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MAXIMIZING THE USE OF REFERENCE BOOKS: A STORY

David V. Loertscher

Once upon a time in libraryland, Studious Sam needed some information from the library. Knowing that it was more than he could expect from a phone call to the librarian, he hopped on his bicycle and pedaled down to the library. It was near closing time and the information he needed for his homework (or report, or job, or personal need, or just plain interest) turned out to be in a reference book behind the librarian's desk.

"Oh please," he asked of Strict Selvin, the librarian, "Couldn't I please check the book out overnight? I'd have it back in the morning, I promise." Strict Selvin didn't bat an eye as he automatically responded, "Reference books don't circulate!"

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Studious Sam was mad. He:

1. threw the book down on the table and walked out enraged, or
2. said he needed the book for a few more minutes - ran to a corner of the library and cut out the pages he needed, or
3. stole the book, or
4. vowed he would never use that library again, or
5. went without the information he needed for his homework/report/job/personal need/interest and suffered because of it.

Studious Sam got to thinking about his experience and decided to ask the head librarian some questions about reference book policy. He was brave. Here are some of the replies he got and some of his objections to those replies.

You could have checked out the older editions of reference books which we allow to circulate.

Now really, librarian, are you advocating that I use out-of-date information for my homework/report/job/personal need/interest? Do you realize how much damage can be done when a patron uses an inferior resource?

Reference books need to be on the shelf at all times so that they are available at any given moment.

OK, librarian, who can possibly get to that book after you close and before you open the next morning? The mice? How can you defend the non-use of a very expensive publically owned resource at a time when it is needed?

But library policy states that reference books are not to circulate overnight.

Sounds like one of those policies that haven't been examined in years to see whether it is relevant to today's needs.

How do we know that a patron would bring a reference book back the next morning so that it would be available to others?

Well, it is certain that you will never know that until you try out overnight circulation and test it out. By the way, have you ever read an article in the professional literature about a library that circulated its reference books for overnight use and stopped the policy because it was abused?

But what would happen if a patron could not get to the library that next morning?

Ah, now here is a use for those older editions. You see, if you guarded the old editions and circulated the newer ones, you could limp along (with verbal warnings to patrons and call-backs if necessary) with the older editions until the newer ones were returned. *We do pride ourself, I guess you know, on the size of our reference collection - it's a mark of quality.*

That's the problem with many libraries. They often relegate many volumes that would get heavy use in the circulating collection to relatively little use in the reference collection. Shouldn't you ask where a book would get more use before you create that all important call number?

Now you are committing the same sin you accused me of. How can I know if a reference book would get more use in the reference collection as opposed to the circulating collection?

Well, I guess that the only sure way would be to do an experiment. You might have a circulating copy in addition to a reference copy of a particular title and through observation (or a note to a patron) a check mark could be put in the reference copy every time it was used and the same count could be done on the circulating copy. That would be one way of comparing the number of uses.

It would also be very interesting for the reference librarian to make a small pencil tally in every reference book used over a period of time (say two weeks or a month). It wouldn't take long to evaluate whether any title was really needed in the reference collection. Why not pare down the size of the reference collection to a minimum? *Since you have been so smart about our reference book policy, I'll bet you have another suggestion.*

I'm glad you asked. Another pet peeve of mine is that I see all those expensive reference books sitting on the shelves in their expensive bindings - particularly encyclopedias - and wonder if something could be done to insure that by the time a reference book was outdated it would be worn out too. Suppose you purchased every reference book you could in the paperback edition?

But are reference books available in paperback?

You're asking me? You are the librarian. I'd suggest a visit to a quality paperback book shop for the answer to that question. Most of the stores I've been in have a reference section with other reference books scattered throughout the nonfiction section. Oh, but you know of other sources you could check like *Paperbound Books in Print* and other specialty lists.

I guess you're suggesting that I could save some money?

That's the name of the game.

I just don't know about your nontraditional approach. We've never done this type of thing before. Are you really seriously advocating that everything in the library collection circulate except the librarian?

If Tutankhamon could circulate why not library reference books?

Remember, I as a taxpayer am getting pretty tired of paying for public services which don't serve. Oh, by the way, librarian, when you need a reference book after hours what do you do?