



Chapter Council Presents Sharing Roundtables

MLA Annual Meeting

Chicago IL

Sunday, May 18, 2008

Final Report Form

Facilitator: Pam Rees State Library of Iowa Miller Building

Recorder: Brandi Tuttle, Duke University Medical Center Library

Additional Participants: Penny Coppernoll-Blach, UC San Diego Biomedical Library

Table Topic: Virtual Reference

Topics Discussed/ Ideas Shared:

First we defined Virtual Reference as any reference interaction not face-to-face (email, IM, chat, & phone).

Penny described her library's activities in virtual reference. UCSD began using QuestionPoint 4-5 years ago. When they originally had to decide on chat software there wasn't really any competition, so they chose QP.

They only used the service for email as it archived and collected statistics. QP kept raising the rates even though UCSD only used the email function. There was resistance toward adoption of chat.

A few years ago it was mandated by the state that all UC libraries would participate in a shared model. The state is composed of 10 campuses that run QuestionPoint via consortium with a merged archive. San Diego is responsible for 8 hours per week from 11-9pm. They are responsible for answering questions from across the state. This means reference librarians are responsible for helping patrons access resources/service for a particular campus (many times not UCSD). To help librarians when serving other member libraries' patrons, an internal website ("policy pages") was constructed to detail each campus specifics, the libraries, and resources/services available. Statistics show that students want to chat in the early morning and late at night. UCSD now also uses an IM widget and have many accounts to be more accessible to students. They don't like the fact that IM, unlike QP, has no canned scripts. QP has a widget now that can be put on pages like a Meebo widget. No log in is required, patrons can just send messages, but there is no email if a follow up is needed.

At Iowa State, Pam related that chat was attempted but that it didn't really work well. She interested in learning more to help the state library choose a new model for virtual reference. At this time they do phone and email virtual reference only.

At Duke University, I indicated that the Medical Library began a pilot IM project in Jan of 2007 (M-F from 9-5). 2006 was spent with getting the staff ready to try IM again after the failure of QP from a few years earlier. The rollout was unannounced to allow staff time to learn with time and practice. Our statistics have been growing every month since, even with limited marketing. We have about 40-50 transactions per month. We use Meebo and have accounts via Yahoo, Gtalk, and AOL. We did create a document online with "canned" responses, so staff can choose to keep that document open while manning chat. I believe that many don't use this (really the document was really more of a crutch to get staff on board with IM).

We worked with our systems department to design a page that could be loaded onto all public computers using the computer's Active Desktop. Each public computer now has a chat widget on the desktop page. Patrons can contact without having to give up their computers. We can go to them! We have had a few people initiate a chat while we are offline. With no contact information usually given, we can't follow up with the person.

At the end of 2007, I initiated a Text Us program. Using the AIM hack (found at: [http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Online_Reference#Software for SMS Reference](http://www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Online_Reference#Software_for_SMS_Reference)) patrons can text the library questions. The questions come into our normal Meebo chat window. The only indication it is from a cell phone is that the buddy name is a telephone number. This was very easy for staff to adapt to as there was no extra work required. However, many staff still don't understand how it works so they don't market it to our patrons.

We decided to collect our patron's opinion about our IM service right after they used it. We have a very short survey (2 questions w/ a comment box) that we ask patrons to fill out. Responses have been overwhelmingly positive. Staff and students find our IM service immensely helpful.

We have had problems with some staff integrating IM into their workflow while at the reference desk or while serving as backup at their own computer. They don't see the flashing window or many times don't have their speakers turned on. We don't keep any logs for privacy concerns. Just keep track of our statistics individually. We are looking at other models currently.

Delay debate:

There was a bit of debate over whether or not patrons minded the delay involved in IM. Peggy thought that students don't have any tolerance for delayed responses. Brandi indicated that students and others haven't seemed to mind waiting a few minutes. Also studies have shown that in the age of multitasking, waiting a few minutes for a response is less of a big deal while waiting on IM vs. phone.

Somewhat off topic: We then began talking about cell phones, texting, Facebook, camera phones, etc.