Report from the Field
Rethinking Reference and Research

SCOUG's Spring Workshop fielded top-notch speakers, record attendance
by Doris Helfer

A stellar speaker roster, including Herb White, Barbara Quint, Jim Keittig, Jerry Campbell, and John Janes, highlighted the 1998 SCOUG (Southern California Online User's Group) Spring Workshop. This year's workshop took place April 29 at the Sheraton Industry Hills in Industry, California. Attendance reached 500, setting an all-time record for this annual event.

Herb White, retired dean of the University of Indiana's Library School, opened the program with his keynote speech stating that computers can cause problems as well as opportunities, and—contrary to what people who sell computers say—they are not easy or fun to use. Computers may be cost effective, but they are definitely not cheap. He quoted Peter Drucker as saying that the end of this century would belong to knowledge workers who would tell us what was important. White stated clearly that, "If reference librarians are doing the same reference work they did 15 years ago, it is bad reference today." Information is a means to an end and not an end in itself.

Knowledge and information have been important since the beginning of the industrial revolution. White believes the library schools that closed over the last few years did so because the university did not know what they contributed to the university's mission.

Today's librarians need to fight for the reference turf, according to White. The alternative is to have doctors and lawyers doing searches more slowly; librarians are much more cost effective. There is no money in it for HMOs to have doctors spending time doing research.

Quality is non-negotiable in reference work. White said. Your loyalty to your profession rises above your loyalty to your job (i.e., your current employer). It is disastrous to limit time with your clients. He implored the audience not to give in to local administrator demands or lack of money; he implored the audience to do more and know more. You do not train users to do what you do and give away your turf. Computers allow you to expand the definitions of what you do and make librarians more cost effective. Computers increase costs and make things better. You have no choice but to adopt them and use them as competitors do.

Integrating Librarians, Technologists

Chris Ferguson, executive director Public Services Core, and John Supra, part-time lecturer at the University of Southern California, jointly spoke on the newly merged library and computer services at USC, now called the Information Services Department. A large number of librarians and technologists already work together there on projects. The primary reason for integrating the departments was to make life easier for patrons and improve services to them. Technologists frequently adopt new technology for its own sake, without regard to who might be able to use it. The merger hoped to give technologists a context for technology uses, leverage service opportunities, and improve the service culture of the technologists.

By integrating the technologist and the librarians, USC hoped to make services work for everyone and make access to the network available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. They completely integrated their budgets and organizations and personnel classifications. They did this in response to increasing customer expectations and the need to present a unified customer interface. Customers will not have to go back and forth between computing and the library to solve their problems. They believe this reorganization also allows them to finally do more long-range planning.

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organization. At Lucent, librarians saved the company $3.5 million by automating back office functions. Now, through the company intranet, they can release information to everyone in a timely fashion. Users increasingly go online for everything.

According to Kent, companies and libraries have to deal with customers in a variety of different ways. Some customers will prefer walking in, while others prefer phoning, faxing, e-mail, Web, or video. The best way to deliver the service is whatever way your customer might want the information. The collection of knowledge is too big for any one library to hold. Libraries will increasingly become collections of access rather than holdings. Reference librarians will increasingly serve as facilitators between the computer access and the holdings. We will increasingly operate customer contact centers in a multimedia library with a wide variety of choices for the customer. We will increasingly teach computer and Web navigation and deal with computer problems. We may have Internet call centers to help patrons find information. Above all, we cannot be afraid. What is happening will not happen overnight, but it will happen.

New Reference Models

Jim Rettig of the College of William and Mary spoke about what he called the "Omnipedia." He conducted an informal analysis of where a "typical" reference librarian (himself) found answers to reference questions in a "typical" public library. In his survey, 42.5 percent of the answers were found in reference books, 42.5 percent in electronic sources only, and 19 percent in both print and electronic sources. No one reference librarian can know everything, but the superiority of reference librarians in finding information is self-evident and demonstrable. For Rettig, reference librarians are in fact the Omnipedia.

Joe Janes, professor at the University of Michigan and founder of the Internet Public Library (IPL), spoke about the experiences of the Internet Public Library. He showed the audience the software used to handle the reference questions the IPL receives. They try to make the IPL the court of last resort, suggesting alternate places to check prior to submitting requests to them. Run strictly by volunteers (Janes was eager for business cards from future volunteers in the audience), IPL answers a large variety of reference questions. They can and do turn down some requests and have set up procedures for the volunteer reference librarians to follow. The service is mostly staffed by student volunteers from the University of Michigan Library and Information Services School. (If you’re interested in helping out, they give purple IPL T-shirts to every volunteer who completes 20 questions.)

Looking Forward

Jerry Campbell, University of Southern California CIO, said the cost of reference is way too much and we can’t keep paying it. We’re in the middle of the old way of doing things with the new way not quite formed yet. Campbell warned the attendees that if they were not thinking about the future, they could depend that others would do it for them. Young people go to bookstores and computers for information. In libraries the universe has revolved around the reference librarian and we’ve kept that model, but we need to put users in the center. We need to have user-generated, end-user services. We need virtual reference services. We need systems that will provide 60 percent or better answers to standard reference questions using the Web. If we do not, users will get their information elsewhere.

We need to develop reference systems with a high success rate and transform from reference librarians to access engineers. Campbell said that today’s system was the best of the 20th century, but the 21st century will require a different one—one that costs less per answer given and one that can scale up to the massive educational and informational tasks before us.

Mary Ellen Mort of Jobsmart conducted a Web-based creativity poll among registrants for the conference. Her motivation for the test stemmed from a belief that reference librarians and information professionals have to re-envision what we do and do it in new ways. The World Wide Web has shown there is rarely only one right answer. As explorers, we must use our creative side. Barbara Quint, editor of Searcher magazine, handling a panel of speakers, wrapped up the session with her always amusing and on-target comments. The first principle of automation is "repetition is your enemy," even the "off-site" repetition of colleagues in other establishments. We need to develop universal service on a universal source and the Web comes the closest. We need to share answers and sources as much as possible. We need to develop ways to put an ALA or SLA seal of approval on Web sites to give users a better idea about the quality of information they access. She told the audience to "just do it" and worry about the funding as they went along. Set a standard of 24-hour service. We are all merging into one giant library. Let’s get to it.

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