

On the Trail of the Elusive Non-User: What Research in Virtual Reference Environments Reveals

by Lynn Silipigni Connaway, Marie L. Radford and Timothy J. Dickey

Virtual Reference Services

An extraordinarily interesting and somewhat paradoxical pattern is revealed in comparing trends in use statistics in academic versus public libraries over the past decade or so. According to Martell [1] there has been a decline in circulation and reference services statistics at some academic libraries since 1995. Although the evidence does not completely support Carlson's bleak prophecies [2], Martell concludes that the "value of electronic resources may already have eclipsed that of physical resources" (p. 443).

However, a different picture emerges in examining a review of public library statistics [3], which shows precisely the reverse – a pattern of increases in circulation and reference services for the same time period. What accounts for these inconsistencies in library use between different types of libraries? Why do people choose to use or not to use particular library services? In order to entice, attract and retain library users, we need to explore these critically important questions.

Perhaps because of their elusive nature, the information-seeking behaviors of non-users of library systems and services is rarely addressed directly in

Lynn Silipigni Connaway is a senior research scientist in programs and research, OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc. She can be reached at by email at lynn_connaway@oclc.org.

Marie L. Radford is an associate professor at Rutgers University School of Communication, Information and Library Studies. She can be reached by email at mradford@scils.rutgers.edu.

Timothy J. Dickey is currently working as a technical intern for the OCLC Office of Programs and Research. He can be reached at dickeyt@oclc.org

the library and information science literature. Most research concludes that libraries are not usually the first choice of people looking for information. Because of the radical impact of the Internet on people's ability to find information, recent studies differ regarding which is the most popular choice: human sources or the Internet. Regardless of this preference, the obstacles associated with virtual reference service (VRS) technology may deter people from using these library services. A variety of VRS, including email and live chat versions, have proliferated in response to user demand and to fulfill librarians' desire to provide reference help to online users.

Along with high levels of Internet use, convenience and speed are important factors in younger generations' information-seeking behavior. Factors such as distance from the library and the relative quiet and comfort of home [4] may keep users away from the library. Connaway [5] notes that information seekers increasingly rely on quick and easily available resources and suggests that library services need "to meet these users' expectations of online systems and sources."

Seeking Synchronicity

Against this background, staff from OCLC and Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, have been studying the perceptions, needs, uses and sustainability of virtual reference service (VRS) through *Seeking Synchronicity*, a two-year project funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) [6]. Four successive phases of data collection have involved different techniques: Phase I - focus group interviews; Phase II - qualitative analysis of VRS transcripts; Phase III - online surveys; and Phase IV - individual telephone interviews. Phases I, III and IV have addressed the differing

perspectives of three distinct populations: VRS librarian-providers and both users and non-users of the service. While findings from all three populations have important ramifications for the development of library systems and services, this article focuses on the experiences of non-users of VRS as revealed in Phases I and III. Phase I included four focus group interviews with 40 VRS non-users conducted between November 2005 and May 2006. Phase III analyzed online surveys completed by 184 non-users from June through August 2007.

Non-users of a service are relatively easy to define; yet the questions of why they do not use library services and how they actually find their information linger. *Seeking Synchronicity* has defined VRS non-users as those who have not used synchronous chat reference services, although they may use instant messaging (IM) or chat for personal or business purposes and also may use other library services via telephone, email or face-to-face (FtF) modes. The study investigates how these individuals meet information needs, why they choose resources other than VRS, what features attract them to these other resources and what might influence them to use VRS. Possible impacts of the study's findings would be to positively influence the ongoing advancement of library systems and services and, ultimately, to entice these elusive non-users to try VRS.

What We Discovered about Non-Users of VRS

Teenage and graduate-student participants in the focus group interviews offer different perspectives on VRS. Unexpectedly, personal relationships with librarians emerge as important to both groups. Perhaps not surprisingly, given frequent warnings in the media about online predators, teens voice numerous concerns regarding their privacy and security. Chatting with an unknown person might "creep them out." One teen even expresses the concern that chat reference could connect her to "some psycho serial killer out there." When posed with the statement, "I am afraid of chatting with a stranger," in the online survey, only 24% of the respondents agree with it, with public library users rating the fear significantly higher than academic or school library users. The convenience and the availability of the service are key especially to the "Millennial" demographic – some teen non-users believe

that typing questions to a chat service would actually take too much time. Many of the teens confess to being avid readers and to having a positive relationship with a school librarian although one teen declared, "I wouldn't really trust my librarian, I trust Google." They might consider trying VRS in the future if a friend recommends it to them or if they thought there was some way it could foster the student-librarian relationship.

One focus group interview with graduate student VRS-non-users in a Northeastern city also highlighted their relationships with librarians. They preferred cultivating rapport with a single, knowledgeable specialist to interacting with a random librarian in VRS. These graduate students use a variety of Internet tools in their information seeking, including library websites, search engines, databases and commercial research sites. However, they reveal negative perceptions of VRS, equating chat reference with a generic online chat room, being unwilling to deploy new software and fearing they would annoy or bother a librarian, being negatively evaluated by a librarian, appearing unprofessional or having reference transcripts revealed to professors. Promotional campaigns and recommendations by trusted librarians or professional colleagues were the most-cited factors that would influence their future use of VRS.

The importance of personal contact with librarians was again highlighted in online surveys of 184 non-users of VRS. When comparing modes of reference service, participants rated FtF reference highly in terms of reliability and effectiveness and overwhelmingly (90%) chose FtF as the mode with which to "develop the most positive relationship with a librarian." Seventy-four percent preferred FtF reference help to either telephone or electronic formats, citing the knowledge, trustworthiness, friendliness and perseverance of their librarian among the most essential factors. Leading reasons for non-use of VRS included lack of knowledge that the service was available (73%), satisfaction with other information sources (65%) and lack of confidence in the chat librarian's ability to help them (70%).

When asked to describe a successful reference encounter in the online surveys, almost all of these non-users wrote about the impact of the type of reference service. Among them, a large majority (80%) not only mentioned FtF reference, but also asserted that it helped create a successful reference

encounter. Ten percent of the respondents discussed email, telephone, online or a combination of formats as an asset to the reference interaction. A large number of the non-users' perceptions of positive reference encounters also involved searching for books or other specific resources. Twelve percent searched for practical information for everyday use, such as consumer product, medical, legal or statistical information, genealogy or job help. Other successful reference interactions involved seeking assistance with websites or library databases, locating library materials that were not available in the expected location, finding primary sources or specific reference works or asking procedural questions.

Seventy-eight percent of the VRS non-users described positive experiences that only happened in FtF reference encounters (rather than via email or the telephone). Nineteen percent praised librarians who gave good directions, walked them directly to resources or explained the classification system. Respondents also reported that librarians only offered instruction (17%) and clarified their questions (9%) in FtF mode. Librarians' behaviors in FtF environments were described by 16% as pleasant and friendly. A few participants (2%) said these friendly behaviors gave them more confidence, 12% valued the opportunity to converse and develop a relationship with the librarian, with some stating that they had obtained the most appropriate and reliable sources only in FtF reference encounters. Specific features of positive reference experiences, however, were not dependent on the FtF format, including the speed of reference assistance (24%), the quality of advice when choosing among resources (14%) and leaving the encounter with an item in hand (11%). Eight percent of participants declared that they selected reference formats based upon convenience. In addition, when asked what might convince them to try VRS, 35% of the participants listed some factor related to convenience.

On the flip side, when asked to discuss a negative experience with library reference, the majority still described FtF encounters, but of these, only 27% believed that the format contributed to their lack of success. Unfortunately, comments such as "No, I think this particular librarian would have wasted my time in any format" were typical. Instead of the format itself, there was a tendency to blame individual librarians, whether it was the librarian's

actions (42%), taking too long, only pointing to the stacks, poor attitude (34%) or lack of knowledge (26%). The participants offered colorful descriptions of their bad experiences with librarians, calling them cold, judgmental, condescending, rude and intimidating. Only rarely did they suggest that the reference *format* was culpable as, for instance, in the comment "Without those additional cues of the bored facial expression and snyde [sic] way that person talked, I might not have been so turned off."

Clearly, focus group interview and online survey respondents revealed distinct themes in their information seeking that help to shed light on their non-use of VRS. The convenience and speed of information delivery remain crucial, especially to the teens and college students. However, these participants distrust the potential of the virtual format and raise serious privacy concerns. Relationships with knowledgeable librarians are highly valued by non-users, who believe that the traditional FtF format enhances their information search.

Comparisons of the Findings to Other Studies

The finding that personal relationships with librarians are highly valued resonates with those of other recent studies. Convenience is a critical factor, and therefore electronic resources are popular with this group when searching for information, and perceptions that VRS might be less convenient and slower keep some as non-users. The importance of personal relationships with librarians is congruent with findings that trusted or knowledgeable individuals are prime sources of information. These non-users also repeatedly cited the lack of relational aspects as a significant barrier to adopting VRS: "As long as you're having a conversation with someone else you can build a relationship. That's just something you can't get through a computer typing stuff." Yet some focus group interview and survey participants also reported apprehension, embarrassment and fear of pestering the librarians in FtF experiences. Nonetheless, the younger generation tends to bolster relationships via electronic means [7]. Fagan and Desai [8] offer practical suggestions for improving the relational aspects of VRS interactions; perhaps such improvements could begin to reduce anxiety in the virtual realm.

Recommendations and Conclusions

On a practical level *Seeking Synchronicity* results can be used to develop recommendations to promote VRS to potential and current users of the service. Non-users revealed that they would be more likely to choose VRS if providers would do the following:

- Highlight the convenience of the service
 - It is available anywhere with web accessibility
 - It is available 24/7
- Increase marketing of VRS to make it more visible
- Increase the availability of instruction and tutorials
- Integrate VRS into library use instruction programs and courseware
- Improve librarians' skills in fostering virtual relationships in VRS
- Involve teachers, counselors and other trusted adults in promoting/recommending the service to students
- Publicize VRS as a private and confidential service.

The project is entering its final phase of conducting and analyzing telephone interview data from VRS librarians, users and non-users. In addition to increasing potential use of VRS, results can be used to shape the future study of how people get their information, why they choose a variety of sources for their information needs and what technologies and features they prefer. Interesting aspects of the findings provide potential areas for future research, including respondent's perception of the lack of privacy and confidentiality of VRS. Evidence of the confidentiality of VRS may instill confidence in users of the service and be beneficial to the marketing and promotion of VRS.

In today's environment of easily available information from user-friendly web search engines and conveniently accessed Internet sites, libraries can no longer continue to solely rely on traditional roles and models of service delivery. Clearly, FtF personal interactions with librarians are still valued. How can these relationships be better fostered in virtual environments to reach non-users, as well as to continue to attract current users, who are increasingly turning to Google and Wikipedia for their information needs? *Seeking Synchronicity* is contributing to help explore options and solutions. ■

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