**Reference Inquiry: Instant Messaging [INFO 210]**

In my inquiry on the size of zoos in the largest zoos in the United States.

What are the largest zoos in the United States?

**Discussion Assignment**

The purpose of this reference question was to conduct a virtual reference interaction and evaluate according to Reference and User Services Association’s (RUSA) five guidelines for the behavioral performance of reference personnel.

**Setting: The Los Angeles Public Library**

The Los Angeles Public Library—not to be confused with the Los Angeles County Library—has 72 branch libraries that serve 4 million residents as well as a 538,000 ft2 central library which boasts 9 different subject departments that provide reference services.

**Reference Interaction**

For this reference interaction, I selected to conduct a live chat interaction with the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL). My selection of the reference question was actually to compare how the Fresno’s Chafee Zoo compared with more nationally ranked zoo’s. In my own independent research, I discovered that the answer to this question was deceptively complex, and I wanted to see how far I could get by asking the Los Angeles Public Library a question in that direction:

Since my reference query wasn’t directly applicable to the Los Angeles service area, I opened the reference query with the following text:

“I am having some trouble finding a list of the largest zoos in the United States? Could you help me?”

I purposefully worded the text to indicate that I have done at least some cursory search on the matter and hinted that the information I was looking wasn’t readily available. The query was timestamped 15:06. After submitting the line of text, there was a prolonged period of time where I was wondering if anyone had actually received my query. It wasn’t until timestamp 15:10 that I received a response and then it was in the form of an answer to my query.

From a 2016 article the answer was…

Bronx Zoo in New York

Columbus Zoo & Aquarium in Ohio

Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium in Nebraska, Riverbanks

Zoo & Garden in South Carolina

the San Diego Zoo

While the librarian did not provide a hypertext link to the source, the librarian did provide enough information on the source he or she was using for me to take a look at it myself. After thanking her for her time, I tried to type up a follow up question to continue the reference interaction. My intention for the follow up interaction was to get the librarian to locate information that provide how the Los Angeles Zoo compared with these findings. Unfortunately, when I typed out my response the librarian also typed out her referral effectively ending the reference interaction. Before I closed the chat window I thanked, the librarian a final time.

Below is the transcript of the reference interaction as copy and pasted from the chat window:

15:06 me I am having some trouble finding a list of the largest zoos in the United States? Could you help me?

15:10 librarian According to a CBS NY News Report from 2016 the five largest Zoos in the United States are, Bronx Zoo in New York, Columbus Zoo & Aquarium in Ohio, Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium in Nebraska, Riverbanks Zoo & Garden in South Carolina, and the San Diego Zoo.

15:11 me Okay thanks.

15:12 me Do you know how the L.A. Zoo ranks?

15:12 librarian If you require additional information please contact the Science and Technology Department here at Central Library by telephone (213) 228-7000.

15:12 me Okay. Thank you.

**Evaluating the Reference Transaction**

The Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) has five guidelines for the behavioral performance of reference personnel. They are:

1.Visibility an Approachability

2. Interest

3. Listening and Inquiring

4. Searching

5. Follow-up.

Below is my discussion of how the Los Angeles Public Library performed during my virtual reference interaction in accordance with each of these traits as outlined by the RUSA.

**Visibility and Approachability**

I rate the Visibility and Approachability of the LAPL’s instant messaging reference service as adequate. Contacting a librarian through the Los Angeles Public Library’s website is fairly easy. There is a “Ask a Librarian” link that leads to a webpage that lists the various methods to contact a librarian from the homepage using a link. The four minutes it took for the reference librarian to answer my question was within the acceptable timeframe to answer my request, but my initial contact should not have been in the form of an answer. It should have contained a salutation, an introduction, and an acknowledgement that my reference query had been received.

**Interest**

The reference librarian’s performance poorly demonstrated interest in the subject matter of my reference request as four minutes is simply too long of a period of time to go before giving any indication that a patron’s query had been received.

**Listening and Inquiring**

The Los Angeles Public Library’s performance in listening and inquiring as measured by my single virtual reference interaction through the chat medium was below expectations. No questions were asked to help decipher the exact nature of my request and the only indication that the reference librarian was listening was the submission of an on top response that answered my initial query.

**Searching**

Unfortunately, from the chat reference experience; the Los Angeles Public Library performed fairly poorly in terms of the search criteria as outlined by the RUSA. During the course of my virtual reference interaction, the reference librarian did not attempt to find out what I had already tried even though my reference query was structured in such a way to hint that I had made several attempts to locate the information in question. Also, it took four minutes to receive an initial response for the reference librarian; as such, there was no attempt to explain the search strategy as the reference librarian was conducting his or her search. In addition, no attempt was made to provide tips to help me improve my own searching skills as a patron of the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL).

**Follow-up**

The LAPL did not give my sufficient time to ask a follow-up question. The reference interaction was brought to a close before I could ask for additional related information.

In terms of follow-up, it would be unfair to rate the institution of the Los Angeles Public Library as the complexity of the question I asked did not require a follow up, nor do I wish to involve further resources of the Los Angeles Public Library in answering my query.

**Why It Matters**

Overall, I was displeased with my reference chat interaction with the Los Angeles Public Library (LAPL). The librarian only followed a few of guidelines for reference providers outlined by the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA). One RUSA guideline that the LAPL librarian followed was refraining from using jargon to answering reference questions. If more RUSA guidelines had been followed, the librarian would have been able to better answer my information need.

This poor outcome from my instant messaging reference query demonstrates that replicating an in-person service in a virtual environment is not simple. Body language and eye contact complement verbal communication to demonstrate a librarian’s interest and focus on fulfilling a patron’s query for an in-person, reference interaction. When face-to-face with a librarian, a patron can confirm through simple visual observation that the librarian remains on task working to answering the patron’s reference query. This is not the case for an instant messaging reference service. To compensate for a lack of facial cues, librarians engaged in virtual chat reference need to make it a point to quickly engage the patron through text and make it a point to verify that he or she understands the patron’s information need. This did not occur in my reference interaction.

I was nearly put off with the four-minute lapse between my request the librarian’s initial response. I had no way of evaluating why it took four minutes for an initial response. Was there another person ahead of me? Did it take a couple minutes to notice that they had question through text messaging? Did the librarian actually use most of the time looking for the answer to my question? I simply do not know. I found the uncertainty unsettling.