

Colorado Virtual Reference Symposium: Working Document
"Funding, Sustainability and Managing Growth"

A Word on Sustainability

Sustainable funding is largely reliant on our ability to communicate the value of our service. Recently there has been some discussion on the DigRef listserv on whether or not virtual reference service has been successful or a "resounding flop." A few statistics were thrown out to lend support to the "resounding flop" argument.

However, as providers of virtual reference I think we need to remember that there are **many ways** to gauge the success of library services. Statistics are but one tool that can help us tell our stories and demonstrate to our stakeholders how much customers value a specific service.

There are currently a number of statewide collaborative VR services with proven track records of usage and satisfaction and a body of data that can help tell that story. For instance, it might be illuminating for our funders if we tell them, "Our librarians share resources and collaborate with each other, and with an international network of other librarians, to provide 24 hour a day, seven day a week **LIVE** help to all of our state's nearly 9,000,000 residents, including thousands of students and small business owners."

Numbers are useful to a point, but our funders are human and they connect with and understand HUMAN stories. Therefore, when talking about our services, it can be helpful to share a selection from the thousands of customer comments we've received. These comments help us present a true, clear, and very human picture of the value of our service. Comments can be organized around themes such as:

EXPERTISE

- They found information that my Mom and I had been looking for and could not find no matter where we looked.
- I asked a question that I wasn't able to track down via Google, the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, the Associated Press or NJ Online. The librarian who assisted me quickly zeroed in on a source of information I didn't know existed.

THE LIBRARY CAME TO ME (CONVENIENCE)

- I like that the Library came to me I am house-bound. This opportunity is greatly appreciated.
- I liked that I didn't have to go out in the rain and received fast courteous service.

OPEN ALL THE TIME (CONVENIENCE)

- I liked that QandANJ was available at 1 am. I was researching from A-Z.
- I got the answers I needed, especially when the library was closed.

LIVE PERSON

- Fantastic knowing that a human was helping me!
- It was so nice to have a real person at the other end taking their time to help me. I was getting frustrated and was ready to give up until I saw this service available!

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Handouts, presentation and more at: www.qandanj.org/colorado

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IMMEDIACY/ SPEED (CONVENIENCE)

- I like the fact that you get an immediate answer to your question instead of having to click on a hundred different links and still not find the information you need.
- I searched for 1-2 hours for any information on the questions I had; your librarian found it in a minute.
- I got a quick and concise answer that otherwise would have required me to sift through a ton of information.

In telling our stories, we need to remember that the "success" of a virtual reference service goes beyond the mere counting up of how many sessions we've completed. Our VR services are important not only because we're providing a great service (which we are), but because we are changing people's perceptions about libraries and making library service relevant to their lives. How do we know that? Because they tell us. Over and over our customers tell us that they are blown away by the convenience and speed of the service. They are knocked out that an actual LIVE person is helping them find what they need on the Net. Giving them point of need "always open" service 24/7, simply blows their expectations out of the water.

So remember: there are many ways to effectively tell our stories, and there are many audiences to tell it to. Statistics, used wisely, are but one part of a robust strategy to convey the value of what we do to a variety of customer, constituents and stakeholders.