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## Rethinking Virtual Reference

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## ONLINE DATABASES

# Rethinking Virtual Reference

by Carol Tenopir

VIRTUAL REFERENCE SERVICES seem a natural extension of our digital collections and our emphasis on access to the library anytime, anywhere. If our patrons use the library from home, it makes sense to provide them with person-to-person online reference. The Library of Congress (LC), OCLC, and several large library systems have developed and promoted virtual reference services, which are now offered by thousands of libraries. Recently, however, some virtual reference pioneers are questioning the cost benefits of online reference and recommending caution.

### A negative look at chat

In a two-part feature in *Searcher* magazine, Steve Coffman and Linda Arret take a critical look at virtual reference, especially chat reference. These are not just two overworked reference librarians venting because of one more thing to do. Coffman is the former director of FYI, County of Los Angeles and Public Library business reference service, author of *Going Live! Starting and Running a Virtual Reference Service* (American Library Assn., 2003). He's also VP, business development, at Library Systems & Services, LLC (LSSI), which until 2003 provided virtual reference software for libraries. Arret was project coordinator for the early stages of LC's QuestionPoint, worked with NISO on standards for digital reference, and is now a consultant.

Chat reference, according to Coffman and Arret, has proven to be expensive and ill suited to personal interactions like reference or customer service. They estimate that somewhere between 1000 and 4000 libraries use live online chat reference or web collaboration software; many answer only a handful of questions each day.

They cite a few success stories, but most are not cost-effective because of staff and software expenses, technical difficulties, and low user interest. Commercial call centers have abandoned chat because it averages twice as long to answer a chat question as it does a phone ques-

tion. Also, most people don't like chat for serious information because they have other and less costly reference options, namely email and the telephone.

### Alternatives to chat

I asked Coffman and Arret what advice they would give librarians beginning or planning live online reference services. First ask, "What is the most effective way to serve" your users "given the limited funding and resources most libraries are faced with." Although chat may be the answer, "given the track record of most chat services so far, many libraries may find that chat will not be the most effective means of providing reference services."

Instead, "when it comes to getting serious questions answered live, people seem to prefer the phone by a very wide margin." Telephone reference is less prone to technical glitches, and concern about tying up the only phone line is no longer much of an issue.

Many times an immediate answer isn't needed, in which case email or web forms work fine. Coffman and Arret say that "in many instances all the client wants is to ask the question now and deal with an answer later." But email responses must be timely, ideally with a three- to 24-hour turnaround.

Another alternative is to improve self-service. "What if we take the money and time spent developing and running chat

services and spend it on improving our web sites and information systems?" Coffman and Arret point to Google and Amazon as services that put their efforts into better search engines, interfaces, collaborative filtering, and personalization. They urge libraries to link forces to spend their resources on making it easier for patrons to find information on their own.

### Not pulling the plug—yet

Not all of us are ready to abandon chat reference. The Digital Reference Education Initiative has begun to develop core competencies in digital reference. These rubrics are at three levels: beginning (skill focused), intermediate (conceptually focused), and advanced (management focused). They will help staff training programs, library schools, and libraries that are deciding whether to offer the service.

Many might agree that chat reference is expensive, but some feel it is a price worth paying. "Successfully integrating virtual services, including reference, educational tutorials, document request and delivery, and other research management tools with 21st-century digital library content is critical if the goal is for people to actually use the multi-million-dollar resources we provide," says Barbara Dewey, dean of libraries, University of Tennessee, Knoxville. "The cost of content without service is irrelevance."

Coffman and Arret admit there are ways to make chat more cost-effective, including marketing, joining a consortium, or moving chat reference back to the reference desk. They offered this final advice: "Libraries should never, never, never do something just because other libraries are doing it...or because it's the 'cool' thing...at the moment." The sixth annual Virtual Reference Desk conference will be held November 8-9 in Cincinnati. Expect some lively, real-time conversations.

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### LINK LIST

#### Coffman, Steve & Linda Arret: To Chat or Not To Chat.

(*Searcher*, July/August 2004)

[www.infoday.com/searcher/  
jul04/index.shtml](http://www.infoday.com/searcher/jul04/index.shtml);

(*Searcher*, September 2004)

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#### Digital Reference Education Initiative Rubrics

[drei.syr.edu/pdf/DREICompetencies-  
Draft092004.pdf](http://drei.syr.edu/pdf/DREICompetencies-<br/>Draft092004.pdf)

#### Virtual Reference Desk Conference

[www.vrd2004.org](http://www.vrd2004.org)