So What Do They Ask? Analyzing the Content of Digital Reference Transactions

Author
Goodson, Kymberly Anne

Publication Date
2012-04-05

Supplemental Material
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8hn5d40q#supplemental
**INTRODUCTION**

- 1,758 questions asked by campus affiliates in Winter 2011 via UCSD Library’s digital reference services were reviewed to determine the topic or content of each inquiry.

**GOALS:**

- Determine the most frequent topics of user inquiry via chat, text, and email reference services.
- Determine number of non-library questions asked.

**PROJECT SCOPE**

- Included chat, text, & email questions received via QuestionPoint, January through March 2011.
- Focused on content of questions asked, excluding other assessment elements like volume, response time, accuracy, user satisfaction or demographics, timing of questions across day/weekTERM/year, etc.

**SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Expand alumni privileges web page, stating that online journal/database access isn’t afforded.
- Add detail (definition, cost, eligibility, turnaround time, etc.) to ILL & requesting book/article web pages for frequent referrals there.
- Give accurate, discoverable information online for visiting researcher use of Special Collections.
- Increase awareness of mobile website as an easy way to find hours, locations, and the like.
- Ensure that hours, locations, study spaces, & other basic information is easy to find on mobile & traditional websites.
- Consider staffing text service with non-librarians because of typical simplicity of those questions.
- Alert users to a variety of general purpose databases to reduce reliance on a single database like JStor.

**SELECTED OBSERVATIONS**

- Patrons self-select consistently & appropriately when choosing an inquiry method.
- These services are rarely used to lodge complaints or ask about events, exhibits, or instruction.
- User confusion over lack of access to online journals directly from publisher/association website or via Google search.
- User problems searching for articles in OPAC & not understanding the difference between OPAC & databases.
- Strong user preference for electronic access to known items of interest; little time or patience for ILL or library visit.
- Few patrons specifically seek contact information, though many receive referrals to another person or service.
- Heavy use of JStor for user’s every research need; little understanding of how to choose databases for different topics.
- Some patrons submitted the same or similar questions to different responders on different days; perhaps unsatisfied with initial results or seeking further assistance or ideas.
- Sometimes several similar chat queries came from same class; perhaps instructors guided students to service or classmates alerted others to it.

**USES FOR THE ANALYSIS**

- Share findings with all library staff, so reserves, interlibrary loan, circulation, reference, instruction, and others benefit from the insight.
- Write or update canned responses or scripts to be used.
- Develop new or enhance existing web page & publication content to address common questions.
- Address frequent questions in staff training & user instruction.
- Adjust staffing types & levels based upon complexity of questions typically asked.
- Promote resources & services about which user’s seem unaware.
- Work with consortial chat service partners to improve their ability to address UCSD-specific questions.

This work was supported by a grant from the Research Grants for Librarians Program awarded by the Librarians Association of the University of California, San Diego Division.