

Expanding an online reference service by increasing student options

Assisting clients with their reference and information enquiries is still very much a part of the role of librarians. However, how clients are seeking this assistance and what questions they ask is changing. Technology means that people want answers more quickly and at their point of need. This flows on to libraries having to reconsider their service models, including their approach to online support. This is exactly what RMIT University Library did in the second half of 2011 and what it will continue to do in 2012.

RMIT University Library has provided an email and e-chat service under the name *Ask a Librarian* since 2006 and 2009 respectively. Originally staffed with a multi-site roster, it was decided to try a centralised team approach between the hours of 9am to 5pm

on weekdays. This alleviated pressure on roster writers, improved the quality and consistency of service offered, and helped to meet demand. A team of eleven experienced reference librarians, representative of our six library sites, contributes up to four hours per week to the service as part of a standard roster, and those rostered are relieved of their responsibilities at physical service points during these times. This new model also involved the expansion of chat by two hours each weekday, and additional training on the expectations of the team, including the key resources and types of enquiries that may be encountered during a shift. Documentation was prepared or updated on commonly asked questions, scripted responses, and etiquette, and a Yammer group was set up as one means of communication.

In the transition to this change in service, a variety of issues has inevitably arisen. Rostering to cover absences proves a challenge at times, but has also shown that we have a strong, supportive team whose members are willing to step up to fill gaps, meaning little outside assistance is required. When frustrating technical problems have occurred (particularly with chat), they have identified in many cases where improvements are needed (for example, changes to the client chat widget on our web pages). A lot of work and energy has been put into this program overall, but with increased marketing, expanded hours, and greater quality of responses, there has also been an increase in usage. The number of chats reached 238 in August 2011, while in the same month our email queries fell to 150. Feedback from clients has been positive, and more questions seem to be coming from our overseas-based students. The latter is one of the reasons we wanted to expand our service further this year.

Where previously email was the only online support we offered after 5pm weekdays, and on weekends, our chat service is now available until later on weekdays (concurrent with email), with the possibility of a weekend trial in the future. More staff will be trained to provide support to the service, including loans staff, to assist with non-reference enquiries. SMS reference is also being considered. At RMIT University Library, we realise that our clients' needs and expectations are changing, and the expansion of our online reference service is one way we can continue to meet them.

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