

In My Opinion

Sharing Reference Services through Electronic and Innovative Means

By Bill DeJohn

The mission of MINITEX is to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of participating libraries by expanding their access to local, state, regional, national and international information resources. This is accomplished by promoting partnerships, effective delivery of needed information and by sharing library resources including collections and electronic resources, bibliographic records, and reference services through conventional, electronic and innovative means. MINITEX pursues technological innovations to provide new opportunities for delivery of services.

MINITEX is funding a project in Minnesota called “AskMN, the Librarian Is In” (www.askmn.org), a statewide cooperative virtual reference service that provides 24/7 coverage for online interactive chat with an experienced librarian. (See the preceding article for Carla Steinberg Pfahl’s update about this service.)

I have long felt this was a service that we should be offering in Minnesota, but it has taken awhile to get it together. We have been discussing digital or virtual reference in Minnesota since 1999.

MINITEX was part of a LSTA grant from the State Library in 1999/2000 to develop a model reference and referral network for Minnesota libraries. On June 4, 2002, LDS and MINITEX hosted a full-day meeting on reference services in Minnesota with 40 librarians in attendance. Goals were developed upon which MINITEX and LDS should continue working. However, LDS staff were dismissed at about this time, and other activities took precedent in everyone’s minds. We didn’t get back to virtual reference services for over a year.

In 2003, we were part of a Minnesota Collaborative Digital Reference Project that met a few times and, then, developed a survey on the subject that resulted in over 400 replies from the three-state region. The survey’s result was that some libraries wanted to move ahead, some were not interested in the activity, and some wanted some statewide organization to take the lead.

Things were in limbo for some time while a few libraries went ahead on their own to offer virtual reference service using commercial software packages and/or email reference forms. MINITEX was part of a discussion in late Spring 2004 with panelists from libraries using virtual reference software of one kind or another. We were hoping that it would lead to a statewide project, but a few people said it was not a priority for them, while a few libraries went ahead on their own.

However, we continued to be asked by directors of academic and public libraries when there would be statewide project because some libraries, which were experimenting with their own sites, wanted to participate in a statewide project, especially with 24x7 coverage. At the same time, various technologies were developed that enabled libraries to use ‘chat’ software including Meebo, etc. instead of commercial software packages.

In Dec. 2007, MINITEX called a meeting of staff of Minnesota libraries offering virtual reference service, including heavy use of 'chat' software, and launched the AskMN project on Jan. 1, 2008. Developing the name and logo took a few months, and the website was rolled out in mid-March. At the same time, a few libraries using virtual reference software transferred to MINITEX's license on Jan. 1, and began to use QuestionPoint.

This has been a long period of development, and I am hopeful that we will be able to sustain it into the future as another method to answer the information needs of Minnesotans. We are now involved in an active project with nine academic and five public libraries, and we are planning to add more libraries during FY09.

In looking at usage statistics, roughly 1842 questions were received between Jan.1 and the end of Oct. 2008 -- for an average of 184 questions a month (without any marketing or general publicity). Hennepin County Library started in January, while everyone else started March 24. Total requests received by our public library group from Jan. 1-Oct. 31, 2008, was 775, while the academic library group received 1,067 between March 24 and the end of October. About 55% of the questions are being answered after the Minnesota libraries no longer staff their reference phones. I know many libraries offer email reference forms for patrons to use, but, in my opinion, that does not provide service 'at the time and point of need' (when I believe users want to ask a librarian a question and receive an answer or, at least, know they have talked with someone and an answer will be forthcoming.)

More and more libraries in the region are using 'chat' software to communicate with their patrons and most of the libraries are accepting email reference questions. A few AskMN participating libraries are using chat and im software during their library hours and switching to AskMN afterwards. AskMN provides a choice of receiving email messages, chat, or instant messaging, or a combination of the three.

See Carla's article for comments from both patrons and librarians about the usefulness of this service. In my opinion, this is one more 'tool' that libraries should be using to serve their patrons when they have a 'point of need' question. It doesn't replace those people physically coming into a library to ask a question or seek information, nor does it replace those libraries whose patrons phone a library's reference service for information. It's just another way for patrons to access their library for needed services. It is also a tool that can show how essential and important the local library is to its community by providing 24x7 information service.

We need to remember that our 'libraries' are available 24x7 in that a patron can search the library's catalog, renew, and request a book or other item; access their electronic resources including ELM; search all the library online catalogs in Minnesota; and initiate an interlibrary through the MnLINK Gateway. Why can't they also Ask a Librarian a question on their own schedule instead of a library's schedule?

Now they can, and, if their librarian is not in, others around the state are and, even after hours, there is a librarian somewhere in the U.S. who is willing to help them with their question successfully at their point of need. The current AskMN – The Librarian Is In project offers chat, instant messaging, and an email reference service – patrons can make their own choice.

We think the benefits of this program include:

- 1) extending access to your collections, resources, and other services to your patrons 24x7;
- 2) having experienced librarians a click away;
- 3) serving your patrons in a new way at their “point of time and need”, especially when so many more patrons are using instant messaging;
- 4) reaching the distance learner/patron; giving patrons another option to connect with your library after hours coverage;
- 5) centralized training and support;
- 6) time commitment of local staff is minimal;
- 7) help where local libraries cannot support a stand-alone virtual reference service; and
- 8) being part of a national group offering 24x7 reference services.

In conclusion, I believe this is another service that Minnesotans should be able to access, and libraries can make it happen – thereby, strengthening Minnesota and improving the health of local communities. Hopefully, if enough libraries participate, we’ll be able to extend it to North and South Dakota just as we have other resource sharing services. However, at this point in time, we are concentrating on getting participation from Minnesota libraries.

More information can be found at: <http://www.askmn.org/>

If you have questions or wish to participate, please contact me (w-dejo@umn.edu, 612-624-2839, 800-462-5348).