



*Evidence Summary*

***Best Reference Practices are Not Observed in Telephone Ready Reference Services***

**A review of:**

Agosto, Denise A. and Holly Anderton. "Whatever Happened to 'Always Cite the Source?'" Reference & User Services Quarterly 47.1 (2007): 44-54.

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**Abstract**

**Objective** – To study source citing practice in telephone reference service in large public libraries in the United States and Canada.

**Design** – Field simulation (unobtrusive testing).

**Setting** – Large public libraries in the United States and Canada.

**Subjects** – Telephone reference staff of the 25 largest public libraries in the United States and Canada.

**Methods** – The 2005 World Book Almanac was used to select the 25 largest (in terms of population served) public libraries in Canada and the United States. Each system's Web site was checked to locate the

telephone number for reference service. For some systems it was necessary to call the general telephone number for the main library or the first branch listed on the Web site.

Five ready reference test questions were developed from a list of questions that students in a graduate library and information science course had previously asked of public library telephone reference services. The selected questions in the order that they were asked were:

1. Can you tell me when Valentine's Day is?
2. Who is the current governor/premier (of the state/province where the library is located)?
3. What is the population of Montana?

4. In which state is the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) located?
5. What is the French word for “chiropractor”?

The authors called each of the 25 libraries during five consecutive weeks at different times of the business day. Each week, one question was asked; once an answer was received, no clarification was requested and the call was ended. The study reports the results of 125 reference transactions.

For this study, the following definitions were used to assess complete citation for each type of information resource:

- For a Web site – the complete URL (title and sponsor of the site not required).
- For a digital database – the database title and the title and year of the specific item (author, publisher, page number not required).
- For a print resource – the title and year (author, edition, page number, publisher and place of publication not required).

Each reference transaction was noted to record whether the answer was correct and to define the nature of source citing that occurred. Other notes were kept to describe other respondent behaviors and attitudes demonstrated during the transaction.

**Main Results** – 93.6% of the answers to the 125 reference questions were correct. Complete citations were provided seven times (5.6%) and partial citations were provided an additional thirty-one times (24.8%). In 68% of the 125 transactions, no source citation information was provided.

There was a corresponding relationship between the difficulty of the reference question and the respondent’s provision of any citation source (either a complete or incomplete citation source). Sources were

generally not provided for simple questions even though the practice of citing is expected for all levels of questions. The practice of citing in order to reveal the path to the answer so that the user may become independent in the future was not observed.

In addition, five “negative closure” techniques were employed by respondents. These included unmonitored referral; immediate referral away from the service; articulating that the encounter would not be successful at the start; shutting down the transaction either by tone of voice or by use of phrase that precluded any further interaction with the user; or claiming that the information did not exist or was not available.

A reliance on digital formats rather than print sources was found.

**Conclusion** – The accuracy rate of the answers to the questions was very high (93.6%), but other aspects of the service were considered to be less than satisfactory. The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) Guidelines, considered the best practices for reference service, were not observed and in particular, the source citation rule was not followed.

### Commentary

This article provides some useful recommendations on how to improve telephone reference service that could be of benefit for libraries of all types and could also inform the delivery of chat and e-mail reference services.

The percentage of correct answers (93.6%) was much higher than previous studies of telephone reference services which have found accuracy in the 50-70% range. This was attributed to the less difficult questions that were asked in this study than in those undertaken previously. It would be

interesting to determine whether more difficult questions would have led to greater frequency of source citing though it does not lessen the finding that for simple questions, RUSA Guidelines are generally not followed.

The study authors acknowledged that although respondents were described as librarians throughout the report, only 24.8% of respondents identified themselves as librarians during the reference encounters. It would be surprising to find that support staff was not the level of staff most frequently employed for telephone ready reference services. Although this study did not undertake to reveal the level of staff, it would be interesting to learn what level of staff is generally employed in the fulfillment of this service. It would also be interesting to determine how many of the 25 libraries believed that they were delivering the standard of service described in the RUSA Guidelines.

There was no indication as to how many calls were necessary to achieve the 125 reference transactions that were reported as the study results. Both authors undertook the calling, but there was no reference to a standard script or any standardized record keeping instrument that was used to track response activity. The authors referred to respondent attitude as demonstrated through verbal intonation and other behaviors, but not to how that evidence was captured in a systematic manner.

The authors' initial frustration with finding the reference service telephone number extended to the challenge of the labyrinth that constituted the automated telephone directory system. This experience is generally reflective of the approach in many libraries and worthy of note and attention.

The repeated respondent use of "negative closure" strategies and the isolated incidences of disrespectful behavior serve as

a reminder to all libraries that assurance of the quality of the user experience may require staff training in both reference and customer service standards.

The authors noted the reliance on digital formats to answer questions. It would be interesting to discover the extensiveness of the print collections available to the staff in the telephone reference services in these 25 libraries.

The findings of this study will be of interest to all types of libraries who provide telephone reference services.

### **Work Cited**

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