Help, I'm not a Business Librarian!

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Perhaps you've seen that look before: one of your colleagues runs up to you, face ashen and hands shaking: a patron has asked him a <gasp> business reference question! What should he do? How can he continue his work day with such a heavy burden on his head? Libraries are changing, as are the patrons who use them. More people are starting their own businesses, and they are coming to access the great resources that we have to offer. There will be librarians out there who fear certain reference questions and will run to you saying, "Help! I'm not a business librarian!" Training your non-business librarian cohorts may seem like a challenge, but at the end of the day it all comes down to one thing: providing them with the tools and resources to perform successful research for your patrons.

We are All Librarians!

First and foremost, try to remember one thing: we are all librarians, and regardless of what our specialty may be, we are all capable of conducting a reference interview. Regarding small business owners or budding entrepreneurs, who will likely be the ones asking for help, the most important thing is to find out *exactly* what they are looking for. In my experience, there tends to be a flurry of excitement when a patron decides to go into business for themselves. Part of it is the risk they are taking. Another part is the volumes of information they will need to get started. While we'd all love to be the ones to set them off on a successful enterprise, most of us are not certified business counselors.

It is important that your fellow librarians understand that they should not offer information or guidance that they are not qualified to offer. This is especially true of legal or financial advice. If you have access to Small Business Development Center (SBDC), Small Business Administration (SBA) branch, or SCORE Business Counselors, it is important for your non-business librarians to understand what those places can offer your patrons and how to get in touch with them. At the same time, you should emphasize all the things that we CAN offer and questions we CAN answer. The last thing you would want is your patron being sent to an SBDC for demographic data when you could most certainly have offered that information to them.

Write a Manual

The majority of the business reference questions that your non-business librarians will be answering will be very similar. So much so that you can probably put together a manual of common reference questions along with common resources. The secret is to make sure to keep your manual or guidebook updated. It may also help to have a listing of common acronyms that many business owners use. Here at the Miller Center, in addition to a printed guide that we keep at the reference desk, we also provide our librarians with an online FAQ which is accessible from our intranet. The benefit of an online component is that it can be updated very

quickly. WIKIs, online web pages that can be used as a collaboration tool that allows users to add and edit entries, come in handy. Simply doing a search online for "Free Wiki" will yield a number of choices.

We also utilize a "front-facing" FAQ that our patrons can access via our web site, giving them common questions and answers with links to resources. A large binder with procedures, a list of common questions, a list of our subscription databases, as well as a list of specific unique situations and the telephone extensions of who should be called for each, sits on top of our business reference desk. Our librarians know to use it as a guide when they happen to be sitting at the desk.

On Site Training

If time permits and there is space available, offer training to your staff. They don't need to know the inner workings of every business database, but they should be comfortable assisting patrons in starting research online. Your colleagues may think that databases such as ReferenceUSA, Hoovers and Dun & Bradstreet require expert training and years to master, but we all know that a little computer know-how and a few minutes playing around with the interface is enough to get working. A good approach would be to create a list of 10 common business reference questions such as: Where can I build a list of potential customers? Where can I find information on a specific company? Where can I find historical stock data? How can I research a financial institution? There are resources that are available that can help answer these questions, and as business librarians we all have our favorite "go-tos." Letting your colleagues answer real-world questions under your guidance would be a big help. If you have a dedicated business collection in your library, give tours. Let all your librarians become familiar with the space..

Be Approachable

Last but certainly not least, make sure your colleagues know that they can always contact you for help, even if it seems to be a question that they think they can answer. There will be times that it is necessary for you to take the call or run to the desk to help. We certainly don't want our poor fellow librarians to get too far in over their head. Let your colleagues know that you are there if they are stuck. Most importantly, if it is a question that could have been answered with a little more digging, get your co-worker involved in your research. The more they do, they more they learn, the more confident they will become.

Resources for your Non-Business Librarians

There are some fantastic resources available both in print and online for non-business librarians (and new business librarians). Here is a list of just a few.

- Business Reference Essentials (RUSA BRASS)

- Ask Entrepreneur (Entrepreneur Magazine)
- Glossary of Business Terms (Washington Post)
- Historic Stock Prices (Public Library Briefcase - 2007)
- Finding Industry Information (Public Library Briefcase - 2003)
- Finding Company Information: Selected Titles and Tips (Public Library Briefcase - 2004)
- Making Sense of Business Reference: A Guide for Librarians and Research Professionals by Celia Ross, ALA Editions 2013
- Small Business and the Public Library: Strategies for a Successful Partnership by Elizabeth Malafi, Louise Weiss, and Sophia Serlis-McPhillips