Providing client services

Introduction

All libraries provide services to their clients. The kind and the level of service differ according to the type and size of the library, and how well it is funded.

Client services include making clients aware of the available services and resources, teaching clients to use the library more effectively, and providing specific information (including sources of information, especially on the Internet) in response to client requests.

When you have completed this section, you should be able to:

- make clients more aware of the library’s facilities and resources
- explain why client education is necessary
- define levels of service
- describe ‘virtual reference service’.

The main topics in this section are:

1. Client awareness
2. Client education
3. What is reference service?
4. Reference service on the Web
5. Virtual reference service

Client awareness

Libraries need to inform their clients about the facilities and resources available to them. These include:

- particular sections of the library - e.g., a children’s library
- hardware and software - e.g., a computer and scanner with Kurzweil software for visually impaired clients
- services - e.g., a current awareness service to alert clients to new material in their areas of interest.

They often do this by producing pamphlets and posters that describe the facilities and resources. These need to contain enough information to assist clients, and be sufficiently attractive and easy-to-read to encourage clients to use them.
Client education

Some libraries regard client education as an essential part of their role. This is true especially of school and academic libraries, and many public libraries.

Client education performs two necessary functions:

- it enables people to gain skills in finding and using information
- it reduces the pressure on library staff by encouraging clients to find their own information.

For example, you could teach clients to search the catalogue effectively by:

- demonstrating catalogue use
- giving them an exercise to find particular information on the catalogue
- providing a PowerPoint presentation
- producing an interactive multimedia tutorial.

There is more about providing training in Training small groups.

What is reference service?

Reference service is provided when a library provides the answer, or the source for the answer, to a question asked by a client.

Traditionally, reference services have given the answers to client queries. Increasingly, answers to specific enquiries are found on the Web. Libraries now consider it sufficient to give the URL, or Internet address, where the answer can be found.

Some libraries provide a very high level of reference service. They include:

- special libraries, whose primary function is to provide information to the staff of their organisation
- national and state libraries, which offer extensive information services to the public
- some academic libraries, which provide an information service especially to teaching and research staff.

Public libraries offer varying reference services, depending on the staff and resources available.

School libraries may provide limited reference services to teaching staff. They generally consider that their main function is to offer information resources and assistance to students to learn to use these resources effectively themselves.
Reference service on the Web

Libraries may offer reference services in person, by telephone, fax, post and/or email.

Many libraries have an enquiry form on their website.

The National Library of Australia and the state libraries listed have a reference service enquiry form on their website.


Virtual reference service

There are many types of ‘virtual reference service’. They include:

- email reference services, which provide written replies to client questions. They may supply a referral to an electronic source (usually a website) rather than an answer.
- online chat, which is not yet very successful. This is probably due to a combination of technical problems and the difficulty of ensuring that appropriate specialist staff are available.
- fully automated solutions based on answers from a knowledge base. That is, simple answers are supplied to clients from a database of information, with little or no input from a person.

Although these solutions, especially the fully automated ones, raise important questions of quality, a service like ‘Ask Jeeves’ that handles 4.5 million questions a day cannot provide personal responses.

Collaborative Digital Reference Service

The Library of Congress has initiated the Collaborative Digital Reference Service [http://www.loc.gov/rr/digiref/about.html] to bring together large libraries around the world to share
reference queries. It aims to develop a ‘24/7’ service - that is, 24
hours a day, 7 days a week - in which a query may be answered
by any participating library. Libraries with specialised collections
and/or knowledge will be able to provide more expert answers,
wherever in the world the questions come from.

Software is being developed for online reference - e.g., the
Virtual Reference Desk
[>http://www.virtualreference.net/virtual/] from Library
Systems and Services (LSSI). The company has a demo site
[>http://www.virtualreference.net/virtual/] that provides
information about its purpose, and suggestions for planning and
using a virtual reference service.