Text Messaging at Reference:
A Preliminary Survey

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ABSTRACT. This article relates the results of a survey of academic libraries using text messaging as a means for delivering reference services. Information concerning the hardware, software, costs, staffing, hours of operation, service life, and patron use is presented.

INTRODUCTION

This article will focus on the current use of text messaging as a means for delivering reference services in academic libraries. It will present the results of a survey of some of the few institutions using text messaging in this manner. The survey was part of the exploration phase of learning the various ways text messaging is being employed for reference services. The terms *text messaging* and *Short Message Service (SMS)* are used interchangeably.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are not many libraries using text messaging for reference services, and consequently there isn't much literature on the topic. Giles

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and Grey-Smith (2005) concentrate on the subject and describe the process of implementing SMS reference service at the library at Curtin University of Technology. In her blog LibrarianInBlack, Sarah Houghton (2005a) reports on the implementation and use of SMS at Southeastern Louisiana University. Houghton's (2005b) Virtual Reference Desk Conference presentation points to text messaging as one alternative to traditional virtual reference products, whereas Fox (2006) addresses SMS in a presentation about mobile handheld devices and library and information services. Whelan (2006) mentions PC-to-mobile phone text messaging among emerging technologies librarians may want to consider for expanding their services across new communication platforms.

Briggs (2007) describes how the University of Florida uses a cell phone text messaging service to distribute information and news updates campus wide; the system allows professors and students to use it for similar communications, but any uses for library services were not mentioned. Condon (2006) provides a different view and questions whether text messaging will really be a desirable and effective means of delivering library services.

METHOD

The questionnaire used for this research included seven items designed to gather basic information about the software and equipment used and their costs, staffing, hours of operation, transaction turnaround time, the length of time the service has been offered, and patrons' use of the service. The libraries surveyed were found using Internet searches and the wiki "Libraries Offering SMS Reference Services." Responding librarians were generous with their time in answering follow-up clarifying questions.

RESULTS

Six of the eight libraries chosen for this study responded, which is a 75% response rate. The parent institutions varied widely in enrollment from 13,500 students to 40,000 students. Three respondents represented multi-campus university systems with between four and six locations. Four institutions are located in the United States and two are in Australia. Only five of the six respondents are actually using SMS. The Cornell

University Library had planned to use SMS for a study abroad program in East Africa, but technical issues and the high cost of international calling prompted library officials to reconsider. Among the five respondents that are currently using text messaging to deliver reference assistance, there are a variety of ways and means employed for doing so. The first two respondent libraries mentioned below use relatively low-tech methods that do not require any special software.

A web page on the library web site serving the six-campus University of Maine directs patrons to send their text messages to an e-mail address. That address serves a distribution list monitored by three librarians who answer the queries. No special hardware or software is needed. The librarians' e-mail responses go back to the patron's cell phone as text messages.

I was intrigued by the simplicity of this method, but it didn't work when I tried it using my personal cell phone and my workplace e-mail. My cell phone prompted me to enter an "e-mail server number." When I consulted my institution's IT staff, I was informed that there is no such number. This issue could be specific to my type of phone or to my service provider's network. In any event, this trial revealed to me a serious limitation to this way of offering SMS reference service in my area.

Santa Barbara City College uses another simple means to provide text messaging reference assistance. On finding the various software options to be too expensive vis-à-vis expected demand, the library director upgraded his ordinary cell phone to a "smart phone" and uses it to respond to patron questions whenever he notices he has received a message and is free to reply. Although I like this approach and admire the director for his involvement in serving his patrons in this way, our vision of SMS reference service includes staffing at the reference desk along with our IM, telephone, and in-person patron assistance methods.

MORE SOPHISTICATED SOFTWARE INTERVENTIONS

The remaining respondent libraries use plug-in software to convert incoming text messages into e-mails. Librarians reply to the queries just as they would ordinary e-mail. The software converts a librarian's e-mail reply into a text message that the patron receives on his or her cell phone.

The Kresge Business Administration Library at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor uses software called SMS Messenger for Outlook

from a company called Upside Wireless. Creating an account and downloading the software are free, but one must purchase credits—essentially messages, both incoming and outgoing—to actually interact with patrons using this software. Credits can be bought on a prepaid basis or at monthly subscription rates. At the Kresge Library, staff decided to open the service in November 2006 with 100 credits at a cost of $12 ($0.12 per credit). Reference librarians staff the SMS service at the reference desk during all of their normal hours of operation seven days a week. Turnaround time on transactions varies from five minutes to the next day, depending on conditions such as when the message is received and other service demands on reference desk staff.

The libraries at both Australian universities use MessageNet, which is provided by an Australian company that uses software similar to Upside Wireless. MessageNet offers prepaid and monthly accounts; the two libraries each spend approximately $1,000 USD per year for MessageNet. At Queensland University of Technology, the SMS reference service covers four campuses. The SMS service is part of a centralized "Ask A Librarian" unit housed at the largest campus. This area, backed by its own funding and completely separate from the reference desk, has a dedicated staff of reference librarians accompanied by subject specialists who assist the librarians when needed. Response time is within one hour. Text messaging reference at Queensland University of Technology began in June 2007 as a Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. operation, but plans to expand to operating seven days a week as early as July 2007.

Having used SMS for three years, Curtin University of Technology's library seems to have been in the business of text messaging reference the longest. The library started its "SMS a Query" program with WhileMobile, but when that company suddenly ceased its text messaging service, the library switched to MessageNet. Available Monday through Friday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., "SMS a Query" is staffed by a library technical assistant who determines whether a question can be answered with a standard reply on file or if a professional librarian needs to be consulted. People received responses within an hour of sending their text questions. The service receives between 20 and 40 questions per month and the beginning of the semesters shows the highest activity. Staff at the library has branched out into using text messaging for other purposes as well, such as sending loan alerts and distributing reminders for upcoming workshops for which people have reserved seats.

USER RESPONSE

The text messaging reference services at the Australian university libraries seem to have the highest patron use. Librarians at Curtin University of Technology have offered their "SMS a Query" for three years and appear to have cultivated a stable clientele for the service. Developing alternative uses for their text messaging system will likely grow and diversify their usership and deliver more results for the cost.

Queensland University of Technology's SMS reference service, although new, seems to be off to a good start. The staff received six questions in their first week of operation. The facts that the library has a dedicated an "Ask A Librarian" facility and that expansion of the service into weekend hours in being considered demonstrate a strong commitment to all virtual reference services there.

The three American academic libraries that currently have text messaging reference services report little activity. It should not come as a surprise that these respondents also report little or no marketing effort for their SMS services.

NEXT STEPS

Like the reference librarians at the University of Michigan's Kresge Business Library, we have decided to create an account with Upside Wireless and use SMS Messenger for Outlook to respond to patrons' text message questions; the low overhead appeals to those who mind the purse strings. The fact that this method employs a simple plug-in that merges well with the familiar Microsoft Outlook e-mail client means that the new service will be easy for reference desk staff to adapt. It is hoped that staffing this service at the reference desk will help boost statistics there during a time when trends show decreasing in-person transactions.

Technological change continues to occur at a rapid pace. New platforms are being developed and efforts to blend existing platforms are creating new uses for familiar systems. Future hardware and software developments will prompt more opportunities for research about and experimentation with emerging means for delivering library reference services.

Moreover, changing social conditions will likely impact how technology and librarianship intermingle. The Virginia Tech tragedy is goading colleges and universities to find new and faster ways of alerting their

communities to campus emergencies. Text messaging systems are one approach to this campus security issue, and these systems may be put to wider use to deliver information for other non-security related purposes to students, faculty, and staff. Institutions would be smart to include as many departments and agencies as possible in these systems, including their libraries. Future research into text messaging by library professionals can help facilitate such inclusion and benefit library services well into the 21st century.

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