

Improving Satisfaction in Virtual Reference Encounters

**PA Library Association
Cedar Crest College, Allentown, PA**

**Presented on:
May 15, 2008**

**By:
Marie L. Radford, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Rutgers University, SCILS**

**E-mail: mradford@scils.rutgers.edu
Website: www.scils.rutgers.edu/~mradford
Blog: Library Garden <http://librarygarden.blogspot.com>**

**Note this research project is funded by IMLS, OCLC, and Rutgers University:
“Seeking Synchronicity: Evaluating Virtual Reference Services from User, Non-User
and Librarian Perspectives.”**

Grant Website: <http://www.oclc.org/research/projects/synchronicity>

Radford Category Scheme for Interpersonal Communication in Chat Reference

FACILITATORS

Greeting Ritual

Deference

- Agreement to Try what is Suggested, or to Wait
- Apology
- Asking for Other to Be Patient
- Expressions of Enthusiasm
- Suggesting Strategy or Explanation
- Thanks
- Polite Expressions
- Praise, Admiration
- Self-Deprecating Remarks

Rapport Building

- Familiarity
- Humor
- Hedges/Interjections (e.g., well, oh)
- Offering Confirmation
 - Approval
 - Empathy
 - Inclusion
- Offering Reassurance
 - Encouraging Remarks, Praise
 - Enthusiastic Remarks
- Repair, Self Correction
- Seeking Reassurance, Confirmation, or Self Disclosure
- Self Disclosure
 - Admitting Lack of Knowledge, At a Loss as to Where to Search
 - Explaining Search Strategy
 - Explaining Technical Problems
 - Offer Personal Opinion, Advice, Value Judgment
- Use of Informal Language
 - Alternate Spelling, Abbreviated Single Words (e.g., info)
 - Lower Case
 - Slang Expressions
- Rerepresentation of Nonverbal Cues
 - ALL CAPS
 - Alpha-Numeric Shortcuts (e.g., l8r for later)
 - Asterisk for emphasis
 - Ellipsis
 - Emoticons
 - Phrase Abbreviations (e.g., FYI, for your information)
 - Spells Out Nonverbal Behaviors (e.g., ha ha)
 - Punctuation or Repeated Punctuation

FACILITATORS (CONTINUED)

Closing Ritual

- Explanation for Signing Off Abruptly
- Invites to Return if Necessary
- Makes Sure User Has No More Questions
- Offers to Continue Searching & E-Mail Answer

BARRIERS

Negative Closure

- Abrupt Ending
- Disclaimer
- Failure to Refer
- Ignoring Cues That User Wants More Help
- Premature or Attempted Closing
- Premature Referral
- Sends To Google

Relational Disconnect Failure to Build Rapport

- Condescending
- Derisive Use of Spelling Out NV Behaviors
- Disconfirming
- Failing to Offer Reassurance
- Failure or Refusal to Provide Info
- Goofing Around
- Ignoring Humor
- Ignoring Self-Disclosure
- Impatience
- Inappropriate Script or Inappropriate Response
- Inappropriate Language
- Jargon, No Explanation
- Lack of Attention or Ignoring Question
- Limits Time
- Mirrors Rude Behavior
- Mistakes
- Misunderstands Question
- Reprimanding
- Robotic Answer
- Rude or Insulting

Sample Transcript with Relational Facilitators “Mathematics in the Islamic Empire”
 (Note: U=User, L=Librarian)

1	U	i need a good website about the accomplishments of mathrmatics during the islamic empire
2	L	[A librarian will be with you in about a minute.]
3	L	[A librarian has joined the session.]
4	L	[You have been conferenced with name of service]
5	L	(Name) welcome to (service name) I'm looking at your question right now; it will be just a moment.
6	L	Hi (name) - sorry about the delay there. This is (name), a librarian in (city)
7	U	ok
8	L	Okay, we should be able to find something on that topic. Math and Islam. Just a minute or two while I search. Please let me know if there's anything specific in this area that you're looking for, okay?
9	U	i don;t care about the delay i have plenty of time
10	L	Thanks for understanding. We just had a very busy spell on the service and I just finished up another call. Let's see... searching now.
11	U	i just need any certan mathematicians or the accomplishments of mathematics during the islamic Empire
12	L	Okay, to start I'm going to send you an article linked from the Math Forum:
13	L	[Page sent]
14	L	It should show on your screen in just a few seconds. Are you able to see it? the title is Arabic mathematics : forgotten brilliance?
15	U	thank you very much
16	L	Great - glad you can see it! There was one other article - did you want me to send it to you, or are you okay with just this one?
17	U	yes plaese
18	L	Okay, just a sec.
19	L	[Page sent]
20	U	i spelled please wrong
21	L	The title of this 2nd page I just sent was, "The Arabic numeral system"
22	U	thank you
23	L	No problem on the spelling. :) Typing this fast it's giong to happen.
24	L	*going*
25	L	Okay, what do you think? Will these answer your questions?
26	U	yes thank you
27	L	Great! Please do write us back if you need anything else.
28	L	Thank you for using (name service)! If you have any further questions, please contact us again. If you provided an e-mail address, you should receive a full transcript in a few minutes. You may click the "End Call" button now.

Sample Transcript with Relational Barriers “Physics”
 (Note: U=User, L=Librarian)

1	U	Physics
2	L	[Please hold for the next available librarian. If you would like a transcript of this session emailed to you, please type your full email address now.]
3	L	[A librarian has joined the session.]
4	U	when you drive forward in a bumper car at high speed and then you slam into the car in front of you, you find yourself thrown forward in your car. Which way is ur car accelerating?
5	L	thank you for holding I was working with another patron.
6	L	Is this a homework question.
7	L	I'm not an expert on driving so I really can't answer that.
8	U	can u find a website or something
9	L	I'm not sure what you are asking.
10	U	when you drive forward in a bumper car at high speed and then you slam into the car in front of you, you find yourself thrown forward in your car. Which way is ur car accelerating?
11	U
12	U	hello?
13	L	Is this a homework a homework assignment. what subject is it.
14	L	I really don't understand how I can answer that for you.
15	U	can i hav another librarian
16	L	The information you gave you me does not help me find any resources to help you.
17	L	What do you mean by which way is your car accerlaerating. Are you sure thats what your assignment asks.
18	U	yes
19	L	What subject is this question from?
20	U	physics
21	L	Okay just one moment.
22	L	[Page sent]
23	L	This is one site that may help.
24	L	[Page sent]
25	L	[Page sent - LeapStart Learning Table. Learning Starts Here!]
26	L	this is another site that youmay try forhelp.

Improving Satisfaction in Virtual Reference Encounters

Marie L. Radford, Ph.D. PA Library Association May 15, 2008

27	L	When we disconnect you will have these links in a transcript.
28	L	[Page sent]
29	L	This site looks to be very helpful.
30	L	[Page sent - The Physics Classroom]
31	L	[Page sent - The Physics Classroom]
32	L	[Page sent - The Physics Classroom]
33	U	this isn't helpful
34	L	Well I really don't have any other resources that can assist you.
35	L	[Page sent - The Physics Classroom]
36	L	I cannot answer the question for you, I don't have the physics knowledge.
37	L	Maybe you will need to ask your instructor for a clear understanding.
38	L	[Page sent - The Physics Classroom]
39	U	do u know ne1 who does
40	L	[Page sent - The Physics Classroom]
41	U	Sorry I do not.
42	U	ok
43	L	I have a few patrons that I need to assist.
44	U	ok bye
45	L	[Thank you for using (service name)! If you have any further questions, please contact us again.]
46		Note to staff: COMP [user has closed this session]

Checklist of Recommendations for Facilitating Interpersonal Communication in Chat Reference

General Notes

- Always remember that your interpersonal skills and experience are transferable to the chat environment.
- There is a general misunderstanding that interpersonal niceties are not important in chat or virtual settings. Interpersonal dimensions are present and vitally important in virtual communication.
- The large majority of time spent in virtual interactions is spent in the searching process, not in interpersonal exchanges.
- Type short sentences and hit send frequently at appropriate places to maintain “word contact.” If you are going to be searching for a while, continue to send short reassurances (e.g., searching...) so the users know you have not disconnected.

Greeting

- Give a personal greeting after the script (can be a quick “Hi!”)
- Use the person’s first name in your response, younger users especially like a personal approach. This softens the anonymous environment and may head off problems.
- When reading user’s initial question, look for any self-disclosure or indications that the user is seeking reassurance (Can you help me?) and provide an appropriate response.
- When initial question looks complex, immediately let the user know that you think this may take some time and ask if they have the time to wait while you search. Users sometimes expect instant answers, like when they search Google, but often they are multitasking and may not mind waiting.
- If you can see that the user is from a geographically remote place, you may want to make a comment on this right away (e.g., How’s the weather in Florida? It’s snowing here in Maryland). This gently alerts the user that a question about local information may have to be referred.

Strategies for Building Rapport

- As appropriate, be willing to self-disclose, to provide information about yourself, to use “I” statements. This can mean:
 - Offering personal opinion/advice/value judgment (e.g., I think that you will have more success if you do X; or I have used this strategy before and it works!)
 - Admitting lack of knowledge (e.g., I don’t know what you mean, could you be more specific? I have not heard of this term before, can you tell me what it means?)
 - Ask for confirmation as needed (e.g., Is this what you mean?)

Improving Satisfaction in Virtual Reference Encounters

Marie L. Radford, Ph.D. PA Library Association May 15, 2008

- Acknowledge user self-disclosure (e.g., I'm sorry you're not feeling well and are unable to travel to your library, let me see how I can help. Then, at the closing, "feel better soon!")
 - Be empathetic when users self-disclose difficulty or frustration. (e.g., It is frustrating when our technology doesn't work!)
- Include user in search process (e.g., Let's try this; We'll look here first; Would it be ok if we...)
- Indicate your approval as appropriate (e.g., That's great! or Good for you!)
- Offer reassurance when users indicate that they are tentative, or unsure of how to proceed. Realize that they can be fearful of your disapproval (if, for example, they have poor computer skills).
 - Use encouraging remarks, praise, and enthusiastic remarks as appropriate.
 - Humor also can be reassuring, as can the use of self-deprecating remarks (I'm not the world's best speller either!)
- Mirror the level of formality/informality of the user
 - If they use informal language, feel free to be less formal (as appropriate).
- Be deferential and respectful of all users.
 - Use polite expressions as appropriate (e.g., please, thanks, you're welcome, etc.).
 - Apologize as appropriate (e.g., use sorry, unfortunately, or oops).

Compensation for Lack of Nonverbal Cues

- Mirror the user's style. If they use shortcuts, acronyms, abbreviations, and emoticons (smileys), feel free to do so also (as appropriate).
 - You may see more "chat speak" in younger users, respond in kind if you are comfortable doing so.
- If you are not comfortable using emoticons, you can spell out nonverbal behaviors or use interjections (e.g., hmmm, oh, ha ha, grin).
- Use repeated punctuation for emphasis (e.g., !!!, or ??).
- Use ellipsis to indicate more to come (e.g., still searching...)
- Be careful when using ALL CAPS, this may seem like a reprimand or like shouting (e.g., Don't EVER ...).

Closing

- Always give a personal closing (can be a quick "bye!")
- In the closing, as in the greeting, be sure to respond to self-disclosure, enthusiasm, or polite expressions. (e.g., if the user says: "This is a great service!" Don't just send them the scripted closing, give an appropriate response like "Glad you think so, thanks!")
- Avoid premature closing, make sure you have answered users question(s) completely. Ask if they need anything else before closing.
- Look for subtle cues that the user wants more help. (e.g., "Well, thanks for your help" is one example, the "well" hedge may indicate that they are settling for what you have provided, but really want more.)

In Synch? Evaluating Chat Reference Transcripts Relational Barriers to be Avoided

- Avoid robotic answers.
- Avoid sending an inappropriate script (e.g., a welcome script half-way through).
- Don't ignore user self-disclosure or use of humor. If the user makes a joke (even if it is lame!) respond with a ;-) or ha!
- Avoid failing to offer reassurance when the user seeks it.
- Don't ignore parts of questions or additional questions.
 - When dealing with a several part question let the user know that you will take the questions in order.
 - If busy, indicate that you will start with question one, and may have to answer the others by e-mail.
- Avoid being condescending or disconfirming.
- Avoid negative closure
 - Premature Closing – make sure that you have answered all questions.
 - Abrupt ending – let user know you are going to close.
 - Disclaimer – don't indicate that question is unanswerable or problematic before checking, many things previously unavailable may now be accessible. Provide a good referral if you are unable to answer question.
 - Never ignore cues that user wants more help, even if it means asking them to wait while you help others.

Checklist for Encounters with Rude/Impatient Users

- Remember you have skills and experience in dealing with rude/impatient people in face-to-face encounters – these skills can be just as effective in virtual encounters.
- Don't "mirror" rude behavior; this only provokes further rudeness.
- Be polite and professional at all times.
- Resist the urge to reprimand or admonish users for rude behavior or FLAMING, again this only provokes more rude behavior.
- Avoid jargon or language that will create a barrier or send the message that you are blindly following the rulebook.
- Apologize to the user as appropriate, this does not mean that you are accepting blame.
 - An apology can diffuse potentially rude behavior on line.
 - E.g., I'm sorry that you had to wait so long; our service is very busy today.
 - E.g., I'm sorry that I can't help with your request this time, please visit your local library for that information.
- When users are impatient (Hurry, hurry!), let them know realistically how long you think that the search for the information they need will take. If you think it will take more than a minute or so, let them know. Present alternatives and let them decide.
 - E.g., I know you are in a hurry, but this will take about 4 to 5 minutes. Can you wait?
 - If they can't wait, apologize (e.g., I'm sorry I can't answer your question quickly, but I can e-mail that answer to you within 2-3 days).
- If the user complains about library service or another chat librarian, thank them for bringing their concern to your attention and promise to follow-up. Regard a complaint as a gift, as a way to improve service.
- Don't be condescending to a person with a "simple question." Sometimes parents are helping their children with homework and you may insult them. Treat all users with equal courtesy and respect.
- Realize that the rude users are in the minority, but understand that you will encounter one now and then.
- Don't take rude behaviors personally, sometimes users are stressed by deadlines and other life problems and their rudeness and impatience usually has nothing to do with you or your service.

Smileys/Emoticons and Chat Abbreviations & Short Cuts

- : -) or :) Basic smiley, used for sarcastic or joking statement.
- ;-) or ;) Winking smiley, used for flirtatious and/or sarcastic remark.
- : - (or :(Frowning smiley, used for sad, depressed, upset, did not like last statement.

Adapted from: The Unofficial Smiley Dictionary [<http://paul.merton.ox.ac.uk/ascii/smileys.html>]

Chat/Texting Abbreviations & Short Cuts

These terms are used in chat/texting for fewer key strokes. Frequently used ones are in bold.

- * **Indicates a correction is being made, usually of a typo (e.g., sarry *sorry)**
- ? Indicates, "I have a question"
- aesp As early as possible**
- afaik As far as I know I
- asap As Soon As Possible**
- ayt Are you there?
- b4n Bye For Now**
- bak Back At Keyboard
- bb1 Be Back Later
- bf1 Bye For Now
- brb Be Right Back**
- btw By The Way**
- bye? "Are you ready to say goodbye?" If so, the other person replies "BYE"
- bykt But You Knew That
- cu See You (also cu2 - See You, Too).
- cul or cul8r See You Later
- dawg Dog, pal, used as a friendly greeting (e.g., Hey Dawg!)**
- dk Don't Know
- eod End of discussion**
- em? Excuse me?**
- f2f or ftf Face To Face
- fyi For Your Information**
- fyeo For Your Eyes Only
- <g> or <grin> Speaker is grinning, also <smile> <wink> etc.**
- gal Get A Life**
- gbh Great Big Hug**
- gfn Gone For Now
- gmta Great Minds Think Alike
- h&k or hak Hugs and Kisses
- hag Have a Good (one or day)**
- hf Have Fun**
- hth Hope That Helps!
- iae In Any Event
- ic I See**
- iykwim If You Know What I Mean**

imho, imo In My Humble Opinion, In My Opinion

jam Just A Minute

jik Just in Case

jk Just Kidding

jw Just Wondering

k or kk Okay

kwim Know What I Mean?

l8r Later

lmho Laughing My Head Off

lol Laughing Out Loud

myob Mind Your Own Business

nmu Not Much, You?

noyb None Of Your Business

np No Problem

ntw Not To Worry

oic Oh, I See

pds Please Don't Shout. (Stop typing in all capital letters, which is considered rude.)

pncah Please, No Cursing Allowed Here

r u there? Are you there?

rhip Rank Has Its Privileges

rme Rolling my eyes

rsvp Répondez S'il Vous Plait, "please reply"

ruok Are you OK?

sec Wait a second

sol Sh** Out Of Luck

sos Same Old Stuff or Help!.

taf That's All, Folks!

tafn That's All For Now

thx Thanks

tia Thanks In Advance

tnxe6 Thanks A Million ("E6" means 10 to the 6th power = a million)

ttyl or ttul Talk To You Later

ttyt Talk To You Tomorrow.

tyclo Turn Your CAPS LOCK Off (Quit Shouting).

ty Thank You

tyvm Thank You Very Much

u, ur You, Your

w8 Wait

weg Wiked Evil Grin

xoxoxo Kisses and hugs

yiu Yes, I Understand

yt You There?

Adapted from: ComputerUser.com High-Tech Dictionary
[Available: <http://www.computeruser.com/resources/dictionary/chat.html>]
and Laura M. Holson, *Text Gap UR 2 Old (Or R U?)*, *New York Times*, March 9, 2008, p. Bu 9.

Bibliography for Further Reading

- Agosto, D.E., & Hughes-Hassell, S. (2005). People, places, and questions: An investigation of the everyday life information-seeking behaviors of urban young adults. *Library and Information Science Research*, 27, 141-163.
- Agosto, D. E., & Hughes-Hassell, S. (2006). Toward a model of the everyday life information needs of urban teenagers, part 1: Theoretical model. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*, 57(10), 1394-1403.
- Braun, L. W. (2002). *Teens.library: Developing Internet services for young adults*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Carter, K. A. (2003). Type me how you feel: Quasi-nonverbal cues in computer-mediated communication. *Etc*, 60 (1), 29-39.
- Connaway, L. S. & Radford, M. L. (2007). The thrill of the chase in cyberspace: A report of focus groups with live chat librarians. *Informed Librarian Online [electronic journal]* [Available:<http://www.informedlibrarian.com/guestForum.cfm?FILE=gf0701.html>]
- Goffman, E. (1972). *Relations in public: Microstudies of the public order*. NY: Basic Books.
- Goffman, E. (1956). The Nature of deference and demeanor. *American Anthropologist* 58(3):475-499.
- Hempel, J. (2005, December 12). The Myspace generation: They live online. They buy online. They play online. Their power is growing. *Business Week*, p. 86.
- Johnson, C. M. (2004). Online chat reference: Survey results from affiliates of two universities. *RUSQ*, 43(3), 237-247.
- Lankes, R.D., Nicholson, S., Radford, M. L., Westbrook, L., Silverstein, J., & Nast, P. (Eds.) (2008). *Virtual Reference Service: From Competencies to Assessment*. NY: Neal-Schuman.
- Lippincott, J. (2005). Net Generation Students and Libraries. In D. G. Oblinger, and J. L. Oblinger, J. L. (Eds.), *Educating the Net Generation*. Educause. [Available: http://www.educause.edu/content.asp?PAGE_ID=5989&bhcp=1]
- Nilsen, K. (2004). The library visit study: User experiences at the virtual reference desk. *Information Research*, 9(2) paper 171. Retrieved on May 13, 2005 from <http://InformationR.net/ir/9-2/paper171.html>
- Radford, M. L. (2008). *Interpersonal communication in virtual reference encounters in the Library LAWLINE Consortium*. In: R. David Lankes, Scott Nicholson, Marie L. Radford, Lynn Westbrook, Joanne Silverstein, and Philip Nast (Eds.) *Virtual Reference Service: >From Competencies to Assessment*, pp. 77-88. NY: Neal-Schuman Publishers.
- Radford, M. L. (June, 2006). Encountering virtual users: A qualitative investigation of interpersonal communication in chat reference. *Journal of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*. 57(8), 1046-1059.

Improving Satisfaction in Virtual Reference Encounters

Marie L. Radford, Ph.D. PA Library Association May 15, 2008

- Radford, M. L. (2006). Investigating interpersonal communication in chat reference: Dealing with impatient users and rude encounters. In R. David Lankes, Eileen Abels, Marilyn White and Saira N. Haque. (Eds.) *The Virtual Reference Desk: Creating a Reference Future*, pp. 23-46. NY: Neal-Schuman Publishers.
- Radford, M. L. (1999). *The reference encounter: Interpersonal communication in the academic library*. Chicago: ACRL, A Division of the American Library Association.
- Radford, M. L. & Connaway, L. S. (February, 2007). "Screenagers" and Live Chat Reference: Living Up to the Promise. *Scan*. 26(1), 31-39.
- Ross, C. S., & Dewdney, P. (winter, 1998). Negative closure: Strategies and counter-strategies in the reference transaction. *RUSQ*, 38(2), 151-163.
- Rushkoff, D. (1996). *Playing the future: What we can learn from digital kids*. NY: Harper Collins.
- Sweeney, R. (2006). Millennial behaviors and demographics. [Available: <http://www.library.njit.edu/staff-folders/sweeney/Millennials/Millennial-Behaviors-August-14-2006.doc>]
- Walter, V.A. & Mediavilla, C. (2005). Teens are from Neptune, librarians are from Pluto: An analysis of online reference transactions. *Library Trends*, 54(2), 209-227
- Walther, J.B. (1996). Computer-mediated communication: Impersonal, interpersonal and hyperpersonal interaction. *Communication Research*, 23(1), 3-43.
- Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. & Jackson, D.D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication*. NY: Norton.
- Walther, J. B. (2006). Selective self-presentation in computer-mediated communication: Hyperpersonal dimensions of technology, language, and cognition. *Computers in Human Behavior* 23 (2007), 2538-2557.
- Westbrook, L. (2007). Chat reference communication patterns and implications: Applying politeness theory. *Journal of Documentation*, 63(5), 638-658.