

Willingness to Return

Professor Carol C. Kuhlthau (2004) begins the 2nd edition of her seminal book, *Seeking Meaning*, by stating that while “library and information services have centered on sources and technology. . . the major writings on the theoretical foundations of library and information services have recognized the user’s perspective as a critical component in information provision” (pp 1-2). Furthermore, Kuhlthau notes that “reference services in libraries have, for a century, served primarily to explain a bibliographic apparatus, help users find library materials, and increase access to the information within the library.” (p. 9). It is within this system-focused framework that Willingness to Return began.

The concept of willingness to return began as a new and user-focused indicator of reference success; it is the result of an insight that emerged from Durrance’s 1980s qualitative study of the reference interview from the perspective of the user. At that time accuracy, a variable relatively easy to measure by researchers (without the need to bother the user), was the key indicator of reference success. The first unobtrusive studies of reference accuracy were published by researchers Terence Crowley and Tom Childers in the early 1970s (Crowley & Childers, 1971). By the mid 1980s this had become the standard method of evaluating the success of the reference interview (Hernon & McClure). The implied assumption behind accuracy as the key factor in reference success was simply that all identical questions had identical answers, which could be determined from the resources of the collection. Typically researchers were assigned groups of specific questions (with known answers and approaches) to administer to public and academic libraries. Most studies showed that librarians had approximately a 55% accuracy rate. At that time researchers reasoned that if librarians increased their accuracy rates, reference service would be improved.

Durrance, on the other hand, suggested that a questioner’s willingness to return to a staff member another time might be a powerful indicator of success—from the perspective of the user (Durrance 1989, 1995). The insights that resulted in the willingness to return measure were influenced by the emerging knowledge gains from research on information seeking and use and the work of a variety of researchers (Dervin et al 1976, Dervin and Nilan, 1986).

The first willingness to return studies were conducted periodically by Durrance and graduate students at the University of Michigan. Like the earlier studies designed to determine accuracy rates, these studies used unobtrusive methods. Unlike the accuracy studies where researchers were assigned questions, willingness to return researchers selected questions that were meaningful to them or to a proxy who accompanied them to the observation site, typically a medium-sized to large public or academic library. Observer-researchers completed a standard checklist and examined key factors associated with reference success. The approaches used were quite similar to those used by Dewdney and her colleagues at the University of Western Ontario. (Dewdney and Ross, 1994, Dewdney and Michell, 1996).

In order to understand willingness to return as it applies to the reference interview one must understand the nature of this interaction that occurs in a public desk or environment that is generally characterized by anonymity and where a questioner brings a query to someone he/she is not likely to know. The interaction itself (often not an interview) typically lasts about three minutes (Lynch, 1978, Dewdney, 1986). These short, typically anonymous encounters are often very basic interactions between a professional and a user.

The early willingness to return studies showed (not surprisingly) that users were likely to return to librarians who were effective communicators and who used open questions; they also learned that questioners were more likely to return to those who appeared idle when approached, who could be observed working with other users, and who were identified by name. Willingness to return studies also showed that approachability was even more important than the first group of factors as was the ability to successfully negotiate and showing some interest in the question that had been asked. Finally, this research showed that the most successful interactions from the perspective of the user were those where the librarian showed a great deal of interest in the question, possessed very good listening skills, used open questions very effectively, and determined the need behind the initial question (Durrance, 1995).

Patricia Dewdney and her colleagues Catherine Ross, Gillian Michell, and Kirsti Nilsen have incorporated the concept of willingness to return into their excellent series of studies of reference effectiveness. (Dewdney, 1986, Dewdney & Ross, 1994, Ross & Nilsen, 2000) Their outstanding reference research has added considerably to the knowledge base and understanding of what happens in the reference interview. For example, they have shown, from the perspective of the user, how particular communication approaches and behaviors boost the effectiveness of the reference interview. In addition, they have contributed to the theoretical base associated with reference (Dervin & Dewdney, Dewdney & Michell).

Knowledge and theory gains are synergistic. Findings of studies of reference by various researchers that have incorporated willingness to return (such as those discussed above) have been used to foster more effective reference service, not only by focusing on building strength in areas associated with a person's willingness to return but also by identifying problem areas associated avoiding further contact with the professional. The basic willingness to return framework can be seen as one of the many building blocks developed through the research and theoretical approaches of a number of researchers such as those discussed above, and theoreticians such as Brenda Dervin (Dervin and Dewdney, 1986).

The most effective work in translating both this small conceptual contribution to understanding reference success and other, considerable knowledge gains based on research into practice—ultimately providing a framework for reference librarians to use to more effectively help people solve their information problems—has been done by Catherine Ross and Patricia Dewdney and more recently by their colleague Kirsti Nilsen

(Ross & Dewdney, 1998; Ross, Nilsen, & Dewdney, 2002). These reference researchers have made theory and research accessible to practicing librarians.

The shelf-life of willingness to return has been extended due to its application by researchers to other situations. More recently researchers have incorporated this user-focused concept into studies of digital reference. (Janes, Hill & Rolfe, 2001, Mon and Janes, 2004, Nilsen, 2004). Tammara Turner, a University of Washington PhD student, recently incorporated this framework into a pilot study of leaders of online peer-to-peer technical support groups to determine why they had been willing to return to the same set of newsgroups at a later time to ask more questions. The results identified a number of factors that contribute to participants returning to the same newsgroups again and again for help and support. In general, users noted many of the same factors that questioners noted in the library setting (unpublished).

Willingness to return has been incorporated into a current study of consumer health information behavior and use of a major consumer health information site, [NCHealthInfo](#), conducted by Joan C. Durrance and Karen E. Pettigrew as part of the Information Behavior in Everyday Context (IBEC) project, which consists of a joint research team from University of Washington Information School and the University of Michigan School of Information.

Additional uses of this basic user-focused concept may be in such areas as online peer-to-peer groups where many of the same factors that occur in the reference interaction occur. Its use is likely to be limited to basic interactions, where anonymity and short interactions are the norm, rather than to value-added services which require different theoretical constructs.

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