) and a concern over the accuracy of projecting annual statistics based solely on a single week's worth of data (71%). Sheer momentum may also be a factor in why some libraries collect statistics year round. History or tradition was cited in the comments of several respondents. As one succinctly summarized, "We have always done it this way."

Reference Activity Recorded

Respondents reported that they gather data covering a wide range of reference interactions. At least 60% routinely gather transaction data not only for questions asked at a reference desk, but also for telephone inquiries, e-mail reference questions, individual appointments, questions asked at other service points (e.g., circulation, media desk), mailed reference questions, chat reference questions, and questions sent directly to individual staff members via telephone or e-mail. Fewer libraries reported recording data on office hours, or the use of research guides and other user aids found on the library's Web site.

In deciding what data to record, libraries generally opted for quantitative over qualitative information. The most popular data elements collected are: Date (91%), Type of Question (e.g., reference or directional, etc.) (91%), Time of Day (84%), and Location of the Reference Transaction (80%). A significant minority also reported recording the amount of time needed to answer the question (43%). More subjective measures have not been widely adopted. Only 11% of respondents indicated that they collect data on the difficulty of the question, while only 3% routinely gather data on the adequacy of the response. Respondents were not asked to supply reasons for why they collected the data they did, but it is likely that convenience is a primary factor. It is certainly easier to note the number of transactions than it is to determine the quality of the encounter.

Changes in Data Collection Practices

Nearly half of the responding libraries reported that in the last three years they have made significant changes to the way reference transactions are recorded. Ironically, while some libraries are going from collecting data regularly to using sampling techniques, others reported that they planned to stop using sampling and start collecting data on a daily basis. Other recent changes can be attributed to the creation of new services, especially chat reference. Many libraries seem to be taking advantage of the automatic recording of data offered by most chat software packages. In some cases the data collected by chat software, and a desire for comparable data, has motivated a review of the data collected across all reference service points.

The changing nature of reference service appears to be causing other modifications in the way reference service statistics are collected. Perhaps motivated by declining activity at the reference desk itself, many libraries reported placing greater emphasis on fully recording reference activity taking place at other service points (e.g., circulation, reserves, etc.). Respondents largely attributed the decline in reference desk activity to the Internet and the fact that researchers no longer need to enter the library to conduct research or ask questions. This reasoning has led many to increase efforts to capture off-desk interactions such as e-mail queries sent directly to individual staff members.

Analysis and Use of Reference Transaction Data

When asked to identify the category of staff responsible for analyzing reference transaction data, survey respondents indicated that library administrators and reference librarians are most often responsible for this task. Other groups or individuals who use this data include various reference working groups or teams, the Management Information Services unit or manager, the ARL statistics coordinator, and library administrative groups. Spreadsheet software is the application of choice for analyzing the data. The use of statistical packages, such as SPSS, is not widespread. More libraries analyze their statistics manually than use statistical software. This may reflect the backgrounds and statistical knowledge of those involved, or, since responses to another survey question indicated that the most commonly recorded data elements are the time, date, and location of the reference interaction, it may be a result of the nature of the data collected. These elements don't require the use of a sophisticated data analysis tool to interpret their meaning.

Contributing to national statistics, monitoring trends in reference services, and determining appropriate staffing levels were the most frequently cited uses of the data collected on reference services. Somewhat surprisingly, justifying the budget was not a consideration for the majority of respondents; only 34% indicated that they use reference service statistics for this purpose. Data is disseminated primarily through internal library reports and reports to national, state, or regional organizations. Relatively few libraries reported distributing their data through other methods such as placing the information on their Web page, library newsletter, or via press releases.

Library Self-Evaluation: Minimum, Desired, and Actual Performance Ratings

Respondents were asked to indicate their impressions about the quality of their library's assessment activities with respect to recording, analyzing, and using reference transaction data. After indicating their expectations for the minimum level and desired level of service on a scale of 1 to 9, where 1 is lowest and 9 is highest, they were asked to rate their library's actual performance level. While they have fairly high expectations on average, the respondents did not give themselves high marks when asked to assess their own performance on these three tasks. As a group, the responding libraries rated their performance as **below** the minimum performance level in the analysis and use of reference transaction data. Only in recording reference transactions did they collectively indicate that their perceived performance was above the bare **minimum** performance level. And, in all three areas (collection, analysis, and use of data) the library's performance was deemed to fall far short of the desired performance levels. Although the reasons for the poor self-ratings were not disclosed, the scores clearly indicate widespread dissatisfaction with current practices relating to reference transaction data.

Further analysis of the data did not reveal any obvious correlation between data collection strategies and high or low self-rankings. Libraries that use assessment methodologies other than simply counting transactions, such as LibQUAL+™ and other user surveys, were comparably grouped with their peers when it came to rating their own performance. Not surprisingly, libraries that reported collecting more categories of data rated themselves highest on their statistics recording performance, but their ratings on analyzing and making use of the data were scattered across the scale of 1 to 9. Libraries that had changed, or were planning to change, their practices did not rate themselves significantly differently than those who had not made or were not planning changes.

Conclusion

These survey responses are a snapshot of a time of uncertainty and change in ARL libraries. Nearly half of the respondents have made significant changes to their data collection practices in the last three years, while over half indicate that they are planning future changes. Libraries seem to be casting about for the ideal solution, with one library investigating the methods recently abandoned by another. Some libraries are considering sampling, while others are expanding their data collection periods. Some are adopting more complicated forms, while others are planning to simplify theirs.

The survey reveals a general lack of confidence in current data collection techniques. Some of the dissatisfaction may be due to the fact that 77% of responding libraries reported that the number of reference transactions has decreased in the past three years. With many librarians feeling as busy as ever, some have concluded that the reference service data being collected does not accurately record their own level of activity. This is not a new sentiment, the library literature is replete with lamentations over the inadequacies of reference statistics, but the dramatic decline in recorded reference desk activities appears to have generated renewed interest in addressing the problem of developing meaningful measures of reference activity. The migration of reference activity to areas beyond the traditional reference desk (e-mail, chat, office consultations), has further motivated many libraries to re-examine and modify their current practices.

Given the long history of complaints about traditional methods for recording and assessing reference services, it is perhaps not surprising that as a group ARL libraries report being unhappy with their own procedures. What is alarming is the depth of dissatisfaction. The mean scores for a library's actual performance ratings are almost the same as, and in general lower than, the minimum expected performance levels. These self-ratings, and the numbers of libraries that are exploring significant changes to their practices, demonstrate a widespread concern regarding the collection of data on reference services. It is hoped that this survey, by calling attention to the depth of the problems, will inspire libraries, librarians, and library associations to devote the resources necessary to developing innovative, efficient, and effective procedures that can be widely adopted. The place to begin is in our own institutions. Over 80% of respondents indicated that a person or group in their library was responsible for coordinating the collection of reference transaction data. Those filling this role can examine their own practices, and take the lead in designing and testing improvements in our data collection procedures. The problem is a long-standing one, and the search for solutions continues.