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The Next Wave for Virtual Reference

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Last month, I visited a bookstore and noticed the clerk reshelving a book and stating, “I’ll have to look up the names of the Seven Seas on the Internet...” Proud of my profession, I sprang into action, “Why not ask a librarian?” The bookseller replied with a stare, and then challenged me, “Librarians would know the names of the seven seas?” He had a point, but I was determined. “Maybe not, but they know where to look it up efficiently and authoritatively.” This time, his look was quizzical, and I went back to browsing.


I was presumptuous. Finding out the names of the Seven Seas is the kind of ready-reference question that most people can answer without the help of a librarian. In this case, the Library of Congress has a great page on the subject (www.loc.gov/rr/scitech/mysteries/seas.html), but most Internet searches are not as authoritative as a librarian. However, Internet searches are just as fast as librarians, and often faster, and have the added advantage of being available almost everywhere you go.

The Internet also has an advantage because it is knowable. Google presents search results in concise and compact sets of ten resources, each with a title and brief description, sorted by relevancy. With this frame, the Internet is easy to grasp and manipulate. For the purposes of day-to-day use and ready reference, most library patrons, like the bookseller, have mastered it. If only our libraries were this simple.

We can’t compete with instant gratification, but libraries are certainly knowable (given some time), and we can make ourselves available online through chat reference services such as our L-net (www.oregonlibraries.net). As it turns out, instant messaging and chat software are also technologies that many patrons have

mastered, and some may even know more about these than they do libraries.

The Pew Internet & American Life Project reports that 63 percent of American adults go online and that 42 percent of these send instant messages. (*Pew Tracking Survey*, 2004) Pew’s study of college students’ internet behavior gives us even more impressive results, finding that three-fourths of college students have used instant messaging or chat. (*The Internet Goes to College*, 2002)

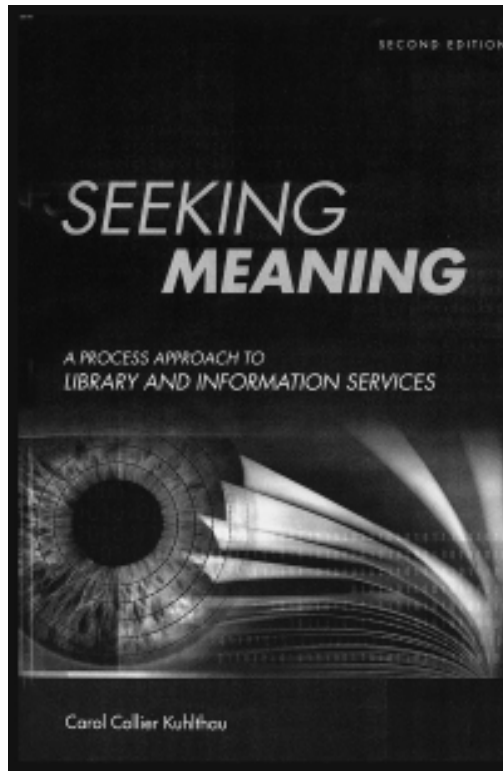
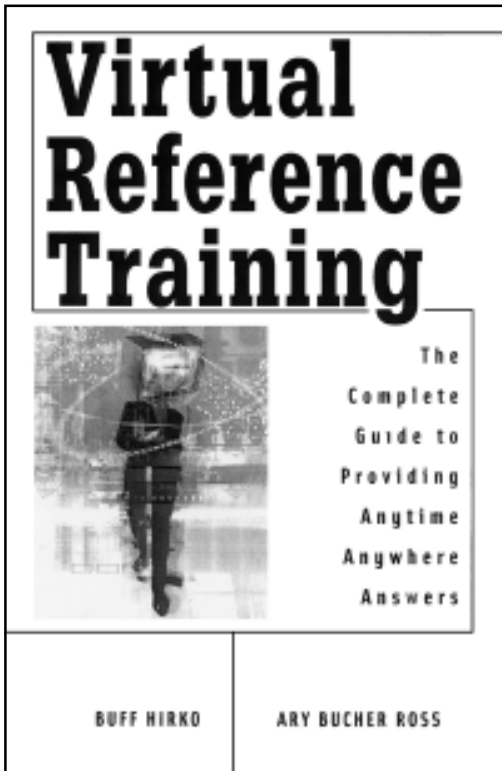
Of course, just because patrons know how to chat and that we offer a statewide chat reference service, patrons aren’t suddenly going to forget how to use Google and need our help more often. Yet they will still need help sometimes, and chat reference services offer them a tool to get it... anytime anywhere. As they become comfortable with the service, they will be more willing to ask for help again. The next time they are in a library, some of them may even want to talk to a librarian. 

References

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Buff Hirko and Mary Bucher Ross. (2004) *Virtual Reference Training: the Complete Guide to Providing Anytime Anywhere Answers*. Chicago: American Library Association.
ISBN: 0838908764

In a training program that promises to make any library staff member—regardless of education or experience—comfortable and proficient in providing virtual reference, expert educator-librarians Hirko and Ross detail the core competencies librarians need in order to deliver consistent service online. The authors also offer a variety of hands-on learning activities, exercises and assessment tools.

From the nuts-and-bolts consideration of online communication and Internet searching skills to actual feedback from librarians who have used it, *Virtual Reference Training* provides the guidance for building a program that will help all librarians develop confidence and finesse at the virtual desk. (ALA, 2004)

Carol Collier Kuhlthau. (2004) *Seeking Meaning: A Process Approach to Library and Information Services*. Westport, Connecticut: Libraries Unlimited.
ISBN: 1591580943

First published in 1993, the second edition of Kuhlthau's *Seeking Meaning* presents an expanded and more in-depth framework for the process approach to library and information services (“the interpretation of information and ideas within sources”). The book places a special emphasis on the cognitive emotional stages the user experiences when engaged in the research process with a librarian. From stage one (task initiation) through stage six (search closure), Kuhlthau provides a detailed description of the Information Search Process (ISP).

