Guidelines for the Development and Promotion of Multilingual Collections and Services

“Guidelines for the Development and Promotion of Multilingual Collections and Services” (2007) was prepared by Library Services to the Spanish-Speaking Committee, Reference Services Section of the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), American Library Association (ALA). The Board of Directors approved it in January 2007. The purpose of the article is to point out that while specific public libraries have established collections for patrons whose native language is not English, little has been done in the United States to address the needs of public library users who are multilingual, language students, foreign students and bilingual patrons. The article states that it is the responsibility of the library to provide “equitable service to all community members regardless of their linguistic background.” Additionally the article said, providing materials for groups should not be seen as an “additional” or “extra service” but should be part of library goals to integrate multilingual services into the overall plan. The paper presented guidelines for doing so including: purchasing materials in languages of the ethnic groups according to community needs, providing varied formats including literacy materials, and a catalog to access materials in appropriate languages.

The article sporadically mentions obstacles that need to be considered when suggestions for changes are made. For example, when attempting to purchase more multilingual materials, the article touched on the low volume of publishers as well as quality concerns of materials purchased outside the U.S. Just a few paragraphs later a section on marketing and outreach services suggests, “Provide and actively promote multilingual services and programs for the various ethnic groups in the community,” but offers few strong suggestions as to how they should be presented. Many libraries need inspirational input when it comes to marketing, but
only a suggestion to outreach to community leaders in ethnic groups was made. The same goes for a section of the article devoted to staffing where it proposed multilingual staff and continuing education, which included language training and cultural sensitivity. This is a noble request, but one that comes at a cost that is not addressed in the article.

The article also made obvious points that it could have excluded, such as suggesting that library materials should be selected for the primary population and ethnic groups in the immediate community. At the same time, it provided ways to determine a community's needs such as focus groups, interviews and U.S. census materials. It reminded staff to purchase materials in a cross section of subjects. That reminder was probably not needed for an experienced library employee who makes acquisition decisions.

A section entitled, “Collection Maintenance” focused on preservation, evaluation of worn-out materials and the collection policy. This section of the article could have been eliminated altogether. Most libraries have a collection policy in place and no special rules need to be made or altered to address materials in another language. Additionally, no special rules or review need to be made for worn-out materials or preservation of materials in another language.

Finally, a section of the article devoted to reference and information services suggests that the library provide reference and information services in the most commonly used languages. In addition, special effort must be made to provide service to recently arrived immigrant groups. The article goes on to suggest the same level of service for interlibrary loan, referral service and bibliographic instruction should be provided “as necessary.” Ideally these are noble concepts, however, a realistic library budget can not afford to dedicate staff in equal numbers to ethnic groups, which, in some cases may be small when compared with English-speaking patrons.
In this economy, every service that requires “extra” or “additional” library funding comes under scrutiny. The requests of this article are noble, fair, good and in accord with the American dream but the costs related to the cause may prohibit moving forward with many of the articles suggestions.

Reference Desk Realities

Sally Smith and Roberta Johnson provide a dose of reality and some “best steps” for new reference desk professionals in their article, “Reference Desk Realities” (2007). The article is aimed at giving library students and recent graduates a realistic picture of what it is like to work the reference desk at the public library, focusing on insight and experiences that are not learned in the classroom.

The article describes the varied tasks one can expect to perform outside the typical duties of a reference librarian including: teacher, study hall monitor and copier fixer. A certain amount of humor is injected into the article such as describing the reference librarian as “civil servant, office supply source, information goddess, a secretary, Guardian of the Fortress of Knowledge…friend or enemy,” depending on how he or she is seen by the user. (Smith and Johnson, 2007, p. 70). Every patron has a different take on the experience they have at the reference desk. The article encourages the reader to think about the first time user of reference services. For many, it is difficult to approach a reference librarian. A patron has a problem they cannot solve and that can be intimidating. Other users demand what they want, as the article points out. Every approach from a user is different.

The article is good about revealing the strengths and weaknesses in each of us as individuals. For example, questions for one reference librarian might prove interesting on a certain level, while another reference librarian my want to “run and hide” from a question. The
article goes on to provide insights on the positive and the negatives of the job. Positive job experiences include the opportunity to work with other people, interesting work that changes with each patron, a chance to learn and feel good about your contribution to the community, as well as a feeling of gratitude from the patron. The negative side described in the article includes difficult people, challenging questions, working nights and weekends, working alone and the feeling you are expected to know everything. The article goes on to suggest that if you identify your “personal stressors”, it will make them easier to deal with, but the article does not give examples of what they could be or make suggestions about how to overcome them.

The article makes a good suggestion in recommending that a reference librarian prepare a list of people to call on for help. The article rightly points out that a reference librarian should have confidence about reaching out for help too. How he or she may answer the patron’s difficult question could go like this--“Wow, what a great question. And it’s beyond me, so if you can wait a minute I’m going to consult an expert.” (Smith and Johnson, 2007, p. 70). The article highlights two examples that can intimidate a reference librarian—medical and legal questions, but surely the list can be expanded to hundreds of subjects that could also easily intimidate him or her.

The article included a brief section on the Patriot Act which was confusing in that it only went so far as to say, “know who in your building is responsible for dealing with outside authority,” and to “know what your library’s rules and policies are…” (Smith and Johnson, 2007, p. 70). The article did not state why knowing these pieces of information apply to the Patriot Act.

The article describes some of the varied patron types the reference librarian is likely to encounter including the bully, the “cranky”, the elderly, the mentally ill, the homeless and others. Because of these varied personality types, the article suggests improving “human
behavior skills”, but it does not suggest how to do so. When interacting with varied types of patrons, it does advocate knowing policies and backup, but it does not suggest any such policies with the exception of keeping your boss apprised of any confrontation so as not to surprise him or her later. That is applicable advice in any work environment.

The article uses good words to describe the reference librarian that include, “intelligent, flexible, friendly and approachable.” (Smith and Johnson, 2007, p. 71). The article also points out a fundamental truth, “…the patron deserves a positive experience.” (Smith and Johnson, 2007, p. 71). Everything counts in face-to-face communication with a patron including body language.

A few new pieces of information were gleaned from this article including know your busiest time and keep your plate clear at those times to focus on patron questions, but be ready to juggle multiple tasks. Offer additional help, “…even patrons who have mastered basic searches are delighted to learn shortcuts or advanced searches that will get them what they need fast.” (Smith and Johnson, 2007, p. 72). Good idea.

A bit of psychology is suggested when bad news has to be delivered. Instead of saying you do not have an answer, deliver the news “sandwiched” between positive pieces of information. Here is a good example the article provides:

I'm sure we can answer that question (positive), but maybe not by myself, or in five minutes, or even at this library (negative). I know who to ask, or who to refer you to outside the library (ends on a positive note). (Smith and Johnson, 2007, p. 72).

The intent is to end on a positive note, which is solid advice.
The article bestows professional wisdom by telling the reader (more than once) not to share personal or professional issues with the patron. It also gives broad workplace advice, which is adaptable in any environment by telling the reader to, “make the boss look good,” because that keeps the boss happy. (Smith and Johnson, 2007, p. 72). The article makes a good point by telling the reference librarian not to share “stupid patron” comments in the community. This is applicable, again, for any profession.

In closing, this article is an excellent read for first-day-on-the-job librarians. I do not think that an experienced professional would be presented with much in the way of new information by having read it.
References

Guidelines for the development and promotion of multilingual collections and services. (2007).

