

# REFERENCE SERVICE AND THE TECHNIQUES OF HANDLING LIBRARY CLIENTELE

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Since the operative word of the topic is REFERENCE, it is only expedient that a search be made for its definition. *The librarians' Glossary*<sup>1</sup> has defined REFERENCE (in cataloguing) as a direction from one heading to another. It goes further to define REFERENCE WORK as that branch of the library's services which includes the assistance given to readers in their search for information on various subjects; the work of the Reference Library; a book or work compiled to be referred to rather than for continued reading; a personal assistance given by the librarian to individual readers needing information.

The Reference Department of a library is that which contains books which are for consultation in the library alone. In other words a Reference Library does not normally allow the use of its books elsewhere other than on its premises. This is quite unlike a lending library where books can be withdrawn for a borrower for home reading for specified period of time. In a nutshell, reference service is the provision and organisation by a library of reference work.

Reference works enable the library user to learn more effectively what books and periodicals are available on a particular facet of discipline. It must satisfy the demands for greater depth in their subject interest. In a large library the Reference Department should always have a Chief Librarian, other librarians and several reference assistants.

## How a Reference Library Operates

A reference library may be regarded as an automation. Its functions include input of information i.e. updating the knowledge in its field of specialisation, processing information i.e. classifying, indexing and storing, and output of information i.e. retrieving information at any time. The operation of the automation is very simple. Information is fed into the system in the form of books and periodicals purchased daily. At each moment when a new book or material is acquired, the system changes its state in the sense that the content of the library stock is increased, the books together with the bookshelves may be rearranged so that additional space may be required. The system's response is in the form of a notice of new acquisitions issued to the prospective customers, and a quest to administration for additional shelving.

A finite - state automation consists of a finite number of

elements, i.e., it responds only to a fixed sets of stimuli. As a requirement of its operation, it is sometimes necessary for the automaton to increase its content, and this growth can go on at any time or all the time without any limit, although its content can never go to infinity. For example, if it had to store the complete history of its own operations, it would store all the inputs it never received when it received them. Such automata are called "growing automata".

Automata which are limited in growth or have no growth at all are called "fixed automata". Automata systems are characterised as being information dependent. They transmit information, process information, or their input or output is information e.g. computers, telephone networks, and robots are considered as automata while power transformers and furnaces are not. In this way, a reference library assumes the character of an automaton through the power of its spontaneous and unconscious intellectual appeal to its users.

## Reference Books

It is impracticable to talk of a reference library in isolation of reference books. However varied the work of a Reference Department may be, the reference book is the basis of its work. Therefore the most important element in equipping such a department is an adequate and live collection of reference books, plus a knowledgeable reference assistant with experience in using and providing the right book at the right time and in the right way.

In other words, the possession of the right books and the knowledge of how to use them are two things essential to the success of a reference library. The ignorant assistant can render comparatively useless the finest collection of reference books, while the skilled assistant who knows how to get from each book all the various kinds of information, can show astonishing result even when limited to only a few basic books.

From the point of view of use, books may be divided into two groups - viz, those which are meant to be read through for



either information or enjoyment, and those which are meant to be consulted or referred to for some definite piece of information. Books of this second class are called Reference Books. They are usually comprehensive in scope, condensed in treatment and arranged on some special plan to facilitate the ready and accurate finding of information.

This special arrangement may be alphabetical as in the case of historical outline or annuals; tabular as in the case of statistical abstracts; regional as in atlases, classified or systematic as in the case of some bibliographies and technical handbooks. Such other reference books, basic to research, that is, general and special, serve as a reference to librarians, research workers or other users of library resources, a selection aid for librarians and a textbook for students, who either in library school, training class or college course in bibliography, is pursuing a systematic study of reference books.

On the other hand, there are those reference books of universal nature which are not devoted to special subjects. These are national bibliographies, encyclopaedias, language dictionaries, directories, periodicals, newspapers, government publications and dissertations.

As books are used for the finding of single definite fact, some alphabetical approach to the fact is usually needed. If the book is not itself arranged alphabetically, it is usually provided with a detailed alphabetical index. Any or all works which follow any of these arrangements are of reference books, pure and simple, and are not used for consecutive reading.

There are, however, other books, which, while intended primarily to be read through for either information or pleasure, are so comprehensive in their treatment, and so well provided with indexes that they serve also as reference books. Some basic reference books necessary for the effective operations of the reference department of a library have been highlighted in the glossary attached to this article.

### Studying Reference Books

Only constant and practical use of a reference book will make a student or reference librarian thoroughly familiar with its character and use. First, the title page has to be examined carefully for information as regards the scope of the work, the author's name and his previous records and earlier works, publisher and date of publication by checking copyright date usually on the overleaf of the title page, and data of preface to determine the date of information in the book.

Secondly, the preface or introduction should be read for further information as to the scope of work, special features, limitation if any, and comparison with any book on the same subject. In examining both preface and articles, note should be taken of any evidence of lack of impartiality, for instance, if the book deals with a controversial subject like religion or politics, does it represent only one side, or in the case of a biographical work, are the selection of names, kind and length of article, determined in any way by a desire to secure subscribers.

Thirdly, the book should be examined for arrangement, kind of entry, cross references, supplementary lists, indexes, quality and kind of articles, i.e. whether they are popular or scientific, impartial or biased, whether they are equipped with satisfactory bibliographical references or footnotes. Several articles should be read carefully and compared with similar articles in other books.

The student or librarian should, if possible look up some subjects of which he had special knowledge as a means of securing accurate information. Irrespective of how important the form or arrangement of a reference book may be, the reliability of its information is still of greater importance and knowledge of its comparative accuracy or inaccuracy is fundamental to any real knowledge of the book.

Fourth, in studying the arrangement of a book, the possibility of variation in books which follow the same general arrangement should be noted, for instance, the rules to be followed in alphabetizing in the work arranged in alphabetical order.

Fifth, if a reference work is a new or a revised edition, it should be examined carefully to determine whether it is so complete and thorough that it supersedes the earlier work; whether there are omissions of some materials included in the earlier work which is still useful, in which case the two editions may have to be used together, or whether it is so insufficient and superficial that the earlier edition is still preferable.

A reference worker needs such information about a book to enable him to explain to his clientele who would always tend to ask for new edition, whereas consulting the old edition or both would have been desirable. Finally, such parts like *content page, introduction, preface, title page, spins and indexes*, should be carefully studied for indepth information about a book.

### Reference Librarian

I have mentioned earlier that an ignorant reference worker can render the finest book collection useless while a skillful assistant who knows how to get from each book, all the various kinds of information can show astonishing result even when limited to only a few basic books. This brings me to the question of who is a good reference librarian. In other words, what is the quality of a good and skilled reference worker or librarian?

A lot has been said about what constitute a good librarian. Here I mean a good reference librarian whose quality is not only judged by the library or institution in which he operates, but also by the library or institution in which he operates, but also by the users or reading public at large. To this question, an American reference librarian Ervin J. Gaines has this to say:

"... a good reference librarian should be a person of taste, with a broad knowledge of literature, and with a vision of the direction our society should be taking".

He went on to say that:

"... a good reference librarian is a person with a strong liberal education and a penchant for scholarship. He is a potential manager of people and an organiser of work; and with this he must combine a powerfully developed social sense and be free from personal idiosyncracies".

I cannot agree more with Mr. Gaines that, for a good reference librarian:

"a study of man will yield more information about how to run a library than the most painstaking collection and ordering of facts"

The arrangement of fact must follow the discovery of need and



it is with this discovery that a reference librarian's satisfaction lies.

A reference librarian must be compassionate and indiscriminate in the discharge of his duties to his clientele. He should never deflect the curiosity of any seeker for knowledge, nor should he allow any social, political, religious or economic snobbery to determine the degree of service to be accorded. Discussing the same topic, another American reference librarian Mrs. Thelma Freides said:

"... the really important knowledge demanded of a reference librarian is the knowledge of relationships and patterns within the system - the characteristics of the universe of publication, the way in which the tools of our trade - the handbooks, bibliographies, and so forth reflect this universe, and the quality of distortion produced by the reflection; the way in which the contents of writing are encapsulated and codified in indexes and catalogues and the amount and kind of seepage taking place thereby; the relationship between basic research summary, between scholarship and popularization, and the meaning of all these in terms of the reference enquiry"<sup>3</sup>.

In a nutshell, beliefs -(be it political, religious etc.), creeds, preconception and biases should have no place in the mental equipment of a good reference librarian. He should have the knowledge of geography of his immediate surroundings and beyond on his fingertips and must socialise. All these are however, very rare qualities to come by but essential to the reference work.

I would like to relate my personal experience in this area of need for a librarian or library worker to socialise. In 1978 while I was a state branch librarian in Enugu, a very important government functionary breezed straight into my office at 10 a.m., by-passing all the security checks, the librarian and the assistants in the reading room. He was sweating profusely and could not sit down until he introduced himself to me. Before I asked how I could be of help to him, he pleaded he was presenting a paper or memorandum to the state Executive Council at 11.00 a.m. that very morning and needed just one information which everywhere he went, he was told only the National Library could supply the most current information on it.

I asked what his enquiry was and he told me with a quivering voice that I should tell him where the National Museum is in Enugu. At that time, it was more of a paper work than actuality. Before I could talk, he warned me that he knew about the land allocated for the construction of the Museum along Abakaliki Road and all he wanted to know was where all the art and craft works gathered all over the state and the federation were kept.

I smiled and this gave him the hope that I had the answer. Of course, I gave him the exact address. Sweat disappeared from his face and he asked what he could offer me. I told him that our library gives out information free of charge. He was full of joy and he disclosed that he was short of words to express his gratitude and satisfaction. I was able to provide this information promptly not because there was a directory of museums in Nigeria in my drawer or even in the library, but because I was conversant with our library environment and beyond.

### **Language Librarian**

Knowledge of foreign language on the part of a reference

librarian puts him on greater advantage, especially in the use of an encyclopaedia. While a good encyclopaedia in English Language must always be the basis of encyclopaedic reference work in a library used by English speaking readers, encyclopaedia in other languages can offer much that cannot be found in English works, especially in biography, individual works of literature and plays.

There are several reasons why a library uses such works. The first reason is to find an article in a given foreign language for a reader who is not familiar with English Language. Secondly, to find a foreign article that is better than the corresponding article in English. Thirdly, to find something on a topic omitted altogether in English encyclopaedia, usually in biography, topography etc.

It is therefore very essential that a reference worker should have even a very slight knowledge of, or at least alphabetical setting and variations in the forms of names - proper, personal and geographical, of a foreign language, as these names differ in forms and variation according to language originality. After all, he does not need to read the article, but merely to find it for a patron who will use it.

### **Language Librarian and Transfer of Technology**

Akin to the use of foreign language in serving all groups of users from North or South, East or West, is this question of transfer of technology which is a household phrase in the third world countries today. It is my view that transfer of technology should start from the library to the workshop and ultimately to the industry.

Apart from providing research materials on science and technology, reference language librarians or translators could be made to translate and transfer knowledge of technology from foreign science books or scientific journals and make it available in the library for our scientists. Such knowledge is then placed side by side with the actual equipment or machinery for study and adoption. Any new idea or discovery that emerges therefrom becomes ours and can be consummated in the workshop for industrial take-off. There is no doubt that the Soviet Union, China, India, Japan some of the leading countries in scientific and technological development in the world today tapped such technologies from the earlier developed Western countries even though they would not tell the world. Therefore the importance of a language reference librarian need not be overlooked, especially in a developing country like ours.

### **How is the clientele handled?**

All material and human resources acquired by any library are geared towards providing maximum service to its users. Consequently, handling the clientele is one of the most important aspect of library service anywhere. It is here that people come face to face, directly or indirectly with recorded knowledge, assess the enormous functions of a library and what it stands for.

Patrons of the library are as many and varied as there are different and varied needs and enquiries. They range from scientists, serious researchers, university dons, students, civil servants and government functionaries, down to technicians, artisans and simple frivolous readers. Librarians and other library workers must therefore be highly and basically educated to be able to satisfy these various groups of library users.



## Reference Desk

The reference desk is the first port of call for any library user, especially the first comer into the library and those who do not come to read, but who are seeking specific informations. It is at the reference desk that the library staff come into the most crucial direct contact with the clientele. The major function here is answering questions. Since reference questions are as varied as patrons too are, the decision to assign a professional librarian to the reference desk is imperative.

Be it monographs or serials, there are four major essentials to determine effective techniques of handling the reference desk vis-a-vis the clientele. First, reference desk librarian must be familiar with the holdings of the library. Secondly, he must be able to meet the needs and interest of the users. Thirdly, there must be an appreciation of the techniques in carrying out the service policies of the library. And of course, the reference library must be willing to co-operate with other departments of the library for which it is an integral part.

In many respects, a reference desk is the reception room as well as the book distribution and information centre of any library and the administration of such library is always judged by users through the activities and the level of service at the reference desk. In most libraries, one can always find Quick Reference Shelves, where the most up-to-date reference materials are shelved for quick and easy retrieval, next to the reference desk.

Apart from the overall stock content of a library the study of shelf content and even title content of materials on Quick Reference shelf provide an important technique in effective handling of library users.

## Readers' Guide

Readers' or User Guide or Aid is an essential element in carrying out an efficient and effective service delivery to library users. This may take the form of simple card catalogue, book catalogue, checklist of holdings, bibliographies, indexes, xerox copies of content page, abstracts, and a more sophisticated machine readable catalogue - MARC etc.

Apart from serving as the reference tools for librarians, readers' guide provide a spontaneous impetus and focuses the attention of the library users direct to the source of their subject area of information or research. However, it is not sufficient enough to provide any or all these tools in the library. They must be made available to users at all times because it is then and only then that a reference library can be compared with an automaton or a self-acting machine.

## Vertical File (V.P.)

Maintenance of a vertical file and newspaper clippings in a reference library is as important, on its own merit, as any other techniques in effective handling of library clientele. Vertical files and newspaper clippings service provide comprehensive coverage of the issues of the day, and can cover subject areas as wide as the library intends, depending on the type and demands of its clientele. Vertical Files, can be kept or bound into volumes, shelved as books and kept in a library as long as possible and this can, in the long run, provide an important information or research source for prospective or younger generations of library users.

## Hours of Opening

Indication of the operational hours on a sign or bulletin board is very essential in a library setting. This will not only instill discipline in library patrons, but will make them to be conscious of time, especially when such a library has very limited sitting capacity. Generally, hours of opening of a library depends more or less on the type of community it serves.

For instance, whereas most public libraries in this country open their doors for users from 9.00 a.m. - 6.00 p.m. the academic libraries leave their doors open from 8.00 a.m. - 10 p.m. Monday - Friday and 8.00 a.m. - 1.00 p.m. on Saturdays except during vacations. The National Library normally opens to the public from 9.00 a.m. - 8.00 p.m. Most libraries close to the public on Sundays and public holidays while in some overseas countries the library opens even on Sundays.

## Reference Methods-

### Approach and Procedure

A brief review of all libraries would reveal that there are at least four common denominators, namely, books, clientele, staff and service when one is engaged in discussion of methods of approach and procedures, with of course, different types of libraries in mind. The reference function is performed in all libraries with greater emphasis on simplified procedures for the patrons. The main reason for adopting different methods of approach and procedures in the service point of any library is to ensure maximum service delivery. The second reason is to ensure the security of library material resources, even though librarians are still being faced daily with abuse of use of library books and materials.

Dominant among the methods are fetching a book from the shelf, charging it to a patron, discharging and shelving it back when the book has been used. No matter what takes place at the reference desk before and after the reference interview, these three methods constitute the basic component of reference work.

At the reference desk in all service points, the reference librarian's approach to his patron should be that of cordiality and enthusiasm. He should always look forward with eagerness and the sole aim of satisfying his inquirer with smartness of mind and body. To him services approach to the library users should not only mean satisfying them by providing the required materials, but in providing related information needs through the use of various reference materials like catalogue, indexes and bibliographies.

The procedures for the reference service depend on the needs of the patron. It also depends on his previous experience in the use of the library and his fore-knowledge of the subject of enquiry. All these will be discovered through the reference interview. If the patron is an amateur library user, he is first of all orientated in the use of catalogue, encyclopaedias checklists, abstracts, bibliographies, vertical files, in-house or commercially bound volumes of periodicals and newspapers and various indexes pertinent to the subject of enquiry.

In the case of hard search, the librarian himself moves to the appropriate locations where such materials could possibly be found. All these happen after the enquirer must have filled the necessary enquiry forms to indicate what he or she needs. A hard search may require more than one day for retrieving materials which might have been misplaced or given out on



inter-library loan as the case may be. In such a situation, the library user may be requested to report back the next day.

But where the source of information is known to be unavailable in the library, the patron could be referred to another library where he could possibly find it. Alternatively, a member of staff is assigned to contact other libraries and bring the information or its source. If the patron so chooses, he can be given time, usually a few days to one week, to come back to enable the librarian obtain such materials on inter-library loan for him to consult.

In the case of simple directional inquiries like "where is your public catalogue", "where can I sit" or "where can I find a book on the history of Nigeria" for instance, the inquirer can without much ado, be directed to such place. The Reference Library should also provide *telephone and photocopying services* to its numerous readers and researchers. This service will reduce book theft, mutilations of library books and materials by unscrupulous readers to the barest minimum.

### Research Corner

Some major libraries of the world, especially academic and research centres provide special research corners or rooms for their scientists, serious researchers and historians. These high calibre library users require recommendations and some days' notice to library officials providing such services so that appropriate and convenient arrangement could be made to accommodate everybody according to his/her need with regards to time, space and available facilities. Such services always enhance scientific and research activities of the community where the library is located.

### Loan Service

I said at the beginning of this paper that a reference library may not necessarily allow withdrawal of its books for home reading. But under inter-library loan agreement senior government department staff, policy makers in government and chief executives of commercial and industrial houses can add to a wider spectrum of library users. In such cases it is pretty sure that the security of books so loaned out is guaranteed.

### Extension Service

Extension Service could be arranged in any library depending on the need for such services. In the case of college or university with multiple campuses, library extension services are indispensable. Even in a single-campus academic institution, faculty or departmental libraries engage in extension services.

In the case of special ministerial or public corporation libraries, regional state branches or liaison offices could serve as their extension service points while state libraries have their extension service points in their respective local government areas. The National Library of Nigeria is another typical example of a reference/research library with the widest extension service points located in thirteen functional state branches, including the federal capital territory Abuja, and having an obligation to establish more branches in all the states of the federation. This is another technique by the Federal Government to provide a national network of reference library service for the largest number of Nigerian library users.

### Library Display

Every library should be able to display its new books, documents and serials materials on the display racks at the beginning of every month. The books and materials so displayed should be removed to the shelves at the end of the month while new arrivals should take their place on the racks. In other words books and materials on display should be very current.

However, what are regarded as current materials in one library may not be current in another. For instance, until new books and periodicals are received the previous ones on display would continue to remain on the racks as current issues except in the case of topical display where any issue of books and periodical on that topic can be displayed as long as the period of such event lasts.

Examples of such events are the Armed Forces Remembrance Day, the Independence Day and the May (Labour) Day. Library display keeps the library patrons abreast of current news and events and boosts their ego vis-à-vis the service delivery of a library.

### Library Accommodation

In a library situation, a comfortable sitting arrangement and cooling system of the entire building is a necessity. This provides much more conducive atmosphere not only to library users, but also the library staff to guarantee their sustained physical and mental alertness. A comfortable library accommodation is also essential for the preservation and retention of the quality of library books and materials.

In effect, the reference/stack room in particular, and the entire library building in general, should be airlogged, especially in our Nigerian hot weather situation, to prevent dust, dry wind and insects from destroying the books. There should also be a centralised cooling system in the reading rooms for users who are usually in large numbers.

But a choice of decentralised single unit airconditioner could be appropriate in staff rooms so that they could be switched on and off according to individuals need. Also, there should be adequate parking space around the library premises or building to enable increasing use of the library by business and industrial houses, especially where there is no telephone services, in which case one hundred percent enquiries have to be made through visits.

### Shelving

As long as library service exists readers, especially students, will continue to play pranks by hiding books they consider very important to the subject of their studies. In this case only library staff should do book-shelving and the readers should be so notified by a small slip with inscription, 'do not shelf' pasted in front of the reading table.

Even this may not guarantee a hundred percent compliance and so library assistants should not relax in their day to day housekeeping operations to ensure a hitch-free shelving system. However, shelving system may be closed or open, depending on what a library intends to achieve.

### Periodical Inspection of Reference Reading Room

This is yet another important technique of handling library users. Periodic inspection of the reading or reference rooms



can reveal many things to many observant library workers or librarians. Many readers who had psychological or emotional problems which could lead to deprivation of concentration in their reference or research work could be pecked up by reference worker during periodic visit or inspection of the reference rooms.

Such problems which might not have been discovered during the reference interview could be pecked up by experienced librarian through intelligent question and professional advice or discussion. Example of such professional showmanship by a librarian to a library user was highlighted by Ivan Turgenev, a Russian writer in his trilogy - "Asya", "First Love" and "Spring Torrents" - Where Dimitri Pavlovich Sanin, a library user and one of the principal characters of the novel could not concentrate when he went to a newspaper reference library due to extreme emotional problem.

But through the intervention of an intelligent and observant librarian, Sanin was able to trace the whereabouts

of his boyhood lover Gemma to New York in America after thirty years of separation. This was in 1840. Such emotional or family problems of library patrons which could be said to be the exclusive preserve of medical doctors or psychologists, could still be handled by a committed and competent librarian today. Afterall, librarianship is a profession of all professions - cutting across all frontiers of knowledge.

### Conclusion

Broadly speaking, anything that a library does is directed towards effective and satisfactory service to its clientele and this runs the entire gamut of library activities. These range from selection of materials to processing, to making these materials available to its users. In order to give effective reference service, it is not enough to know how best to organise the library for such service. The type of information-requested for and the techniques of handling various patrons with their various needs must be explored.

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