Ask an Expert: Lessons Learned Repackaging Reference for Exhibition Spaces

Set Up
Late last year, library staff participated in a special exhibition. Over a three-month period, the museum invited the public to observe the conservation of Caravaggio’s Crucifixion of St. Andrew in a specially equipped gallery. A museum conservator worked directly on the painting five days a week while museum visitors watched. As part of the exhibition, visitors were encouraged to ask questions at an Ask-An-Expert installation in the gallery. The intention was for Ingalls Library reference staff to provide answers to questions inspired by the exhibition and then display the answers in the gallery.

Design
Due to a short timeline between design and installation, the library committed to the project without knowing what to expect. When asked to answer questions collected in a gallery, the answer seemed initially to be an obvious yes. The process designed by Education & Interpretation, Exhibitions, and Design staff proved time consuming over the course of the exhibition. The museum provided question cards, lined 4x5 cardstock printed in house, with fields for a question, a name, a Twitter account, and a location. The suggestion was that library reference staff could check for questions several times per day and respond via a second card. Both question and answer would be displayed on a wall adjacent to the temporary conservation laboratory. Additionally, visitors that included a Twitter account would receive an answer via a tweet from the museum.

Response
Over the course of the exhibition, we received over one hundred thirty-two cards containing a grand total of one hundred eighty-two questions. Essentially, the exhibition doubled the number of questions that reference staff answered each month.

Visitors seemed fascinated by certain aspects of the exhibition, and asked duplicate questions forty-four times. Frequently asked questions included:
- How long will the conservation process take?
- How do you become a conservator?
- How does x-rayograph work?
- How much is the painting worth?
- What kind of solvent are you using on the painting?

The repetition of these questions allowed staff to reuse previous answers, reframing text to fit questions.

Public Anonymous Interaction
Surprisingly, most participants did not include a means of contact. The question card included a field for Twitter, to allow for staff to tweet answers, yet only thirteen participants filled in a Twitter username. While the form did not include a field for email, twenty-four participants provided one. Two participants provided telephone or mailing addresses. The name field included a similar variety of responses, with partial names, first or last only, and fake names, outnumbering the full names. No correlation was found in the data between anonymity and number of questions per card or type of question asked.

Further Thoughts
Information and answers are more readily available than ever before, which makes the recent Ask an Expert experiment in the Focus Gallery even more fascinating and a direct contrast to what we have been experiencing in the library itself. Clearly, providing answers to all types of questions is still vitally important and equally clearly, these questions are not being brought to the library for answers.

Does the anonymity of the process make people more comfortable in asking their questions? Does the low tech/no tech approach of the question desk encourage people to interact more freely? Does seeing the answers to questions asked by others encourage people to ask more questions?

In order to provide the most effective reference service and take advantage of the myriad resources available to us, we need to think about what we have experienced in the Focus Gallery and use that information to find new and relevant ways to make our visitors feel comfortable and engaged in the process of learning about the museum and its collections.

Next Phase
Equipped with more questions than answers, the Ingalls Library staff is initiating a survey of museum visitors. The aim of the next phase is to harness the curiosity of art museum visitors by providing the means to interact publicly yet anonymously with museum experts, to seek answers to questions where and when inspiration hits, and to provide a platform for the voice of all museum visitors.

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