

Virtual Reference Services in Modern Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Reference Service is an important personalized service in the library and information centers. Traditionally, it is a one-to-one service provided by the reference librarian to users. But the present epoch is being transformed by the technology. Thus, with the progression of shifting technology the approaches of providing reference service in the libraries are gradually changing. Nowadays it is offered to the user in a fresh and more developed form called as “virtual reference service”, also known as “digital reference service” (Mahrana & Panda, n. d.). Virtual reference is reference service commenced by electronic means where patrons employ technology (a computer or any other form) to communicate with the professionals without being physically present. The modes of communication often used in virtual reference include e-mail, instant messaging, chat, Voice-over-IP, videoconferencing, co-browsing etc. (RUSA, 2010). Virtual Reference Services (VRS) have high user satisfaction (Mu, Dimitroff, Jordan, & Burclaff, 2011). As libraries make more digital resources available over the web, virtual reference traffic is consequently expected to increase. According to Gray (2000a) more internet use is equal to more Virtual reference traffic. The present article aims to discuss the concept of Virtual Reference Services in contemporary libraries. It also assesses nascent modes of providing quality Virtual Reference Services. Further the chapter also discusses reputed Virtual Reference systems of select online Libraries.

Keywords: *Ask A Service, E-Reference, Instant Messaging, Reference Desk, Reference Service, Virtual Reference Service, Web forms, Widgets*

INTRODUCTION

Reference services also referred as 'Reference and Information Services' mean the personalized assistance provided to users in their quest for information. In simple terms, reference services are the services provided by a library and librarians to guide patrons or users to find the relevant information they need or want. Reference service librarians advise, assist, recommend, and instruct users in retrieving and accessing the knowledge. It includes both direct and indirect services to clients (Dominican University, n. d.). Hence the method of providing personal attention to readers in terms of meeting their specific needs is given the name 'Reference Service' (Chandwani, 2010a). Bunge (1999) categorized reference services into three broad groups: services whereby a librarian finds the required information on behalf of the users or assists users in his search for the relevant information; services whereby Instructions to users are provided regarding the use of library services and resources and services whereby users are guided in choosing the most suitable information sources (as cited in Chowdury, 2002). Dr. S. R. Ranganathan recognized two aspects of reference service - Ready Reference Service and Long Range Reference service. Former service is a fact finding type that can be furnished in a short span of time and latter service is based on referring every source of information to retrieve the required information; as such, it is not possible to render this type of service immediately (Types of Reference and information service, n. d.). With the advent and introduction of latest and novel technologies the importance of these technologies has tremendously grew in library and information centers. Librarians all over the world have always been eager to integrate new tools and technologies like computers, World Wide Web, social media tools in library and information centers so as to advance and improve the delivery of services. The latest innovation that is generating interest is "Digital reference" (Diamond & Pease, 2001) also known as Virtual reference. There are various other terms in use: online reference; electronic reference; live reference. Web-based library reference services have arisen as dynamic substitutes to the former face-to-face (F2F) and telephone reference meeting (OCLC, 2008). According to Cheng, 2008 libraries have developed virtual reference services (VRS) in order to provide efficient and effective reference services to patrons in and out of the library and even to users not in the library's usual service community. As information assets are becoming increasingly web-based and used actively by patrons and users over the internet, libraries are providing more and more virtual reference services (VRS). Virtual reference delivers a reference service via electronic means be it an email or real time web chat. A model VRS provides professional reference service to patrons anytime and anywhere (Jin, Huang, Lin & Guo, 2006). According to the guidelines provided by RUSA (2010), the reference service introduced via electronic means where clients employ computers or other

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