Librarian 2011: Using Basic Library Science Techniques to Manage Technology Requests

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It is a truth almost reduced to a cliché that library patrons often come to the reference desk convinced they know the correct information to find a resource only to find out that they are completely wrong in almost every particular. One classic article on the subject contains the story of a student who comes to the reference desk of a university library seeking a volume called *Oranges and Peaches* which cannot be found in the catalog. A careful query by the librarian unearths the fact that the material in question is a seminal work on evolution and she correctly deduces that the student really needs *On the Origin of Species.*

Technological requests are subject to the same sort of confusion and misinformation. A request for a webinar or collaboration tool (to use only two examples) can mean many different things to many different people. In addition, since the terminology to describe technology is evolving alongside the technology itself, authoritative statements that begin with "I need a…" are often followed by similarly authoritative labels that don't necessarily accurately describe the underlying need any more than a patron request such as, "I need *Prosser and Keeton on Contracts,*" would automatically yield a meaningful result.

Take webinars as an example: in practical effect, a request for a webinar can actually mean anything from a bridged conference call with slides distributed by e-mail to a web-based videoconference between two people to a multipoint communication with presenter-controlled slides, multiple methods of asking the presenter a question, and archiving of the presentation for later viewing. Determining the real need and the best technological tool to achieve the desired result can be a complicated calculation based on factors such as expectations, budget, and even the technological acumen of the person making the request.

As librarians, we are used to using the reference interview as a tool to peel back layers of poor recollection, unintelligible notes, and outright misinformation. By dialing a query back to the point of finding out what is required and differentiating that from what is asked for, we can find the real answers our patrons seek. Thus, the same tool that turns "I need a book called *Oranges and Peaches*" into "Here is *On the Origin of Species*" can also turn "I need a webinar" into "Let me get you a Skype account and show you how to use it."

Conducting a technological reference interview has all of the hallmarks of a more traditional reference interview: the patron may insist that you "just get me the thing I asked for," they may be embarrassed by their own lack of a clear idea of what they want, or they may have tried other avenues before seeking your help and are already frustrated and confused. The keys to solving these problems are the same in the tech suite as they are at the reference desk: patience, good humor, and basic questions. Instead of saying, "What sort of webinar would you like?" it is wiser to start with something like, "I'd love to help you. How many people are involved? Do you want people to be able to ask questions? How many presenters are there? Do you have a budget for this?" If you get a lot of these sorts of requests, developing a questionnaire to ease and organize planning is essential.

Further complications can be introduced by other players outside your organization. In the case of technology used to collaborate or communicate, you may need to assess not only your own resources but those of someone outside your institution. For instance, if Skype looks like it will meet your user's needs, you have to make sure that the other party involved has access to a computer with a camera and microphone that has enough memory to run Skype.

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Having conducted your reference interview, you also need to know what resources are available to match to the user's request, what the level of expertise required to use them is, and how much they cost. For this, another basic library technique comes into play: environmental scanning. Blogs can be used as powerful discovery tool for new technological resources; for instance, Profhacker at the Chron-

icle of Higher Education has been especially effective at introducing new resources that are relevant to my user base. Free software and web services are also increasingly common and effective. You may want to keep a running list or spreadsheet of resources that you uncover and where they can be found to facilitate future requests. **LLL**

Here are just a few of my favorite free tools:

Audacity

Audacity is an audio recording and editing suite that offers users an impressive array of effects and tools. Audacity can export files to a number of different formats, including MP3, WAV, and AAC. This application is perfect for making up lost class time by creating podcasts.

Dropbox

Dropbox creates a synchronized, password-protected folder that is available from multiple computers. When a computer is offline, the documents are still available as local copies saved to the hard drive. When the computer comes online again, it automatically syncs any changes from the hard drive to the Dropbox server and then those changes sync to other computers when they come online in turn. You can share specific sub-folders without endangering the security of the rest of your account. Dropbox even lets you undelete a file for 30 days. Dropbox is ideal for enabling someone to work on a project from multiple locations without e-mailing files or keeping track of flash drives or for collaborators on a single project.

Jing

Jing is a fully-featured screen capture application that not only enables you to snap and annotate still images, but also does full-motion screen capture with automatic output into Flash. You can then embed the Flash movies into a presentation or share them at a free Screencast.com account. Jing helps me provide clear, effective technical support and assistance from my desktop.

Prezi

Prezi provides a web-based suite of tools to create presentations that look nothing like Powerpoint. Utilizing a zoom-and-pan approach rather than a slide-by-slide approach, Prezi can make distinctive, dynamic presentations and only requires a very short learning curve to master.