

Title: Personalizing the Reference Interview: Getting Up Close and Personal Without Being Creepy

Presenter: Rita Vine, Senior Medical Librarian, University of Toronto

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Reporter: Gail Thompson-Allen

Rita Vine was a dynamic speaker that presented a whole new spin on the reference interview. In her presentation she showed how to establish a professional and personalized relationship in a brief communication encounter so as to get the person the answer to their real question and the information they really want.

She spoke about the elephants in the room; one elephant being the first impression we make of being too busy and inaccessible or looking more like a security guard than a helper; the other elephant is that we are “information believers” and we just want to throw information at them, get the question and get them in our “silos”, ie. books and journals and databases. These things combined with asking the wrong questions produce a statistic of a 55% disconnect rate where the patron does not get the information they wanted or the question they had answered and results in the person not going back to that librarian again. This 55% failure rate that has not changed that much in years is because of the lack of a good reference interview.

Rita claims that we need to get personal and use the kinds of questions we do not feel comfortable with. She made us all stand a little on our heads because what she called “neutral questions”, we all felt were kind of personal. Here are some of the tips she gave us as to how to conduct a better interview, so as to find out what the person really wants. Be welcoming, “yes you are in the right place”, “yes I can help you with that”. Do not ask them what they are “exactly/specifically” looking for. Instead use some bridges to neutral questions, such as, “it would help me think of the best way to help you if you could tell me...” or “can you back me up a little bit and tell me...” or “can I ask you a few questions so that I can help you better...”. At this point, you are then ready to ask the “creepier” questions; “what are you trying to do?”, “what will you use this information for when you get it?”, “what seems to be missing?”. In this way you learn about the user’s “problem” so you can present ideas so they can solve their problem. Now you are ready to say, “here are my ideas that might help”, “how do you feel about these ideas?” You want to give the user control! Their problem, Their Solution. Interestingly enough Rita claims she has never had anybody balk at answering the “creepy” questions she posed and she after all is a medical librarian dealing with very sensitive “problems”.

Rita Vine has emailed her complete presentation to me and I plan on sharing this with the Information staff. I would be happy to share it with anyone else that is interested.

