

“UP! Your Reference Quotient” at the National Library of Singapore

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Abstract:

Rapid technological advancements and attendant changes in information-seeking, reading and learning behaviours have reshaped the environment in which today's library operates. The rise of Google has thrown the raison d'être of the library profession into question as the primary functions of the librarian appear to be performed just as well – if not better – by Internet search algorithms. However, technology is merely a tool of the reference librarian's trade, and as such, Google is not (and will never be) enough.

"UP! Your Reference Quotient" is the National Library of Singapore's (NLS) reference services' professional development framework to equip reference librarians with diverse skills and expose them to different ways of working with content and the community. The strategy takes a four-pronged approach to boost what the NLS terms the Reference, Knowledge, Collection and Social Engagement Quotients of staff. In essence, Reference Quotient covers the fundamentals of daily reference and user services; Knowledge Quotient refers to research aptitude and subject expertise; Collection Quotient meaning familiarity with the NLS' collections; and Social Engagement Quotient advocates bringing the content, reference services and value of librarians to the global community.

The challenge of librarianship in the current Google age is to sustain and be a part of that conversation between people and content. Neither "human search engine" nor "partner in knowledge creation" adequately describes what a 21st Century reference librarian should be. In fact, the 21st Century reference librarian needs to embody both – and more. The NLS reference services' professional development strategy aims to bridge the two by encouraging reference librarians to venture into collaborative curation and knowledge creation while remaining grounded in the tenets of librarianship and reference services work. Google has not displaced the reference librarian; rather, it has reinvigorated the profession in this brave new world of information abundance and ubiquitous access.

Keywords: professional development, reference quotient, knowledge quotient, collection quotient, social engagement quotient

1 Introduction

Rapid technological advancements and attendant changes in information-seeking, reading and learning behaviours have reshaped the environment in which the library today operates. The spectacular rise of Google has thrown the *raison d'être* of the library profession into question as the primary functions of the librarian appear to be performed just as well – if not even better – by Internet search algorithms. However, it should be emphasised that technology is merely a tool of the reference librarian's trade, and as such, Google is not (and will never be) enough.

This paper presents the reference services' professional development strategy, or "UP! Your Reference Quotient" framework, formulated by the National Library of Singapore (NLS). The objective is to equip reference librarians with a range of diverse skills as well as expose them to different ways of working with content, collections and the community.

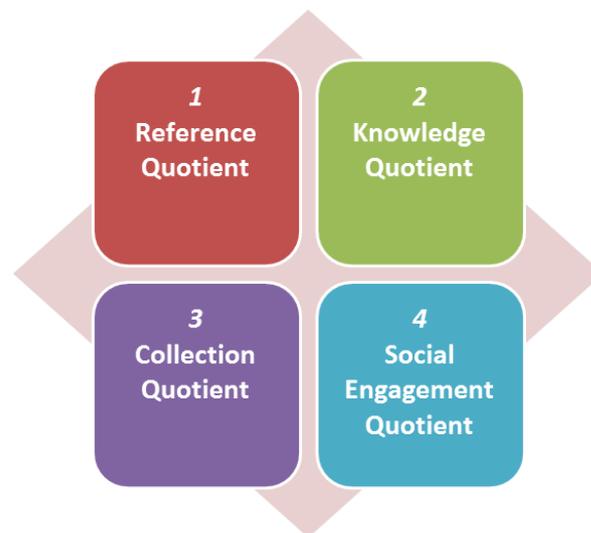


Figure 1:
"UP! Your Reference Quotient" Framework

The strategy takes a four-pronged approach to boost what the NLS terms the Reference, Knowledge, Collection and Social Engagement Quotients of staff. In essence, Reference Quotient covers the fundamentals of day-to-day reference and user services; Knowledge Quotient refers to research aptitude and subject expertise; Collection Quotient meaning familiarity with the collections of the NLS, its associated policies and processes; and Social Engagement Quotient advocates bringing the research content, reference services and value of librarians out to the global community.

2 National Library of Singapore's Reference Services – Where Are We Today?

The key purpose of the NLS reference services is to fulfil the ever-growing information, research and learning needs of Singaporeans, as well as users from other parts of the world. This is primarily served through the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library which houses general reference materials as well as works on or about Singapore and the region. The Lee Kong Chian Reference Library occupies seven storeys (Levels 7 to 13) at the National Library Building offering a full range of services such as access to the library's catalogue, reference collections, electronic databases, document delivery service, reprography, microfilm and audio-visual materials.

The NLS reference and information services address both general and subject-specific enquiries. Besides onsite counters, the NLS reference services are offered through other modes such as the telephone, fax and email to meet varying expectations of customers.

3 Moving Forward – How NLS Reference Services' Professional Development Strategy Bridges Both "Human Search Engine" and "Partner in Knowledge Creation"

With the world around us evolving at a rapid pace, the NLS must adapt to meet the changing behaviours of users and take into consideration the global trends affecting the provision of reference services. Nowadays, users are savvier and more empowered than before. With a technologically transformed society, the NLS reference librarians need to be ready for deployment opportunities across service functions to advance their capabilities. Innovative ways to improve our reference services are continuously explored to ensure that the NLS stays relevant in meeting the information needs of our sophisticated users according to the times.

Undoubtedly, "the librarian's central mandate ... [continues to be one who connects] ... information seekers and information sources together"¹. Still, the main challenge of librarianship in the current Google age is the seizing of opportunities to sustain and be a part of that conversation between people and content. Neither "human search engine" nor "partner in knowledge creation" adequately describes what a 21st Century reference librarian ought to be. In fact, the 21st century reference librarian needs to embody both – and more.

Hence, the NLS reference services' professional development strategy aims to bridge the two by encouraging reference librarians to venture into collaborative curation and knowledge creation while remaining grounded in the tenets of librarianship and reference services work. Google has not displaced the reference librarian; rather, it has reinvigorated the profession in this brave new world of information abundance and ubiquitous access. To this end, the NLS's professional development training plan provides sharing sessions plus hands-on involvement in research and curatorial projects that challenges reference librarians beyond their comfort zones to address the Reference, Knowledge, Collection and Social Engagement Quotients of staff.

With the above, the NLS rolled out a series of workshops under the umbrella called "UP! Your Reference Quotient" in January 2013 for all its reference librarians and library officers with the following purposes:

- Develop better competency in reference, research, curation and proliferation work
- Equip staff in talent building and deployment
- Allow staff to gain a good understanding of reference services and collection policies and procedures

4 "UP! Your Reference Quotient" – Four-Pronged Approach

4.1 Reference Quotient

The Reference Quotient component of the NLS professional development framework focuses on the operational basics of reference work and seeks to:

- Equip reference librarians and paraprofessionals with the foundational knowledge and skills crucial to reference and user services
- Boost familiarity of staff with their professional responsibilities as well as reference services' policies and procedures

The Reference Quotient training comprises core training on the duties of reference librarians and library officers, customer service standards and etiquette. Senior staff provides instruction on reference services' policies and procedures through lecture and informal sharing sessions. Advanced training on information packaging, citation style, in-depth searching skills and an overview of the NLS' Client Research Services' fee-based information products and research enquiries are also provided.

In addition, the National Library Board Academy (training arm of the National Library Board) offers selected Professional Development modules such as:

- Library Functions, Management and Services
- Reference Enquiry and Tools
- Information Search Skills
- Database Search Skills
- Information Packaging Skills

Both the NLS and National Library Board Academy's courses are designed to induct new staff into the rudiments of library work and also serve as a useful refresher for senior staff to reaffirm their professional competencies. Emphasis on skills for handling reference enquiry, information and database searches, along with the creation of information products, attest to the critical importance of grooming each staff as a "human search engine". Indeed, proficiency in searching for and locating relevant and reliable information sources is required of all aspiring library professionals.

Apart from classroom-based learning, the Reference Quotient training includes "on-the-job-training" and mentoring. For example, new staff would understudy a senior colleague on reference duties for a month.

On-going involvement in Reference Quotient training – whether as first-timer or repeat participant, as instructor or learner – enhances the quality and operational efficiency of the NLS reference services.

4.2 Knowledge Quotient

The reality of how information is so readily available at a finger swipe has created an impetus to transform how reference librarians and paraprofessionals engage with and respond to the increasingly sophisticated inquiry needs of users.

To reshape the reference librarian's role, to equip paraprofessionals with the competency to provide reference and information service and for the NLS to champion its mandate to provide value-added and authoritative reference and research advisory to the community, the NLS embarked on a mission to enhance the subject knowledge (aka the Knowledge Quotient) of our reference librarians and paraprofessionals, to achieve the following objectives:

- Enrich the knowledge capacity of reference librarians and paraprofessionals
- Augment and elevate the subject expertise of reference librarians
- Raise the research capability of reference librarians
- Support the NLS' vision to nurture research scholarship and facilitate a lifelong learning culture in the community

In phase one, reference librarians overseeing the NLS print and non-print collections as well as those with extensive knowledge specialisation and proficiency in a subject area are invited to share their expertise with staff.

Some of the sessions under Knowledge Quotient included:

1. Singapore Heritage Sources
2. Genealogy talk
3. Behind-the-scenes curators' tour of the "Roots: Tracing Family Histories Exhibition"
4. Peranakan Research Sources

The above topics were specially selected as the NLS frequently receives enquiries on Singapore's history and requests for information on tracing family lineage.

In addition, the NLS Client Research Services² attachment programme commenced in September 2013, as a follow-up to its briefing on fee-based information products and research for corporate clients under the foundational Reference Quotient. The goals of the programme are to:

- Enhance the level of librarians' proficiency in annotated citations and summary writing
- Facilitate librarians in keeping abreast of developments in the selected knowledge domains.

Under this attachment, three reference librarians were trained to summarise articles and reports to prepare industry alerts in two specific knowledge domains, namely manpower/workforce and media/information communications. This attachment is currently on-going.

NLS librarians are also encouraged to contribute research articles to *Biblioasia*, a quarterly news journal that promotes collection services and programmes of the National Library.

In phase two, subject experts, library consultants and industry leaders outside of the NLS will be invited to share and impart their knowledge on disciplines within NLS' collection and research focus.

4.3 Collection Quotient

Among the many new and exciting hats that the 21st Century librarian has to wear – research library liaisons, knowledge navigator, information broker, social media technologist – the core function of correctly matching information seekers with authoritative and relevant information sources has remain unchanged through the ages.

To execute this function efficiently and professionally, librarians and paraprofessionals need to be intimately familiar with the library's holdings and be cognisant of the National Library's collection development strategy, selection and de-selection policies and workflows. Towards this aim, the NLS created a Collection Quotient training module that will:

- Deepen library staff's knowledge of NLS' print, donor and electronic collections
- Enable library staff to have a good understanding of NLS' collection policies and procedures for purchased and non-purchased items.

Some of the collection briefing sessions organised include:

1. Selection policy for non-purchased items (Legal Deposit, Gifts & Exchange) and Reference Used Books Collection; Evaluation & Weeding Policy
2. NLS Collections: Rare Materials, Maps, Newspapers, Ephemera, Literary Arts, MusicSG portal, Standards, Reference Closed Access, Donors' Gallery
3. Electronic databases

The benefits of a more extensive and thorough grasp of the length, breath and peculiarities of the library's collections are manifold. The knowledge serves as a propitious arsenal for library staff to provide higher quality reference advisory services, aid staff in developing high value information products and showcase staff's ability to venture beyond their traditional information-connector roles to become reputed knowledge creators among the research community.

Quarterly curated collection displays on rotating themes highlighting NL's collection diversity also demonstrate staff's application of collection knowledge and feature specially selected monographs, serials and ephemera to inform the public on themes such as the cooperation of ASEAN states, iconic English language works from Singapore's literary repertoire and Singapore's post-war construction after colonisation.

4.4 Social Engagement Quotient

Social media has become a way of life for many today. Libraries need to establish an online presence, which requires the adaptation of reference services, research content and information products for the digital age. The Social Engagement Quotient component was created to help librarians and paraprofessionals acquire the know-how to connect with user communities in their preferred spaces.

Current social media training conducted by the National Library Board Academy and the Institute of Public Administration & Management at the Singapore Civil Service College covers topics such as:

- Write and Communicate in Social Media
- Harnessing the Potential of New Media Communication
- Increasing Traffic to Your Website – Use of SEO and Search Engine Marketing
- Facebook for Effective Communication and Engagement

These courses enable reference librarians and paraprofessionals to gain a broad understanding of the preferences and expectations of the Internet audience with regard to online content. More importantly, they recommend guidelines and practical tips that cover the basics of crafting social media and/or blog postings, as well as the more difficult task of engaging the public online.

Beyond learning to do, the Social Engagement Quotient training challenges the NLS staff to learn *by doing*. In mid-February 2014, a team of six NLS librarians was formed to take charge of the content posts on the NLS Facebook and upcoming Pinterest sites. The team worked from scratch in conceptualising posts and devised feasible processes and production workflows to ensure a sustained level of fresh content and audience engagement. The social media posts will promote the Singapore-related content and collections of the NLS with such themes as:

1. On This Day
Events and milestones in Singapore history with links to Singapore-related digital content, particularly articles in *Infopedia*, an online encyclopedia on Singapore [<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/>], and HistorySG, an upcoming online resource guide to Singapore history, as well as physical resources in the Singapore and Southeast Asia collection.
2. Who's Who
Personalities who contributed to Singapore's political, economic, social and cultural fields with links to relevant resources across collections.
3. MusicSG [<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/music>]
Content from MusicSG, a digital archive of all published Singapore musical works including music recordings, articles on topics related to Singapore music, biographies, lyrics and scores.
4. Weekly Wisdom
Practical tips and informative trivia linked to relevant resources in the NLS' business, science and technology collection.
5. The Arts
Links to relevant resources in the NLS' arts collection mainly the National Online Repository of the Arts (NORA) [<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/arts>], a database of digitised works in the literary, performing and visual arts by prominent Singapore writers and artists.
6. Collection Highlights
Librarian's picks such as new arrivals, and lesser-known materials – "hidden gems" – that deserve greater exposure because of their rich content.

5 Outcomes

5.1 Impact on Reference Librarians' Professional Development

Since its launch in January 2013, the NLS' "UP! Your Reference Quotient" training series has organised a total of 26 workshops with an average attendance of 15 to 20 staff per session (as at March 2014). To supplement the training workshops, a series of monthly reference tips was also broadcasted over six months between July and Nov 2013 to cultivate good quality reference services among reference librarians and paraprofessionals

The overall feedback has been very positive with many staff indicating the relevance and usefulness of these reference skills clinics to their work. They welcomed such training sessions as good refreshers and excellent platforms to learn from one another. For instance, 29 staff attended the 'Rare Books and Maps Collection Briefing'. Out of which, 26 staff returned completed feedback forms and all agreed that the workshop sparked their interest to find out more about the subject and deepened their understanding of the subject. Eight attendees said that the workshop was "Excellent" while the remaining 18 participants indicated that it was "Good". The session was led by two senior NLS reference librarians who oversee the NLS' Rare Book and Maps Collection and attendees commented that the "trainers and their content were insightful" with "good coverage of the topic".

5.2 Impact on the Provision of Reference Services

The regularity of these sessions covering at least two topics each month is gradually seeding good practices as evident through the feedback received from patrons on the NLS' reference librarians' commitment to deliver high value reference service. Some compliments include:

- "...You are clearly a very dedicated, diligent and thorough researcher, and you must love what you do – it seems to me that you enjoy the journey of discovery and investigation as a passion..."
- "I would like to thank the librarian for spending time to provide comprehensive answers..."
- "Excellent, prompt and accurate references that I can actually refer to for my area of research."
- "Extremely professional, more than what I could have expected."

6 Conclusion

This first phase fulfilled the basic areas under the Reference, Knowledge and Collection quotients. Moving on, future training workshops will be more in-depth. Staff competency development in the area of Social Engagement will be increased too. The NLS will also explore approaching external organisations to give reference librarians a wider perspective to build up their professional competencies. Concurrently, there are plans to convert some of the training modules for a new e-learning portal expected by end of 2014 for all employees.

What makes a 21st Century reference librarian? Is he/she just a “human search engine” or “partner in knowledge creation”? Not quite, the 21st Century reference librarian is more than the sum of these two functions. He/she is one who is a firm believer in the value of good reference services work, a discerning knowledge seeker, leading thinker and aspiring polymath. Through the NLS’ “UP! Your Reference Quotient” professional development strategy, the whole composition of intelligence, emotional, reference, knowledge, collection and social engagement quotients are being developed, thus contributing to a more professionally competent reference librarian and supports the NLS as a key provider of access to knowledge in today’s 21st Century.

References

- ¹ Core Competency for 21st Century CARL Librarians. (2010, October). *Canadian Association of Research Libraries*. Retrieved February 7, 2014, from http://www.carl-abrc.ca/uploads/pdfs/core_comp_profile-e.pdf
- ² The NLS Client Research Services is a division that provides fee-based research services in the form of industry alerts, industry digests and research reports to Singapore government ministries and statutory boards.