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The Public-Access Computer Systems Review 1, no. 2 (1990):
67-70.

Public-Access Provocations: An Informal Column

"Help!"

By Walt Crawford

Your patron access systems probably have help screens available at the touch of a key. There are dozens--maybe even hundreds--of carefully-worded context-sensitive messages to help the frustrated patron. Some systems even incorporate the patron's problematic command into the help text.

How often do those help screens get used? If you're typical, not very often. From what I've heard informally, systems with logging facilities show that help functions are so rarely used that, if they were indexes, they would be prime candidates for removal from the system. Not only in patron access systems, but in most interactive software, even the most superbly-crafted help facilities go unused--even while they could solve most problems that users face.

Help in Other Contexts

The problem seems to be general, although I've never seen a good explanation as to why this is so. Think about your own experiences--say, with microcomputer software. Quite a few contemporary programs have superb online help, in some cases even first-rate tutorials that can be reached from within the program. I'm writing this using Microsoft Word, which has both. Quattro Pro has context-sensitive help that is not only well-written but includes a coherent hypertext system to expand on selected topics. Even inexpensive programs such as PC-File and PC Tools Deluxe have excellent context-sensitive help facilities, and in each case the way to get help is clearly labeled.

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But I'm no different than the rest of you; I fail to go for help when I'm a little unclear on a concept. That was brought home when I was giving a workshop on PC Tools Deluxe, and one of the people asked about the four choices for type of backup in PC-Backup: while we all understood "Full" and "Archive" (incremental), what were "Full continual" and "Continual"? I

mumbled for a minute and was about to open the manual, when another person said "Why not ask for help?" A press of F1, and I had a concise answer to that precise question.

People tend not to ask for help when it would be most convenient, but wait until they are in serious trouble. That's true for more than computers, to be sure--how many people get seriously lost when driving in strange territory before they'll stop and ask for directions? But at least in those cases, they have the feeble excuse that they don't want to look ignorant. Why are we so afraid to "look ignorant" to a computer? It's certainly stupider than we are, and that help was put there for a reason. (Are we really afraid to admit ignorance, even to ourselves? Perhaps. Do you know how all the functions on your VCR work--and, if the manufacturer had tucked a \$10 bill somewhere in the manual, would you have it in your wallet by now?)

If Not Help, Then What?

What provisions can you make to ease people over the rough spots in direct-access systems? While first-rate online help will not get used nearly as often as it should be, that's no reason to ignore it, any more than a library should ignore the needs of ten percent of its users. And maybe someday we'll lose enough of our pride so that we start using help more readily. It's possible that labeled HELP keys get used more than unlabeled F1 or help achieved through a command, but I'd be surprised if they solved the problem entirely.

Some patron-access systems make a point of offering help when something goes wrong, or if the same incorrect or ineffective action occurs two or three times in a row. In the latter case, a system might even pop up a help screen unasked. These options can be useful--although some study of patron reactions might be worthwhile.

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What else can you do? While good bibliographic instruction classes in college can be enormously valuable for other reasons, very few college or university libraries can possibly train all their students and faculty in using direct access systems--and, of course, universal formal training is impossible in public libraries.

Manuals? Forget it. Yes, you should have them--for staff use, so that the staff understands the system properly. You might even have a copy available for the incredibly small fraction of users who would have any interest in reading them. Most people who spend good money for software won't take the time to read the manuals; why should library users spend time with manuals?

The real resource for patron access problems should be the librarians, but that's problematic as well. Some libraries do

make a point of having librarians cruising the terminal areas for the first few weeks after a new system is introduced, looking for people who may need assistance.

That's a nice touch; where I've seen it done, it has been good public relations and quite useful in improving initial acceptance. But how many libraries can afford to have professionals wandering around the terminals and PCs permanently--and how will that help the fraction of troubled users who really don't want to admit that they have problems? In any case, librarians on the alert for patrons who need help can't do much for patrons dialing up from home or with the increasing use of terminal clusters throughout the stacks and in locations all around campus.

Cheat Sheets

Once again, I don't have any pat answers. The closest I can come is the cheat sheet or reference card: a card or single (possibly folded) sheet that offers a tight summary of commands, with just enough explanation to get people going. The cheat sheet should also emphasize that online help is always available and show how to get it. These inexpensively-produced items should be readily available, in stacks so that people feel free to take them away. (If they cost more than a nickel each to produce, you may not be doing them correctly.)

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Cheat sheets don't solve all the problems, by any means. Flip charts at terminal stations can be useful, although they can also get in the way and take up usually-inadequate working space. A combination of help screens, cheat sheets, and moderately alert librarians is probably the best solution you can provide, although it will always be incomplete.

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The Public-Access Computer Systems Review is an electronic journal. It is sent to participants of the Public-Access Computer Systems Forum, a computer conference on BITNET. To join the PACS Forum, send an electronic mail message to LISTSERV@UHUPVM1 that says:

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