

Focusing on Change: Connecting to Both Millennials and Baby Boomers

information: interaction and impacts Conference

Aberdeen, UK

June 27, 2007

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Grant Website: *Seeking Synchronicity: Evaluating Virtual Reference Services from User, Non-User, and Librarian Perspectives*, IMLS Grant. [<http://www.oclc.org/research/projects/synchronicity/>]

This document is available online at:

<http://www.oclc.org/research/projects/synchronicity/resources/20070627-i3-handout.pdf>

This research is one of the outcomes from the project: *Seeking Synchronicity: Evaluating Virtual Reference Services from User, Non-User, and Librarian Perspectives*. It is funded by the Institute of Museum & Library Services (IMLS), Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, & OCLC, Online Computer Library Center.

Abstract:

In an era of staggering changes to the global information environment, library and information science (LIS) faces numerous challenges. The digital revolution demands that library practice become more intensely user-centered and—simultaneously—return to its core philosophies in the face of cyberspace's limitless and unregulated chaos. In order for libraries to remain relevant in this environment, they must provide services that match the information-seeking habits of a new generation, who "...*think and process information fundamentally differently* from their predecessors" (Prensky, 2001, np),¹ as well as those of one of their largest constituencies – the Baby Boomers.

These two groups display very different characteristics. The new generation, the Millennials, who were born between the years 1979 and 1994 (Sweeney)², have been referred to as the Millennial Generation, Next Gen, Net Generation, Generation Y, C Generation, Nexters, Nintendo Generation, Digital Generation, or Echo Boomers.³ Regardless of the name, Sweeney believes this generation will outnumber the Baby Boomers, who were born between 1946 and 1964, by 2010.⁴ Sweeney characterizes the Millennials as impatient, practical, results oriented, multi-taskers, with non-linear communication patterns⁵ that differ from the characteristics of the Baby Boomers. Millennials prefer more information choices and more selectivity, personalization and customization of information, as well as convenience.⁶

The different characteristics and information needs of these two groups present a dichotomy for library service and system development. Two research projects, both funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) and in-kind support from the Online Computer Library Center (OCLC), and one each funded by in-kind support from The Ohio State University (OSU)⁷ and Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey,⁸ studied the habits and needs of library users and non-users to identify characteristics for informing library system and service development. Both studies included focus group interviews as part of a multi-method research design to identify how and why individuals seek and use information. Both studies warrant individual reporting for each research phase. However, this discussion only will report the findings of the focus group interviews conducted for both projects.

Eight focus group interviews were conducted with seventy-eight college and university participants to identify how and why they satisfy their information needs. Thirty-one faculty, nineteen graduate students, and twenty-eight undergraduate students participated in the study. Nine focus group interviews with ninety-one participants were conducted to evaluate virtual reference services (VRS). Of these nine focus group interviews, two of them were with VRS librarians and will not be included in this analysis; therefore, a total of fifteen focus group interviews with 148 library user and non-user participants are analyzed and discussed in this paper.

Although focus group interview data cannot be generalized to an entire population, the technique has been used extensively in library and information science research and practice.⁹ The methodology is frequently used to identify perceptions and attitudes of a target population, to learn more about a subject or topic, and to get input from hard to reach groups.¹⁰

Several trends emerged from the analysis of the focus group interview data. These findings can be used to influence the development of the next generation of library online catalogs, retrieval systems, and services, including VRS.

Participants, regardless of age, expressed a heavy reliance upon Google and other search engines and information sources. Although these individuals use traditional library services, they criticized traditional library services and use electronic mediation to access these services and systems.

A dependence upon human resources, i.e., parents, friends, professors, are identified as important sources for information. Many of the Millennials discussed the use of cell phones, text messaging, and instant messaging (IM) to contact parents and friends for information or answers to questions. These Millennials also indicated that they will consult with a librarian in a face-to-face environment, but indicate trepidation about communicating in a virtual environment with a librarian who they do not know.

Although they valued the relationships they had cultivated with librarians, they generally reflected negative stereotypes of librarians. There also was consensus in the urban and rural groups that they trusted the results they got on Google above those they received from librarians.¹¹

However, many of the faculty and graduate student participants view the library as a source for authoritative and academic information and value browsing of physical library materials. The focus group interview participants acknowledged the value of databases and other online sources. They want to have access to more digitized sources of all kinds, including older literature, sheet music, and art images. However, some users do not understand what resources a library holds, and often cannot distinguish between databases held by a library and sources available online. In addition, participants believe that library online public access catalogs (OPACs) are difficult to use; this belief is held by all types of participants, though it is especially prevalent among the undergraduate students.

The participants believe that OPACs should implement discovery and recommender services such as those offered on Google.com and Amazon.com. They want 24/7 reference and roving librarians in the physical library. Although they did not use the term, many of the respondents described a need for Selective Dissemination of Information (SDI) services.

The themes identified in the focus group interviews provide information on the quality and effectiveness of interactions between users and information and how libraries can use this information to develop services and systems. The findings have implications for the development of reference services, information literacy programs, and library systems as well as the design of physical space for libraries. The fact that many of the participants did not know that VRS was available to them indicates the need for library promotion and marketing campaigns. In order to sustain the services that appeal to the Baby Boomers and to continue to attract the tech-savvy Millennials, libraries need not only to maintain the status quo but transition into new methods for delivering services and accessing information.

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