

Answering the unanswerable: The business reference quandary

By Samantha Mills.

On the first full day of this year's BC Library Conference, attendees were treated to a tour of the multifaceted world of business reference. Three business liaison librarians from three different institutions came together to introduce us to some of the reference challenges, strategies, and resources that set business enquiries apart from the reference questions academic librarians field every day.

Dividing the room into small discussion groups, Mark, Lindsay and Leanna used a combination of lecture and pair/share strategies to engage attendees in the material. They scaffolded us from thinking generally about librarian and patron goals in the reference interaction through to discussing and discovering what is unique about business reference.

The goal underlying a business reference enquiry can be anything from settling a bar bet or preparing a first year paper through to developing an actionable business plan. It is essential to know the *why* behind the question. As in any reference interaction, this can be accomplished by repeating and rephrasing the inquiry, ensuring that the patron feels heard. One interesting element discussed in this session was the fact that sometimes, due to the information lifecycle as well as to the proprietary nature of some business information and the overly specific nature of some patron inquiries, the desired information will simply not exist. Often, however, patrons and students can be steered towards related information that can help them explore their topic. For example, while it may not be possible to investigate the exact number of sports socks sold each year in Abbotsford, you may be able to determine the numbers for the larger clothing or sports equipment industries in that region, or in the next-largest region. The idea is to lay out what you can help with, and be honest both about the availability of information and your knowledge of the topic. You know the information landscape; they know the topic and can recognize what they need.

The lecture and discussion in this session also covered reference interview questions and strategies that are specific to business reference. Among them:

- Ask if they are looking for raw data, or for analysis. This will dictate the kinds of sources you use.

- Ask questions to determine the patron's ability, and previous research experience
- Ask about geographic range, and consider whether data at that level exists. This may involve some negotiation: can they apply their analysis to data from elsewhere?
- Defining the problem helps to confine it; find broader terms; thesauri are your friends.
- Talk extensively with the patron to define the scope, create a plan - it may be a good idea to do this before touching the computer.
- Time - how new should the info be? how new can it be? Again, negotiation based on availability may be key.
- Discuss publishability - who would care, who would publish on this, who would make their data public? governments? companies? associations? Have the student come up with a why, and start generating a list of possible sources from there.
- Primary research - if the student/patron is doing research that is locally focused, suggest that they might engage in their own research firsthand, or that they might contact an appropriate business association directly.

In the final portion of the session, basic business resources were discussed, including the Small Business Accelerator (<http://www.sba-bc.ca/>; the Business Planning, Key Resources, and Accelerator Guide sections in particular). Additional resources to be familiar with if you deal with business reference questions include regional, national and international association websites for particular sectors of the business world; government resources, including the NAICs codes and terms for business sectors (<http://www.statcan.gc.ca/subjects-sujets/standard-norme/naics-scian/2012/index-indexe-eng.htm>).

The session ran up against time, in large part because of the enthusiastic participation of attendees, who shared stories and reference strategies, and asked questions throughout. Mark, Lindsay and Leanna were engaging speakers with an entertaining and well-prepared presentation. They welcomed comments and questions, and emphasized that while a referral to a business librarian may be the ultimate destination of some business reference interactions, librarians of any specialty can make a lot of

headway by following some of these strategies and getting familiar with some of these resources. They also indicated that they are open to questions from colleagues interested in learning more - you can find their contact information on their respective institutional websites.

Samantha Mills (MLIS, B.Ed., B.A. (Hons)), is graduating in May 2014 from the iSchool at UBC, and is pursuing work in library instruction and public service in academic and public libraries.