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## Chat's Positive Side

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## ONLINE DATABASES

# Chat's Positive Side

By Carol Tenopir

"I HAVE ABSOLUTELY NO REGRETS about enhancing our reference services through chat." "It's been a smooth and successful expansion of our existing reference service." "It's so successful we've moved from being a pilot project to an ongoing service." These are the positive voices of virtual reference, the librarians who feel chat reference is now an integral part of their library. After giving time in my column last month to negative views ("Rethinking Virtual Reference," *LJ* 11/1/04, p. 34), this month I've asked librarians in notable virtual reference services to tell their stories.

### Finding a niche

In the successful implementations, virtual reference finds its place in the entire suite of reference services. It isn't the only service, sometimes not even the busiest one, but it fills an important, unique niche. Often that niche is built on the capabilities of virtual reference that go beyond chat or what you can do via email or telephone.

Josh Boyer, assistant head, distance learning services at North Carolina State University (NCSU), Raleigh, admits there are many questions he'd rather answer on the phone, in person, or by email. But some questions "are perfect for virtual reference—the ones where you have to show a patron a procedure—how to log in, where to find that database, etc. If a patron asks, 'Do you have books on stained glass?', I can demonstrate searching and put a list of books from our catalog right onto her screen. Moments like that make me want to say, 'Ta da!' ...has anyone ever had a 'ta da!' moment in email?"

Cobrowsing is another robust feature that makes virtual reference unique. Boyer employs it to see how users search and to troubleshoot their strategies.

At the University of California-Irvine (UC-I), some librarians show patrons how to approach a search, others

talk them through the process so the patron clicks and browses. In both instances, the reference interview is just as important as it is in traditional reference, says Heather Tunender, electronic reference services librarian.

### Remote users

Reaching remote users is an important niche. The AskNow! service at the National Library of Australia serves a wide range of users spread over the continent (and beyond). In only two years the service has answered over 71,000 questions and continues to grow. Although the highest proportion of users are under 16 (29 percent) and from metropolitan areas of Australia (70 percent), AskNow! hopes to attract more rural and remote users, according

to have more difficulty expressing themselves verbally. For them, typing a question may be easier than finding the right words and grammar in English," said Tunender.

Round-the-clock access is not necessarily a part of successful chat reference. According to Rita Smith, head, reference and instructional services, UT, "The 24/7 thing was way oversold. Reference services staff should feel that they can develop a very successful virtual reference service without having it monitored locally or remotely for 24 hours a day, seven days a week."

### Just another part of reference

At UT and UC-I every reference librarian has chat and email reference shifts in addition to physical reference

Students intimidated by the reference desk may appreciate asking a question anonymously

to Carmel McNerny, AskNow! service manager.

NCSU's Linda Saunders, head, research and information services, says they are able to "answer thousands of questions from patrons we might not otherwise encounter. Many undergraduates don't like coming to the library on weekends and at night. They can still get immediate, one-on-one attention through virtual reference.... They don't have to stand in front of someone and ask what they may perceive as a 'stupid question.'"

Chat users are not always remote, many students at the University of Tennessee (UT) and UC-I access the service from inside the library. No one wants to give up their computer, but anonymity is probably the most important factor. Students intimidated by the reference desk may appreciate asking a question anonymously. UC-I is culturally diverse, and "patrons may choose chat reference instead of approaching a desk where they might

desk duties. At UT it was always "just another facet of our general reference desk service rather than something special and different. It has been very much a team approach, and we now consider ourselves 'old pros,'" said Smith. Successful virtual reference services provide "what our users would come to expect: a way to link to us wherever they might be."

Smith believes "strongly in offering what has become known as a hybrid of services that includes face-to-face, telephone, and computer-mediated communication. It is possible to balance it all if you encourage a positive attitude among librarians and staff and if you are creative."

Use of chat may be slow at first but will likely grow every year. Good virtual reference does not replace other reference services. Rather, it is an important part of the full-service modern library.

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