

REFERENCE SERVICES IN THE 21ST CENTURY ACADEMIC LIBRARIES: OLD WINE IN A NEW BOTTLE

Rita Otibhor Salami

Federal University of Technology, Library Minna
connectrito@yahoo.com

Lami Akawu

Ibrahim Badamasi Babangida Library, Lapai
lamiakawu@gmail.com

Katamba Abubakar Saka

Federal University of Technology, Library Minna
s.katamba@futminna.edu.ng

Abstract

This paper discussed reference services in the 21st century academic libraries. Despite the innovations in service delivery, the core functions of reference services have not changed. However, what have changed, are the information sources reference librarians' consult and the tools they use in providing services. Today, it is observed that current trends in reference services are: Online Data Base Searching, Online Public Catalog, Video Conferencing, Tied Reference Service, Social Media, Mobile Technology Service, Roving Service, Research Consulting Service, Mobile Service and World Wide Web. Yet as exciting as these current trends in reference services it was observed that libraries are faced with some challenges in the full implementation of these services. These challenges are: lack of expertise, lack of marketing, technical issues, lack of enthusiasm, lack of sustainability and lack of current reference sources. It is recommended that reference librarians should maintain and develop new skills, librarians who are friendly, knowledgeable, experience and have good communication skills should man the reference sections of the libraries more awareness should be created for old and new services, library management should lobby electronic resources publishers to create more user friendly and easy to use databases, resources should be shared among academic librarians, libraries should acquire more current reference sources, reference librarians should endeavor to attend regular trainings, workshops, seminars and conferences and they must be enthusiastic, dedicated and committed to their duties.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, ICT, Reference Services and 21st Century

Introduction

The importance of academic libraries to higher institutions of learning cannot be overemphasized. They serve two complimentary purposes; they support the curriculum and also support faculty and student research. Academic libraries are classified based on the mission and type of institutions they serve. Salami(2014) cited Uwaifo (2010) and defined academic libraries as institutions established and maintained by higher institutions of learning such as Universities, Polytechnics, Colleges of Education, Schools of Nursing, Petroleum Training Institutes and Schools of Health Technology.

Over time, academic libraries perform three major functions which include: acquisition, organization and dissemination of information. Each unit in the library has a specific role to play in these functions. One of the units in charge of disseminating information to users is the Reference Section. It brings the information resources and services available in a library closer to a user. In fact, Achebe (2012) stressed that reference service is an essential part of everyday

library activity without which other functions such as collection development; cataloguing and classification can hardly be justified. It is the responsibility of reference section as part of their services to ensure that the resources and the services are efficiently and effectively used by library users.

Smith (2010) noted that the history of reference services started from a paper written in 1876 by Samuel Swett Green of the Worcester Public Library on Personal Relations between Librarians and Readers. The author identified four functions of reference services: Instruct readers how to use the library and its resources, answer users' queries, aid the reader in selection of good works and promote the library within the community. These are still the core functions of reference in the 21st century. However, reference services have undergone significant changes, but it has not affected its basic functions. Richard and Ghod (2017) stated that the two obvious changes in reference are the formats of the Information sources, reference librarian consults and the tools they use to search, retrieve, communicate and disseminate information. Academic Libraries now employ the use of ICT in reference information sources and tools. Emezie and Nwaohiri (2013) cited Ramzan (2004) asserts that development like experts systems, wireless networks, virtual collections; interactive web interface, virtual reference services and personal web portals bring about greater changes since the start of the new millennium.

Current Trends in Reference Services in the 21st Century

In time past, the reference services was centered on the reference desk. It was the central point of library services and patron contact. At this period, reference librarians wait for users to offer them assistance. The 21st century is regarded as a millennium of information and information explosion. With the World Wide Web Information can now be sought anywhere and anytime. These alternatives were more convenient to users than coming into the library to consult with a reference librarian. Association of College and Research Committee (2012) also argued that delivery models, ongoing technological change, a shift to mobile devices new models of scholarly communication and changing users' expectations have affected reference services. As a result of these challenges in the library, reference librarians now saw a need to be more available to users to answer their queries anywhere and anytime without approaching a reference desk. This period, motivated Miller William in 1984 to write an article titled, What is Wrong with Reference. This led to great transformation in reference. Libraries now had to apply newer technology and rethink services in reference. Igbinoia and Solanke (2015) opined that those who argue that technology is making the reference services obsolete fail to realize that libraries are taking advantage of the same technology to provide and enhance services, develop new community relationships reach new library users and enhance the role of the library as an information resource centre. The following are the current trends in reference services:

- **Online Database Searching:** Richard and Ghod (2017) Academic libraries now subscribe to databases because they provide information not available anywhere. They further stressed that online database searching was the first powerful new way which provided librarians an opportunity to improve on service delivery.
- **Online Public Access Catalog:** This further extended the capabilities of reference librarians. They have continuously trained patrons on how to access the online public catalog.
- **Mobile Technology Services:** Reference librarians are aware that large segments of users never come into the library. To provide services to this group of users reference librarians introduced text a librarian service. This have added value to services provided to clients in terms of expectations of immediacy, interactivity, personalization and mobility.
- **Video Conferencing:** One of the tools reference librarians now use to deliver services is video conferencing. Chouhan (2010) stated that Reference Librarians now use Skype

which is a type of video conferencing services whereby users and librarians can converse over a video chat.

- **Tied Reference Service:** This service provides multiple contact points for patrons. One contact point is designed to give answers to quick information questions. The second contact point is to provide research consultations to users. Igbinovia and Solanke (2015) are of the view that a tied reference service is also a service where libraries are linked through collaborative arrangement and share reference responsibilities. Questions will be attempted at the local level, and if unanswered may be routed to the consortia national or international level.
- **Social Media:** Various social media sites have introduced quite a number of different tools which have been adopted by Reference Librarian in enhancing service delivery. Examples of such social media websites are: face book, flick, twitter etc. Salami and Kolo (2015) emphasized that these tools are now been used to display new arrivals, provide current awareness services, provide user education and get feedback from users.
- **Roving service:** This is a service where the librarian initiates the reference transaction by meeting the potential user. Any location in the library can be served by a roving reference librarian not necessarily at the reference section. This provides several avenues for users to receive assistance in a library. Letizia(2010) opined that this service targets new patrons who are unfamiliar with the library resources, services and directions.
- **Research Consulting Service:** With the decline in ready reference, librarians are now into research consulting. They suggest information sources both print and electronic, search terms and strategies that will lead to information sources that will satisfy a researcher information needs. Research Information Network (2011) stated that the following were ways libraries support research in their institutions: help researchers win grants, promote and exploit new technologies and new models of scholarly communication, help to manage institutions' repositories which results to increase visibility of research output, employ liaison staff who partner with department to provide high access to quality information resources.
- **Mobile Services:** Academic Librarians have moved beyond the library building and taking reference services to where users study and learn. They are now setting up outposts in faculties, department, hostels and laboratories. These efforts result to positive public relations for the library and promotion of library resources and services.
- **World Wide Web:** The World Wide Web has provided great opportunity for reference librarian to provide virtual services to distance learners. Users do not have to visit the library physically before they can have access to their resources and services. Examples of services provided by reference through the World Wide Web are ask a librarian and email etc.

Challenges

Despite the fact that there have been significant changes in reference services, the academic libraries no doubt have been faced with some challenges in the services the section provides. These challenges include the following:

- **Lack of Expertise:** Reference section cannot function effectively without very knowledgeable staff. Sonia (2016) in Johnson (2011) noted that there is a generational divide between new staff and old staff. New staff is more comfortable using technology to locate resources but lack knowledge of the physical resources that can be used to answer queries. This is a big challenge because library print collections still contain several accumulated knowledge that is not available in digital form. Some older librarians were also not comfortable using technology to answer users' information needs.

- **Lack of marketing:** Libraries do not market their information resources and services. No system can be effective until users are aware of the potential benefits of the service. Online Computer Library Center (2010) observed in their studies that users rely heavily if not exclusively on Internet search engines for information. Their survey showed that 84% of respondents started a search on a search engine and not a single respondent reported beginning on a library website. It is worrisome that even librarians are also fond of this. Behrands (2012) cited Anderson (2005) lamented that librarians publicly disparage google, but privately adopt it in their own information seeking practices and neglecting our print and electronic resources.
- **Technical issues:** Several academic libraries have now subscribed to various databases. However, Albernese and Kennese (2016) observed that with few exceptions most databases were too hard to navigate and users because of this reason, rely more on search engines. Quality access to Internet plays a major role in provision of virtual reference services. The Internet connections in most academic libraries in Nigeria are slow.
- **Lack of enthusiasm:** Gone are the days when reference librarians need to wait for people to come and ask them a question. However, must reference librarians have not realize this and are still very passive in service delivery. Several reference librarians are not enthusiastic about learning new skills and technology. Albernese and Kenny (2016) cited Aldrich (2011) in their opinion stated that reference librarians must be competent in the following: reader advisory, home work help, digital fluency, local history, and working outside the library
- **Lack of Sustainability:** There is no doubt that several reference librarians love their patrons and would like them to have every information resources they could possibly need. However, most of the databases do not have continuous subscription. Furthermore, some library websites were not continuously active.

Lack of current reference sources: Regardless of how competent a reference librarian is his/her performance solely depends on the reference sources available in a library. This is one of the major reasons affecting the effective delivery of reference services to users. Iliyasu and Babalola et al (2016) revealed that availability of quality reference sources was the basis of users' satisfaction.

Conclusion

Reference services have changed considerably. They now provide personal assistance to users' within the walls of the library and outside the library. These services are provided using technological formats and tools and at the same time retaining traditional reference values. There is no doubt that reference service in academic libraries is an old wine in a new bottle.

Recommendations

In order to overcome the challenges discussed above, the following are recommended:

1. Reference staff in academic libraries should maintain and develop new skills especially in information and communication technology, knowledge of reference sources and reference interview.
2. Academic Library management should endeavor to post librarians who are knowledgeable, friendly, experienced and have good communication skills to manage the reference unit/section.
3. Use of posters flyers, radio and placing of logo in the school websites should be employed to create awareness on old and new services in reference sections.
4. Academic Libraries should lobby electronic resources publishers to create databases that are more user friendly in terms of ease of use.
5. Every academic library should ensure that they are present online. They should ensure

- Research Information Network. (2011). The value of libraries for researchers. Retrieved on 30/10/2012 from: www.riuk.ac.uk/upload
- Richard, M. and Ghad, D. (2017). Digital Libraries a Vision for the 21st Century. Retrieved on 29/09/2017 from: www.libumich.edu
- Salami, R.O. (2014). Marketing Library and Information Services in Academic Libraries in Niger State. *The information Technology*, 11(1), 105.
- Salami, R.O. and Kolo, J.J. (2015). Enhancing Information Management in Libraries through Application of Multi-Media. In *proceeding of the 3rd International Conference of School of Science and Technology Education*, October 4-7th, Minna.
- Smith, L.C. (2010). Reference Services. In *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Services*, 6(3), 485-488
- Sonia, S.S. (2016). Reference Desk is not Dead Yet: A perspective from the National Medical Library. Retrieved on 6/6/2017 from: www.tandfonline.com