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On Asking for Help*

Mary Whisner**

Women will ask for directions, but men won't. Whether that stereotype is true or not, it is certainly true that while some library patrons will ask for help, many others will not. Ms. Whisner suggests that there is a range of reasons for not asking and that librarians should keep these in mind when devising ways to assist their patrons.

¶1 It has become something of a cliché to talk of men who will go to great lengths to avoid asking for directions when they are driving. The stereotype is sometimes extended to suggest that these men will not read the directions when assembling furniture or performing other intricate operations. Beyond setting up jokes in comic strips and situation comedies, can the stereotype teach us anything useful? For some lost researchers, is asking for help in the Reference Office as hard as asking for directions in an unfamiliar town?

¶2 First, let us agree that people—men and women—exhibit much greater diversity than this stereotype suggests. It is silly to claim that all men are always averse to asking for directions or that all women are always comfortable doing so. Surely, some men, in some situations, ask for directions, while some women, in some situations, do not.

¶3 Whatever the distribution of this trait by gender, it is clear that some people hate to ask for directions. The reasons vary. Perhaps some people do not ask for directions because they believe they know the way. Others might know that they do not know the way, but believe that a little guesswork will get them on track. Some might enjoy the challenge of navigating without help. Some might not want to interrupt another person to ask for help (“that gas station attendant would not want to be bothered by my question”). Perhaps some drivers’ ability to find their way around is tied up with their sense of self and competence, so they feel embarrassed that they do not know the way and believe that confessing their ignorance would be humiliating.

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¶14 All of these cognitive and emotional factors can come into play as easily in the library as on the road. Consider the following examples of library users who don't ask for help, each a product of my imagination but based on years of observing researchers (and being a researcher myself).

¶15 Example 1: *They think they know the way.* Some library users believe that they are skilled researchers when in fact they are not. Lynn Law Student feels utterly confident using the *Decennial Digest* to find federal employment discrimination cases. She never asks how to use *West's Federal Practice Digest 4th*—let alone BNA's *Labor Relations Reporter!*—because she believes her approach is an effective way to find the information she needs. Indeed, she does locate many federal employment discrimination cases using the *Decennial Digest*; her path is just not as direct as we expert researchers might desire.

¶16 Example 2: *They know they don't know the way, but believe some guesswork will get them on track.* Alan Attorney wants some practice guides for Washington real property law. He assumes that he will find what he needs in the same section of the library that has the state statutes and digest. Luckily, the *Washington Practice* set is right around the corner from the statutes and, after just a few minutes of browsing, he finds two volumes on real property.¹ This is a good find, but he misses the nine-volume *Washington Real Property Deskbook*² that is kept on reserve, not in the stacks.

¶17 Example 3: *They enjoy the challenge of researching without help.* Professor Peerless enjoys the activity of research—logging on to databases, trying different searches, taking notes, following leads, pulling books off the shelf. She savors the feeling of accomplishment when she finds a good source. She would not feel she was achieving as much if someone helped her.

¶18 Example 4: *They don't want to interrupt the reference librarian with their question.* Pat Patron is polite and hates to impose. Seeing that the reference librarian is talking to someone else and appears to have other things to do, Pat is reluctant to bother the librarian.

¶19 Example 5: *Asking for help would embarrass them, damaging their images of themselves as competent researchers.* Lee Law Student is working hard to seem on top of law school—he is always alert and prepared when called on in class and will be fully rehearsed for moot court. He wants people to think of him as bright and competent, so he would be embarrassed to confess to the reference librarian that he has no idea how to use a periodical index. Chris Counselor has been in practice for a few years and is widely praised for her grasp of the law. Chris fears that asking a librarian to explain Key Numbers would ruin her reputation. (This might be so even if it is just the librarian at the public law library who doesn't know her. It would be worse if it is a librarian in her law firm—someone she will

1. WILLIAM B. STOEBUCK, *REAL ESTATE: PROPERTY LAW* (1995).

2. *WASHINGTON REAL PROPERTY DESKBOOK* (Edward W. Kuhrau ed., 1997).

have to see again.) Maybe Chris and Lee are not explicitly worried about their reputations—they are just in the habit of presenting themselves as knowledgeable and in control, and it is hard to abandon that image. Many of the people who use law libraries—law students, law professors, attorneys—are competitive people who find satisfaction in their knowledge and power. They could be particularly vulnerable to this fear that asking for help would embarrass them. More than one professor has told me something to the effect of: “I hate to ask Reference for help because I’m afraid you’ll think I’m dumb.”

¶10 How can reference librarians encourage researchers to ask for help?³ One step is to recognize the existence of this range of reasons for not asking. Lynn Law Student (who thinks she knows a good way to research her question) will need a different sort of encouragement than Chris Counselor or Lee Law Student (who know they do not know what they need but are embarrassed to ask). The good news is that the strategies we use to help one sort of patron may help others, too.

¶11 *Signposts, maps, and guidebooks.* Drivers who do not like to ask for directions can avoid that uncomfortable interaction if the streets and highways have good signs, if they have maps in their car, or if they have consulted guidebooks. We reference librarians can provide analogous tools to help our independent patrons. If they do not want to ask us questions—for whatever reason—they can still use the documentation we create. We should work with our colleagues in other departments to make sure the collection is arranged in a way that guesswork-oriented patrons can figure out. Signs and maps will help. Research guides offer more assistance. We should also do our part to help improve our catalogs (in our library, for instance, reference librarians participated in the committee that planned the implementation of a new public catalog; reference librarians also helped draft the content of help screens).

¶12 *Travel magazines and shows.* Some travelers who do not like to ask directions pick up information about their destinations by leafing through magazines or by watching a travelogue—or even the traffic report on the local news. Similarly, reference librarians can disseminate research tips that will become part of researchers’ background awareness. For instance, Lynn Law Student might continue happily using the *Decennial Digest* for all her case law research until she reads an article in the school newsletter about how to choose an appropriate digest. Her use of sources might also be broadened if a reference librarian speaks to her employment discrimination class about specialized sources and the value of loose-leaf services in labor and employment law. Similarly, Alan Attorney might go on browsing to find his practice materials, but an article about subject-

3. On some days, in some moods, some of us reference librarians might think it is just fine that some patrons are not asking us for help—we have enough to do without them! How could we handle the traffic if every library user came to us? We are also aware that some patrons ask for help too readily. Dealing with them might be the subject of another essay.

specific materials in his local legal newspaper can tell him that more exists than what he saw at first.

¶13 *Friendly locals.* Travelers find it easier to ask for help if the local residents are friendly and knowledgeable. (Consider the opposite. If someone reluctant to ask directions finally gives it a try and finds hostility or ignorance, then he will be even more loath to ask directions the next time.) In the Reference Office, we can use a variety of social cues to welcome questions. We can look up from our work, taking our eyes off the computer screen and our fingers off the keyboard. We can smile and lean forward. We can greet the patron—"Can I help you?" or "Come on in!"

¶14 We should be knowledgeable without being know-it-alls. I think it helps patrons who are embarrassed about admitting ignorance if we reassure them (explicitly or implicitly) that their questions are not dumb, that legal research is complicated, and that it is okay to ask for help. We happen to know more than they do about research tools because we specialize in research—we understand that they do not have the time to keep current in research techniques as well as in their substantive areas. That is why our institutions employ us. To ensure that I take this approach with patrons, I find it helpful to remember times I have been confused myself. When I was a law student, I was just as confused as most of the students I talk to today. When I was a beginning librarian, I had only the vaguest sense of how to use sets that are now familiar to me. I have learned a lot about legal research in the last twenty years—there is nothing wrong with them if they have not learned all the same things!

¶15 For a variety of reasons, some patrons could use a reference librarian's help but do not ask for it. We can serve them anyway—by making the library easier to use, by creating guides, and by speaking and writing about research topics. We should also be sensitive to some researchers' reluctance to ask questions and put them at ease if we can.