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It's IM time: a case study of instant messaging reference for teens at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

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Abstract

Instant Messaging (IM) reference is catching on in public libraries across the country. Because IM is especially popular among 12-19 year olds, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh launched an IM pilot for teen reference in the summer of 2005. As a student intern it was my job to implement the program and evaluate results with the help of the teen services staff. Our study found that IM's unique characteristics such as its conversational tone, informality, and anonymity were particularly suited to the communication style of teens. The article also details how we promoted the service, and dealt with technological limitations. Interactions between the staff and patrons were analyzed for insights into the IM reference interview. This article addresses ethical issues, technical obstacles, and scheduling conflicts encountered during the trial. And finally, the paper proposes strategies to improve service, such as the need to integrate IM reference into staff duties, and to get IT staff on board from the

get-go. Although temporarily suspended, CLP's IM service is poised for re-launch.

IM Time!

The 14-year old girl slouches at a public computer in the teen room of a public library. She scans the reference desk where a twenty-something librarian sits working at the staff computer. The girl types "Are you the guy in brown?" and hits send. The librarian receives her message on his screen and taps out a quick reply. Welcome to the newest teen reference service: Instant Messaging (IM).

IM is picking up speed among university libraries across the country with over 50 programs in place at last count, but public libraries have been slower to catch on with less than half that number so far (*Online Reference*, ch. 4.2).

Nevertheless, a number of public libraries, like Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (CLP), are experimenting with IM as a new way to relate to their teen patrons. By extending their reference services with IM, CLP is utilizing a tool that over two-thirds of teens already use regularly and that may reach patrons who are reluctant to approach a librarian in person (Pew Internet and American Life Project, 2005, p. 33). Even though CLP librarians are renowned for their youthful *savoir-faire*, they still embody

authority figures some teen patrons may find off-putting.

So last summer CLP decided to launch an IM pilot program. According to Dallas Delio, former Manager of Main Library Services, “The Teen Zone staff were an adventurous group and I thought maybe they’d like to give it a try.”

This is Where I Come In

As a student intern it was my job to implement the pilot and evaluate results with the help of the teen services staff. For security reasons I wanted to find a web-based service that did not have to be downloaded onto library servers. This challenge led me to AIM.com, AOL’s instant messaging service—you simply create a screen name, go to the login screen and submit your question. But first I created a screen name for the IM reference librarian: TeenDesk.

To promote the service we designed a striking instructional flyer to be displayed next to the teen-designated computers. On the glass wall in the teen room, I painted a little “Marvin the Martian” knockoff to convey the message from a different angle. We hoped teens would see the flyers and anonymously IM TeenDesk with requests and reference questions. This exchange could occur anywhere in the library. By simply adding TeenDesk to their “Buddylist” teens could IM remotely from any library computer with an Internet connection. After a quick training session, we were ready to launch.

Ten...Nine...Eight...

Public library IM services have had varying degrees of success. After some preliminary research, I discovered that many libraries offer very limited coverage: for example, IM reference would be available only between 10AM and 5PM, and not during lunch hours. Because the goal at CLP is to

accommodate teen schedules, we strove to provide IM service from early afternoon to evening, and on weekends.

Shortly after launch, librarian Karen Brooks-Reese reported that an impatient IM user sent verbally abusive messages while she was busy assisting another patron. In response to this incident we decided to set up an “away” message while busy with other patrons. This message automatically pops up when the librarian is away from the desk, assuring the patron that a response will follow shortly. However, posting an Away message was not a completely satisfactory solution because our web-based version lacked the full functionality of the downloaded software. For instance, we would have to re-create a custom message each time we left the desk—not going to happen!—or rely on a generic AIM message.

A Bumpy Road

Acclimating staff to log in for IM service was the biggest challenge. Teen Zone staff rotated throughout the day. That means a different person will be at the TeenDesk in the morning than in the afternoon. Additionally, librarians are often consumed by the many demands of the bustling teen space: roaming the stacks to assist browsing patrons, aiding in web research and fixing computer glitches, or running workshops. It became clear that sustaining an IM service would require a dedicated staff person. “It was too irregular with so many different people involved at the desk,” says Robyn Hammer-Clarey who was Manager of Teen Services at the time. During the trial period there was no staff person dedicated to IM reference. That will be a goal for re-launch. There were days when no one remembered to log in as TeenDesk and our opportunity for IM reference was lost.

Needless to say, the staff’s help with this project was invaluable. Decisions regarding

software and promotion were reached collaboratively. Teen librarians recorded each transaction on daily log sheets: The first week we logged five questions for reference assistance, two instructional queries, and one referral. The following week we ran out of log sheets. Oops!

Getting Personal

Queries ranged from traditional reference queries to more personal questions. Library Assistant Mark Russell observed how traditional services could open up new opportunities for “teaching moments” via IM. One of his transactions involved a patron who was trying to reserve a new DVD that the library did not yet own. Mark took this opportunity to explain policies about reserving books and requesting new materials. According to Mark, “The IM format gave me the opportunity to present a lot of information in a short amount of time, and the customers I helped definitely appreciated the level of detail” (personal communication, Sept. 12, 2005).

Other questions were of a more personal nature, dovetailing with a teen’s propensity for online socializing. Library Assistant Joseph Wilk gamely provided links to a user who complained about a bossy younger sister. Encounters like this seem ready-made for the IM format, and the privacy and informality it affords. Now, whether or not the librarian wants to tackle them is another story! But Joseph says he enjoyed the exchange.

Interviews may acquire a personal tone, but they are also anonymous. Anonymity can be a double-edged sword: if not handled prudently the IM exchange can invite abuse. In the following weeks Joseph encountered a few IM’ers who enjoyed requesting fictitious book titles (“Do you have Mr. Garbage Fart and the Grease Monkey Mystery series?”). He caught on quickly and became a pro at deftly transforming the prank into a teaching moment. His method:

barrage users with library resources that relate to their topic of interest. For the less intrepid, a firm, “I’ll be happy to block you as I have other patrons to help” will do.

On the positive side, anonymity also forges a unique intimacy between librarian and patron. In the course of one IM interview, Joseph realized that something other than travel books for India was behind this user’s query. After further inquiry, he discovered her true need was to find resources for coping with a mentally ill parent. Joseph IM’d her with a local support group’s number.

Promising Results

Its conversational tone and written format makes the IM exchange an ideal way to study the reference interview. After discussing the ethical implications of saving transcripts, we decided to strip scripts of screen names, and to keep them only long enough to study reference interview techniques and uncover characteristics unique to the IM reference interview. From studying the reference interviews we learned a few tips to pass on to the reference staff. We discussed, for example, how to handle the barrage of multiple questions in a single transaction, and tips for maintaining control of the transaction and how to end it.

In the beginning of our IM trial, I acted as its point person, reminding the staff to log in, save transcripts for further study, and keep log sheets up-to-date. But my internship was over at summer’s end, and due to staff constraints, no one was available to take over this role. Logins were sporadic and the decision was made to suspend the service.

In spite of its limited success, the IM pilot project for teens at CLP yielded promising results. Based on our findings, an IM service:

- fosters an intimate bond between teen patron and librarian,
- creates intrigue for the patron (“Are you the guy in brown?”),
- provides critical information in a convenient and immediate way (“How do I request a DVD?!”),
- provides information about library policies in an informal way,
- provides information in a “permanent” format when patrons save the scripts containing useful information, and
- provides temporary documentation of librarian/patron interactions for further study.

The Road Ahead

CLP’s IM program is poised for re-launch. Considerations for Phase II are :

- integrate IM reference into staff duties so that one or two people are responsible for it throughout the day,
- get IT staff on board to support the full functionality of downloaded software,
- accommodate teen schedules by offering the service in afternoon and early evening,
- hammer service hours into users’ heads even if you need a flashing neon sign to announce “It’s IM TIME!”
- librarians need reminders, too: send an email alert or possibly an RSS feed to staff responsible for IM reference that day, and
- IM service doesn’t have to put a strain on librarians’ already maxed-out schedules— as they become more comfortable with it, librarians will seamlessly integrate IM with the other forms of reference they use.

None of these challenges is insurmountable, and it seems likely that an IM re-launch at CLP is imminent. There is every indication that IM reference can become a popular and successful service, both for staff and teen patrons.

References

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Author's Bio

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