Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers

Developed by the System-Wide Reference Team, Boston Public Library. June 13, 2001

Introduction

After a process of reviewing current provisions, professional literature and conducting internal/external surveys we conclude the best course of action is to adopt an amended version of "Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Services Professionals" issued by the Reference and Adult Services Division (RASD) of the American Library Association. The committee felt the established standards set forth by the RASD eloquently and professionally demonstrate the staff behaviors the Boston Public Library strives to achieve in providing reference service to the public.

The intentions of these guidelines are to assist in the training, development, and/or evaluation of reference providers who deliver information services directly to library clients. The reference provider is any staff member who assists clients with reference questions. The guidelines are designed primarily to deal with instances in which the client and the reference provider are working face to face, although many suggestions will apply to reference work done by telephone, by mail, or electronically.

1.0 Approachability

In order to have a successful reference transaction, the client must be able to identify that a reference provider is available to give assistance and must feel comfortable in going to that provider for help. Approachability behaviors set the tone for the entire communication process between the provider and the client. The initial verbal and non-verbal responses of the provider will influence the depth and level of the interaction between the provider and the client. At this stage in the process, the behaviors exhibited by the provider should serve to welcome the client and to place him/her at ease. The provider's role in the communications process is to make the client feel comfortable in a situation which may be perceived as intimidating, risky, confusing, and overwhelming. To be approachable, the provider:

1.1 Is poised and ready to engage approaching clients and ready to drop instantly any other activities that detract from the availability to the client.

1.2 Establishes initial eye contact with the client.

1.3 Acknowledges the presence of the client through smiling and/or open body language.

1.4 Acknowledges the client through the use of a friendly greeting to initiate conversation and/or by standing up, moving forward, or moving closer to the client.

1.5 Acknowledges others waiting for service.

1.6 Remains visible to clients as much as possible.

1.7 Moves through the reference area offering assistance whenever possible.

2.0 Interest
A successful reference provider must demonstrate a high degree of interest in the reference transaction. While not every query will contain stimulating intellectual challenges, the provider should be interested in each client's informational needs and should be committed to providing the most effective assistance. Providers who demonstrate a high level of interest in the inquiries of their clients will generate a higher level of satisfaction among users. To demonstrate interest, the provider:

2.1 Faces the client when speaking and listening.

2.2 Maintains or re-establishes eye contact with the client throughout the transaction.

2.3 Establishes a physical distances which appear to be comfortable for the provider and the client, based upon the client's verbal and nonverbal responses.

2.4 Signals an understanding of the client's needs through verbal or non-verbal confirmation, such as nodding of the head or brief comments or questions.

2.5 Appears unhurried during the reference transaction.

2.6 Focuses his/her attention on the client.

2.7 Generally, client present receives service before telephone clients. Please be mindful of the duration of time a client remains on hold. Courtesy applies to both clients waiting whether on hold or in person.

3.0 Listening/Inquiring
The reference interview is the heart of the reference transaction and is crucial to the success of the process. The reference provider must be effective in identifying the client's information needs and must do so in a manner that keeps the client at ease. Strong listening and questioning skills are necessary for a positive interaction. As a good communicator, the provider:

3.1 Communicates in a receptive, cordial, and encouraging manner.

3.2 Allows the client to state fully his/her information need in his/her own words before responding.

3.3 Rephrases the client's question or request and asks for confirmation to ensure that it is understood.

3.4 Uses open-ended questioning techniques to encourage the client to expand on the request or present additional information. Some examples:
     Please tell me more about your topic.
     What additional information can you give me?
     How much information do you need?
     Where have you already looked?

3.5 Uses closed and/or clarifying questions to refine the search query. Some examples of clarifying questions are:
     What have you already found?
     What type of information do you need (books, articles, etc.)?
     Do you need current or historical information?

3.6 Seeks to clarify confusing terminology and avoids excessive jargon.

3.7 Maintains objectivity and does not interject value judgments about subject matter or the nature of the question into the transaction.

4.0 Searching
The search process is the portion of the transaction in which behavior and accuracy intersect. Without an effective search, the desired information is unlikely to be found. Yet many of the aspects of searching that lead to accurate results are still dependent on the behavior of the reference provider. As an effective searcher, the provider:

4.1 Selects search terms that are most related to the information desired.

4.2 Explains search strategy to client.

4.3 Consults guides, databases, or other providers for assistance when he/she cannot independently identify sources to answer the query.

4.4 Accompanies the client (at least in the initial stages of the search process).

4.5 Explains how to use electronic and paper sources.

4.6 Works with the client to narrow or broaden the topic when too little or too much information is identified.

4.7 Provides complete source/citation to information.

4.8 Asks the client if additional information is needed after an initial result is found.

4.9 Recognizes when to refer a client to a more appropriate librarian, library, or other resource person.

5.0 Follow-up
The reference transaction does not end when the reference provider walks away from the client. The provider is responsible for determining if the client is satisfied with the results of the search and is responsible for referring the patrons to other sources, even when those sources are not available in the local library. For successful follow-up, the provider:

5.1 Asks the client if the question has been completely answered. Encourages the patron to return to the reference service point for further assistance.

5.2 Consults other providers when additional subject expertise is needed.

5.3 Makes arrangements, when appropriate, with the client to research a question even after the client has left the library.

5.4 Tries to ensure that the client will get appropriate service after a referral by providing accurate information about the query to the next provider or other resource person, including the amount of information required and sources already consulted.

5.5 Facilitates the process of referring a client to another library or information agency through activities such as calling ahead providing direction and instructions, and providing the library and the client with as much information as possible.

5.6 Refers the client to other sources or institutions when the query cannot be answered to the satisfaction of the client.