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INFO 210
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Week 2: Discussion Post – Phone Reference Service

Initially to conduct a reference query via phone, I had intended to contact a medical library to ask for information on the pros and cons of a specific kind of thyroid cancer treatment which has become increasingly less common in the last ten years but both Cedars-Sinai Medical Library and the main library at the USC Keck Medical Center both explicitly state via their websites that their services, facilities, and resources are only for physicians, nurses, staff, researchers, and medical students so I abandoned that idea.

When I Googled “public medical library”, my search turned up the Health section of the Los Angeles Public Library (my local library system) so I decided to contact them instead. For my face-to-face reference interview, I had visited my neighborhood branch of the LAPL so when I elected to reach out to LAPL again for this exercise, I decided to use the same search topic - sources on the Freedom of Information Act. However, for this assignment, I contacted the Central branch of the library instead in the hope that my search would be a little more fruitful than it was in my face-to-face interview experience.

On the LAPL website, the Central branch has its own tab and under Departments, they have a link for their Reference Services which they call “InfoNow”. I’ve included a link to the page because I found it to be exemplary of RUSA Guidelines 1.1.1 and 1.3.1 which, under guidelines for **Visibility/Approachability**, includes clear depiction of hours, availability, and jargon-free pointers to services.

["When you've got a question, we've got an answer." Links to an external site.](#)

I called the main phone number listed and a recording picked up that thanked me for calling the Central branch of the Los Angeles Public Library and included that all their librarians were helping other patrons but someone would be with me shortly. I noted the exact time when the hold music began in case I was likely to be waiting for a while but in about 15 seconds, a person answered “Hello, Information Services” adhering to Guideline 1.1.3 with a friendly greeting. I said that I was looking for sources on the Freedom of Information Act and she acknowledged my request and then asked if I was looking for books or databases or something else (meeting Guideline 3.1.8 with a clarifying question). I replied that I was looking for information about the history of the FOIA and some examples of the most notable uses of it and she said she understood and then asked if this was for a school assignment. When I hesitated, she mentioned that she wanted to check the age range for the sources and I laughed a little and confirmed that I’m an adult. Somewhat sheepishly, she said “oh, okay. I’m just going to go check the catalogue. Is it okay if I put you on hold?” I said that it was and she assured me she’d be right back

exemplifying Guidelines 2.3.2 and 2.3.3 demonstrating **Interest** (2.0) in a Remote interview (2.3).

Some patrons might have been offended by the age question but I'm sporadically mistaken for a much younger person both in person and on the phone so I wasn't fazed by it and respected that she wanted to be thorough in determining the appropriateness of the resources. When she returned, she thanked me for waiting and asked if she could transfer me to the Social Sciences desk as she felt that particular department would be able to best assist me with what I was looking for. I said that was fine and thanked her. Throughout our interaction, I appreciated that she was incredibly polite and explained to me why she was doing what she was doing adhering to Guidelines 3.1.1, 3.1.2, and 3.1.4.

When I was transferred, I again heard a recorded message stating that all available librarians were currently busy and one would be with me shortly and again, waited about 15 seconds before someone (who I later learned was Greg) picked up with "Social Sciences Desk". I stated my query that I was looking for sources on the Freedom of Information Act. Greg acknowledged my request and asked if I was primarily looking for secondary sources and books or the language of the FOIA itself as a clarifying question (Guideline 3.1.8) demonstrating excellent **Listening/Inquiring** practices. I stated that I was hoping to find a summary or history of the Act and some of the most famous or controversial cases associated with it. Greg said, "ok, I understand" (Guideline 3.1.5) and mentioned that he was going to check the catalogue if I wouldn't mind holding for a minute. I confirmed that was fine. When he came back, I was thanked for holding and Greg said that he was going to go check the shelves in that section because there were a few books in the catalogue that indicated they had information about the FOIA but Greg wasn't sure what kind of information or how much. I appreciated that he explained to me what he was doing and why and articulated that he was continuing the process of **Searching** for me (Guidelines 4.1.2 and 4.1.3).

When Greg again returned, he thanked me for my patience and he mentioned that he'd located a couple of books that appeared to have chapters about the FOIA including one that was currently available called *Secrecy in the Sunshine Era: The Promise and Failures of U.S. Open Government Laws*. Greg said that it was hard to find a book with the history of the FOIA specifically but that in flipping through the index of this book, it looked like there's quite a bit of information on it. He included that the book looks somewhat academic and then as he continued to look through it, mentioned that yes, it was published by a university press but he felt it would maybe be helpful to me. I thanked him and then he added that he was just going to check online quickly to see if there was anything else he could recommend (Guideline 4.3.1).

He came back shortly and told me about the website www.everyCRSreport.com **Links to an external site.** clearly articulating and repeating the URL for me. He explained that CRS stands for Congressional Research Service as the site has information on nearly every piece of legislation and added that politicians in D.C. and their aides often use it when they need background or information on the history of something. I confirmed the URL and told him that the website sounded great. He then asked me if I wanted him to hold the book he'd found or send it to my local branch. I asked that he send it to my local branch and he asked for my library card number and which branch I'd like it sent to. I was able to provide that information to him and he

confirmed my first name according to the system and then said that the book should be at my branch by the beginning of next week and I'd receive an email when it was ready to be checked out. He concluded with good **Follow-up** communication by asking if I needed any other information (Guideline 5.1.1 and 5.1.7) and I said that was a good start, asked him for his name, and thanked him for all his help.

My phone reference interview could not have been more different from my face-to-face reference interview. It was a very positive experience in that both the woman to whom I initially spoke and Greg were extremely friendly, communicative and helpful and adhered to all of the applicable RUSA Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers as evidenced above. Further, Greg's use of the index to determine how many entries existed on the Freedom of Information Act in the book he'd located as well as acknowledgement that it was "more of an academic book" evidence demonstration of Cassell and Hiremath's description of a "skilled answer" (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 41). I also feel that his referral to the CRS website served as an example of a "value-added answer" (Cassell & Hiremath, 2013, p. 39) in that the website is a good source for this particular query but will likely be useful as a source for other queries in the future. Overall, I felt listened to, assisted, and left with a very favorable impression of the Reference Services department at the Central branch of the Los Angeles Public Library.

References:

Cassel, K.A., and Hiremath, U. (2013). *Reference and information services: An introduction*. Chicago, IL: American Library Association.

Reference and User Services Association. (2017). *Guidelines for Behavioral Performance of Reference and Information Service Providers*. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/guidelinesbehavioral>