Say What?! How to handle reference questions from patrons who seemingly inhabit an alternate universe

by Rhonda Schwartz

How can I sue Satan? Where can I plug in my hair dryer? Amy Hale-Janeke, reference librarian and media coordinator at the San Diego County Public Law Library, and Sharon Blackburn, head of reference and instruction at Texas Tech University School of Law Library, addressed how to answer such questions at the 2004 AALL Annual Meeting program, "Negotiating with the Bizarre: Strange Questions at the Reference Desk."

"I've never been to an AALL program where laughter resounded for approximately 30 minutes of the 60-minute program," says Maureen Well, deputy director of law libraries, State of Connecticut. "But it was a laughter of recognition of shared experiences, not laughter at those individuals who come into our libraries."

Hale-Janeke and Blackburn began their program with a disclaimer, stating that they were going to focus on strange questions asked at the reference desk rather than on the behavior of the patrons asking those questions. The stated purpose of their program was to help others gain confidence in handling a wide variety of bizarre questions.

Hale-Janeke and Blackburn then launched into the Bizarre Question Pyramid. The five levels of the question pyramid were: sane but misguided or uninformed; sane but angry; sane but stubborn; unusual belief; and not all there. A couple of examples from their own library experiences help to illustrate a few pyramid levels.

How can I sue Satan? Where can I plug in my hair dryer? Amy Hale-Janeke, reference librarian and media coordinator at the San Diego County Public Law Library (right), and Sharon Blackburn, head of reference and instruction at Texas Tech University School of Law Library, addressed how to answer wacky reference questions during their program, "Negotiating with the Bizarre: Strange Questions at the Reference Desk."

Photo by Brant Bender
Hale-Janeke then told the woman that she was welcome to continue her research into motions, but she also advised her to visit the bookstore at 6th and G and look for a particular book, Codependent No More. She pointed out to the woman that because her “boy” was 30 years old, it just might be time to let go and move on.

Providing another example of a “sane but misguided or uninformed” type of question, Blackburn spoke about a man who came into the law library at Texas Tech with a question about divorce. The man told Blackburn that although he was getting a divorce, he and his wife had slept together 40 times since they started divorce proceedings. He wanted to know if the divorce was going to be legal or illegal. Blackburn calmly directed him to a helpful book with a chapter on divorce.

In dealing with the “sane but stubborn” level of the question pyramid, Hale-Janeke noted that the San Diego County Law Library is located near the county jail, and newly released prisoners often visit the library. One such ex-prisoner handed Hale-Janeke a piece of paper, explaining that there was a statute that provided newly released prisoners with money when released from jail; as a newly released prisoner, he wanted his money now.

The paper included a citation to RCW. After some digging, the library staff realized that the RCW referred to the Revised Code of Washington. “Here’s the thing,” Hale-Janeke told the ex-prisoner, “You live in California; Washington State is up North.” The ex-prisoner replied, “So if I lived in …” “Yeah,” Hale-Janeke said.

As a final example, Blackburn handled an “unusual belief” question when a man, believing that once his name was copyrighted, anyone trying to use his name in a court document would violate copyright, asked Hale-Janeke if he could look at the copyright statutes. Hale-Janeke and Blackburn showed the patron the contract form books and suggested the patron photocopy what was relevant and take the form with him the next time he time-traveled.

The program played to a packed room late in the day. Hale-Janeke and Blackburn held the audience with their wit, humor, and common sense. As for the patron who asked about suing Satan, the advice was to provide an example of the “sane but stubborn” type of question, “let’s get to the bottom line, what can I get for you today?” kind of approach. Hale-Janeke’s approach takes less time, and the patrons usually leave feeling somewhat calmer, and they often come back.

Hale-Janeke and Blackburn recognized that librarians sometimes feel guilty or even angry when dealing with patrons with strange questions. Both advised librarians not to argue with patrons about the patron’s reality because it may only serve to make the patrons themselves angry. However, the ability to enter the patron’s “alternate reality” can sometimes be quite helpful. For example, were the invisible police jumping up and down on a patron’s mobile home and then running and hiding? Hale-Janeke advised this patron to get a camera and take pictures of the invisible police in action; the patron could thus secure the needed proof to present to the staff sergeant in charge of the invisible police.

Or, did the patron, who time-traveled and created the mountains around San Diego, fail to get a signed contact to recover costs for the creation? Hale-Janeke showed the patron the contract form books and suggested the patron photocopy what was relevant and take the form with him the next time he time-traveled.

Her approach takes less time, and the patrons usually leave feeling somewhat calmer, and they often come back. Hale-Janeke and Blackburn would like to hear about your experiences with bizarre questions at the reference desk. Please e-mail your strange questions to Hale-Janeke at ahale@sdcll.org or to Blackburn at sharon.blackburn@ttu.edu.