

Referral Lists: Two-Way and Win-Win

Referrals, referrals, referrals. One of the best services a library can offer a patron, when it can't provide *the* answer, is to provide a referral to the appropriate entity that can provide the answer, or at least assistance in moving closer towards the answer. Most libraries, especially those that deal with the public, are very good at creating in-house referral lists. Our library boasts a listing of over 100 federal, state, and local agencies that can provide assistance or information for our patrons. Libraries that keep this type of referral list spend many hours each year updating existing entries and adding new ones. But how good are we at making sure we are on the agency's referral list? How can we try to encourage a referral linkage that works both ways?

Libraries actively look for entities to recommend to our patrons as part of offering complete reference services. The agencies we refer to do not have the same mission we do. The motivation to create an inclusive referral list is not a part of their goals. They won't come looking for you—so you must make them aware of your existence and services. But how? Below is a listing of some of the approaches that have worked for us.

Contact the Agency Directly When Updating Your List

This is the simplest way of making yourself known. This is an easy starting point in your strategy. When creating or updating your referral list, don't rely on the telephone book or the Internet directory sites. Call the agency. Speak to a live representative of the agency. Identify yourself and say that you are calling to verify *their* entry on your referral list. Keep in mind that this can also be the least effective method. Often you will end up speaking with a receptionist who will verify your information and forget about you. But in some instances, you will be sent on to someone in an administrative position. Here is your chance to make him/her aware of your library and the services you can offer the agency and its clientele. Be sure to request copies of brochures regarding its services that may be made available to the library patrons.

This is a labor-intensive undertaking. Locating agencies, contacting them, creating the list, organizing the brochures, reviewing and updating the list on a regular schedule, and training staff to

remember to offer the referrals can take a large part of the reference staff's time. But the rewards outweigh the costs. One way our library has found to manage this upkeep is by making this project the responsibility of library interns. It is a wonderful reminder to the interns that good reference service often includes resources outside the library's walls.

Join Court, Bar, and Advocacy Committees

There is an old saying about being in the right place at the right time. Having a representative of your library on these types of committees is a sure way of making yourself known. You will have the chance to network with the pro-active members of the court, bar, and advocacy groups. These are the people who can best assure that your library and its services are recognized by the community you seek to reach. Along with raising the library's profile, you may be able to influence the establishment of new procedures to assist in access to the legal system. What a great way to pursue the mission of a law library!

Contact Agencies and Schedule Meetings

This is the most direct and effective method. It is working quite well for our library. We often find that, once agencies are aware we are here, they do make referrals to us. However, these referrals are often inappropriate or misleading. Their clientele arrive at our library having been assured by the agency that we will be able to assist them with very specific legal issues that exceed our ability to service. Obviously this leads to frustration and anger on the part of the patron. By arranging a meeting with a representative of the agency, you both have the opportunity to make clear exactly what your organization can do and what your limits are, especially in regard to legal information.

Always approach this outreach in a positive light. We never contact an agency and say, "You are making inappropriate referral to us." Rather, our approach is "We would like to ensure that our referrals to you are appropriate. Could we meet to ensure that we are both aware of the services each other offers to our clientele?" Included in this meeting is a tour of the library. We provide an explanation of our collection and the services that we can

offer to the agency staff along and clientele. By taking this approach, we become clearly fixed on the radar screen of these agencies. An added bonus for us, as a public library, has been to create a base of concerned organizations that have risen to our support during times of difficulty in securing funding.

The Old Bus Stop Method

Never underestimate the marketing and referral opportunities in the chance meeting at the bus stop, in the elevator, at the store, or in the rest room. If you recognize an individual from a service agency, introduce yourself. Comment on the great work his/her agency does. Mention how being able to direct people to their services allows the library to provide better service to its patrons. At the same time, ask if the agency is aware of the ways in which the library can assist its staff and clientele. If appropriate, ask if it is possible to schedule a meeting as described above.

Conclusion—Everyone Benefits

This type of referral list is clearly a benefit to all involved. For the agency it is another way to ensure that they are reaching those who need their services.

The biggest beneficiaries of all are the patrons. This type of referral system goes a long way to providing access to both legal and non-legal services for our patrons. One of the greatest frustrations for patrons is feeling that they are getting the runaround, the endless stream of dead-end referrals. This runaround inevitably leads the patron to conclude that our justice system cares nothing for them individually. Accurate referrals go a long way to restoring the public's trust and confidence in the justice system. Finally they have found someone—you—who will listen to their needs and provide them with good information and direction to someone who can really help them. The referral list provides a type of outreach that ensures that the dead-end leads stop.

For the library it is a win-win situation. You increase your profile with service agencies in your community and also with the public. But mostly you fulfill your goal of offering the best reference service possible.

Claudia Jalowka (claudia.jalowka@metrokc.gov) is References Services Librarian at King County Law Library in Seattle, Washington.