AskNow chat reference: trendsetter service bows out

Back in August 2002, before Google was a household name and anyone had heard of an iPhone, a new and innovative service called AskNow made its online debut.

Since then however, the information landscape has changed considerably. The dominance of Google and social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter have had a dramatic impact on user behaviour. Chat is now only one communication channel among many, and AskNow has seen a substantial decline in usage in the past five years. As new technologies take centre stage, AskNow partners – the National Libraries of Australia and New Zealand, and the State and Territory libraries across Australia (NSLA) - are launching new projects in reference collaboration.

Looking back

Using OCLC QuestionPoint chat software, AskNow aimed to connect users with high quality information through the convenience of immediate, online communication with library professionals. At the time, AskNow took the ground-breaking approach of staffing the service collaboratively, with librarians from the National Library of Australia and all State and Territory libraries taking part. The service became international in 2003 when the National Libraries of New Zealand and Singapore joined the roster. Over the years, 22 public libraries across several States have also contributed.

The collaborative aspect of AskNow has been one of its real strengths. Operating 50 hours a week across five time zones, participating libraries could offer a service by joining forces they would have struggled to staff individually. On its first day, the service fielded 45 enquiries - despite receiving no formal publicity or promotion. Usage over the first months was steady, but the official launch on 20 January 2003 prompted an immediate surge. AskNow recorded 568 enquiries the next day alone. It didn't take long for the education sector to discover the service and a promotional campaign aimed at regional Australia in 2003 also generated interest. By December 2003, a dedicated team of AskNow operators had provided answers to over 45,000 enquiries on a wide range of topics and had received many accolades for the high quality of their responses.

In addition to students wanting homework help, questions range from family history and hobbies, to market research and census statistics. The interactive chat software enables librarians to push webpages to users as well as provide guidance on search techniques. Some of our favourite questions include "how can I find info on minefields in Tasmania?" and "I need a Russian translation of Happy Birthday". One user was obviously thinking ahead by telling us, "I'm interested in family history as well as breastfeeding". Librarians sometimes take questions as referrals so they can provide more detailed responses. Each question concludes with the user receiving a transcript, including URLs sent during the chat, and a link to a short feedback survey.

Despite many satisfied customers, some consistent themes have emerged through feedback. Users have high expectations, often forgetting they are talking to a person not a search engine, and the collaborative approach can confuse users who expect to be chatting with a librarian who has detailed knowledge of their local library.

Looking forward

Over the last year or so, the National Libraries of Australia and New Zealand, and the State and Territory libraries across Australia (NSLA), have instigated a series of projects entitled Reimagining Libraries - **http://www.nsla.org.au/projects/rls/.** Ten different projects are exploring how libraries can embrace social networking and find new ways to expose library collections and promote user engagement. Just one example is the launch of the Australian search engine Trove (**http://trove.nla.gov.au/**) which makes it easier for people to find, use and engage with resources held in collections around the country.

The Reimagining project looking at how we deliver reference services, including chat, is called Virtual Reference. The Virtual Reference Project Group is focussing on effective ways to promote reference services and reference librarians' expertise in a Web 2.0 world.

Tasks include standardising reference policies across institutions and developing criteria for cooperative development of research guides. One major initiative is implementing a common software platform across institutions to facilitate seamless transfer of reference questions between NSLA libraries and with Trove.

As part of Reimagining, the Virtual Reference Project Group has considered the future of AskNow. AskNow has been an excellent model for successful reference collaboration, but chat can be resource-intensive to offer and is now only one of many ways that the public can engage with libraries. This is reflected in the service usage: the number of chats handled in 2009 (15,949) is a 58% decrease on the number handled in 2004 (37,773).

Given the decline in AskNow usage and the development of Trove, NSLA plans to discontinue the AskNow service at the end of this year and focus collaboration on non-synchronous channels and 'one-to-many' reference activities. Chat will continue as a local service in some NSLA libraries, as one of a suite of services that capitalise on innovative technologies and changing user behaviours.

Aileen Weir
Manager, Virtual Reference Services
National Library of Australia
aweir@nla.gov.au

Stay up to date with new developments in NSLA collaboration and repositioning by subscribing to the Reimagining Libraries newsletter at

http://www.nsla.org.au/projects/rls/newsletter