

# Trends

by Suzanne Thorpe

## in Law Library Public Services: Have You Seen Your Patrons Lately?



Law librarians, in turn, respond to patron requests electronically, often without any direct human contact. For some, it is more common to provide e-mail service than in-person service. In the past, law librarians usually directed patrons to works found on the shelves in their libraries, whereas today law librarians are just as likely to send patrons e-mails with URLs for Web documents that have the information they need. Instead of compiling bibliographies on paper, law librarians routinely run database searches or set them to run automatically over a period of time and have the results electronically directed to our patrons. Law librarians also supply full text materials through online delivery. They now have the capability to scan hard copy documents and instantly transmit them to patrons, either as e-mail attachments or to servers for electronic patron pickup.

These remote services are typically asynchronous. Rather than responding in real time, as librarians would face to face, they respond as soon as they are able to do so. Remote patrons can place requests for assistance any time, even when libraries are not open for business. It is not uncommon to find several requests that have come in overnight waiting in librarians' "in boxes" when they arrive at work each day. The fact that they cannot always handle these requests immediately may be less than satisfactory for patrons who, accustomed to the world of chat rooms and instant messaging, expect immediate replies.

Fortunately, law libraries are moving into the world of synchronous, or "live," online services. Law libraries will soon be using currently available software that allows librarians and remote patrons to communicate online with each other in real time. This software enables a reference librarian, for example, to conduct real-time interviews with remote patrons and to guide them through electronic resources that the librarian "pushes" to the patrons' browsers. It is almost as if the patrons were present in the library, with the added benefit that a transcript of the entire

**W**e have come a long way since the days when library patrons were required to pay a visit to the law library to request assistance or use our resources. Today, with the prevalence of cell phones, personal digital assistants and wireless networks, law librarians are just as likely to check their voice mail and e-mail for requests for reference help, document retrieval, interlibrary loan or recalls as they are to have a patron request such services in person.

Indeed, law librarians encourage such remote electronic access to services. Most law libraries, at the very least, widely disseminate e-mail addresses for staff members or departments. Many offer an array of services that can be easily accessed via the World Wide Web or office intranets. It is not uncommon to find law library Web sites that include interactive forms for submitting reference questions, requests for interlibrary loan or room reservations.

session can be sent to the patrons or saved in a knowledge base for future use with other patrons.

While law libraries continue to offer numerous public services requiring human interaction, unmediated services are definitely growing in popularity. Living in a world besieged by e-commerce, people log on to their computers to take care of personal affairs. They make travel reservations, conduct banking transactions, shop for groceries, and pay taxes, typically without any direct intervention from a live person. It is understandable, therefore, that patrons expect do-it-yourself law library services as well.

Law libraries currently offer several ways for patrons to obtain the services they need without asking anyone for it. Automated circulation systems permit patrons to access their own circulation records to renew or check on the status of materials they have on loan, to pay fines and to recall materials held by others. Some libraries provide self-serve electronic check-out systems. In academic law libraries, digitized course reserves allow law students to pull up assigned readings and old exams that can then be printed or downloaded. Academic libraries also provide access to full-text and bibliographic databases that allow patrons to find and retrieve copies of documents themselves. In addition, patrons can now directly request and have delivered books and articles from other libraries through a number of interlibrary loan systems and consortia gateways. It may appear to patrons that they are on their own in these transactions, but, of course, law librarians are involved extensively behind the scenes in setting up and maintaining such unmediated services.

Another area where law libraries are significantly empowering patrons to serve themselves is legal research. Rather than waiting for patrons to come to law librarians for research help, the librarians supply "just in case" support ahead of time through Web sites. Most law libraries maintain helpful portals to legal information on the Internet that are tailored to the needs of their regular patrons. A number of law libraries also offer FAQ pages and searchable knowledge bases containing commonly sought information on their Web sites. Others provide online research guides on a myriad of topics and types of resources for use when needed.

Some law libraries have created interactive wizards that combine a discussion of research tools and methodology with hyperlinks to electronic versions of those same tools. Self-paced legal research exercises are also beginning to appear on library Web sites to assist patrons in developing their skills.

As remote services gain in popularity, law librarians see fewer patrons in their libraries. Thus some patrons might be unaware of what law librarians can do for them or even forget to take advantage of library services. To combat this "out of sight, out of mind" syndrome, law libraries have begun to actively use technology to reach out to remote patrons and market library services. Electronic newsletters, recent acquisitions lists and current awareness services are widespread. A number of academic law librarians have also begun to collaborate with faculty members to provide library information on course Web sites as well.

### **Just Who Are Our Patrons and What Do They Need?**

Traditionally, law libraries have served a known local population. Law libraries today increasingly serve a much wider, more diverse audience than in the past. Thanks to the Internet, distance and physical access are no longer barriers to obtaining information. People from around the globe as well as individuals with disabilities are finding law libraries through their Web sites and online catalogs and taking advantage of the libraries' remote electronic services. They often present special communication and access issues that are difficult to anticipate.

Law library patrons have typically been easy to categorize. For the most part, law librarians served the bench and bar, law schools and government, along with some members of the general public. Today, however, there is heightened interest in the law from people working in other disciplines and from those wishing to handle their own legal affairs. They are tapping into the law library's legal resources and seeking the services of law librarians at a growing pace. For many, the legal information that law libraries provide is quite new and difficult to comprehend. Public and academic law librarians, in particular, are finding it necessary to develop new approaches to serving these nontraditional patrons that will

enable them to effectively find and understand legal information.

The primary goal of law libraries has always been to provide legal information. Law librarians have prided themselves on their ability to stay abreast of the rapidly growing number of available national and international legal resources. However, just as other disciplines are seeking legal information more than they have in the past, the legal profession increasingly is seeking subject matter beyond law. In an era of joint degree programs at law schools and multidisciplinary law practice, traditional patrons need scientific, commercial, historical and social science data. Although the volume of legal information continues to grow rapidly, law librarians can no longer be purists about the subject matter competence they hold. Today, in addition to being able to deliver legal information, law librarians are expected, at the very least, to know where to turn for help when asked for nonlegal information. Law librarians often are required to have a command of a broad range of resources covering multiple disciplines as they relate to law.

Law library patrons come to us with varying levels of technological competence. Many individuals using law library services are not skilled users of computers and databases. For these patrons to access the information they need, law librarians must spend considerable time explaining to them how to use equipment and run searches. Even the more technically savvy users require assistance in resolving technical issues with online access to the law library's resources and services. As law libraries continue to build electronic collections and create additional electronic services, providing adequate staffing to handle technology-related questions becomes more important.

### **What Do These Trends Mean for Us?**

An increase in remote services, in many cases, has resulted in a decrease in walk-in patrons and the number of in-person requests at public service desks. Behind the scenes, however, law librarians are busy handling requests that come into their e-mail and voice mailboxes. They are also working intensively to create and administer the unmediated services often used by patrons. Service hours and staffing levels at public service desks should be carefully

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reassessed. Reducing walk-in service hours or staff at public service desks when usage is low can provide a way to respond efficiently to remote requests and to develop new electronic services. Such a strategy must be marketed carefully to assure that financial supporters and patrons alike understand that this is an improvement, not a decline in service.

To effectively deploy public services staff, law libraries must carefully analyze workloads and demand for service. It should thoroughly examine the amount of time invested in providing electronic services. In addition to tracking the traditional services delivered from central service desks, methods need to be in place to record the number of remote requests received via e-mail and voice mail and the time spent responding to them from workstations in separate staff offices. Similarly, for unmediated services where it is not possible to track transactions at the point they are used, law libraries should take advantage of software counters that monitor activity on Web sites and statistical data from vendors about usage of integrated library systems and databases.

It is difficult to gauge how well law libraries are responding to the needs of users when they use remote library services. Law

librarians typically do not receive the same verbal and physical cues from remote users as from in-person patrons; law librarians might assume that they are providing them with needed services when, in fact, they are not. Thus, law librarians must actively solicit feedback from remote patrons. They should use online surveys and electronic comment forms on their Web sites and online catalogs. As law librarians find that they are serving a wider and more diverse audience than ever before, they should adjust their services to match different backgrounds and skill levels than those which they might be accustomed to serving. Similarly, as law librarians find increasing demand for "live" electronic services around the clock, they should develop ways to collaborate with colleagues in different time zones.

Finally, law librarians need to find ways to competently provide new subject matter and to effectively use new technology. As the interests of the legal and nonlegal professions increasingly intersect, their focus also becomes more multidisciplinary. Law librarians should reach out to colleagues in nonlaw libraries and find creative ways to collaborate for the good of all patrons. Jointly administered Web sites, research guides and knowledge bases are just some of the ways librarians

can better serve patrons' diverse interests. In addition, law librarians should consciously build their skills base so that they are equipped to find nonlegal information that may be needed by patrons. Job exchanges between law and nonlaw librarians would prove to be helpful in that arena. Likewise, it is essential that law libraries provide continuing opportunities, including time and financial support, for public service law librarians to develop technology skills to create new remote services and to assist patrons in their use. Supplemental training and course work might be required and should be supported by law library administrators.

The coming changes in public services are both exciting and intimidating. Dealing effectively with new types of users and new technologies provides law librarians with great opportunities but will challenge their skills and established practices. If law librarians can meet the challenges, they will be providing better services to a wider range of library users. And that, in the end, is what it's all about.

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