American University (AU) Library has a rich history of reaching out to students via any means available in order to reach them where they live and work and in a manner they can relate to. Virtual reference very much fits that description: the service taps into the comfort the students feel towards technology.

The AU Library’s involvement with virtual reference (VR) began in 2002 when we joined a consortium-wide project to provide VR services to patrons using vendor chat software. This service allowed patrons to receive research help from a librarian in real time. Unfortunately, this approach came with some disadvantages: not every librarian in the consortium was adept at answering questions about other institutions or their services, resulting in some less-than-satisfactory answers. Furthermore, the software had multiple bugs that made co-browsing and other desirable features difficult to use. Additionally, a general lack of ownership seemed to pervade the service, thus making participation and sometimes staffing problematic. This lackluster service, combined with technical difficulties, did little to encourage repeat use by students, and a decision was made to discontinue our involvement in the consortial project.

The AU Reference Team then began to investigate decided ways to fill that gap and provide a replacement digital reference service. Instant messaging (IM) reference grew out of that need. This decision seemed like a logical fit with our student population; many students were already using IM for personal chat.

Switching from a multi-university, consortial administrative model to local administrative control encouraged AU librarians to work together to develop a service infrastructure. A subteam was created to set up and manage the service, and staff members were actively recruited to become part of the effort. This built a sense of ownership across multiple unites in the library and allowed us to offer expanded hours. This new infrastructure brought together expertise in marketing, design, communication, management, information literacy and reference. The team effort created a strong sense of pride that seemed lacking in our consortial arrangement.
Marketing the IM service has been a priority since its inception. Given the fact that this service came on the heels of the previous, shared VR service, marketing became paramount in order to distinguish it from the previous service and encourage usage. With very little money and human resources we were able to drive up awareness through marketing. When the service first launched, we were strategic about marketing in order to keep the costs down and prioritize our focus. To be able to accomplish this, we piggy-backed on an event that was already scheduled in the library, the annual Valentine's Day party. We printed large stickers that read, "Have you *hugged* a librarian today?" with the screen name for the IM service and distributed them liberally. These stickers proved to be wildly successful and served as a nice, widespread kick off of the new IM service.

Because this promotion was so successful (usage of the service surged), library administration provided more resources for marketing. As a result we started including IM reference in our everyday marketing strategies. An IM logo was developed that appeared on highlighter give-aways, several databases search screens and the library’s federated searching interface. The team also created posters, including fliers that went into information packets for every on-campus student, set up a webpage that highlights the IM service as the main point of contact for the reference librarians, and incorporated IM promotion in many library events. As a result use of the service has sky-rocketed, and we have expanded the hours to make it a well rounded and exceedingly popular service.

Shared excitement about the service spread throughout campus via the library's marketing work, which spread across the student body and attracted the attention of the university’s high-level administrators. The numbers of chat reference questions asked show our success. Prior to our marketing efforts, only 200-400 questions were asked per year through the consortial chat service. After marketing, more than a thousand questions were asked per year through IM—and that numbers appears to be growing steadily. While the change of chat medium helped—the popularity of AIM and other IM services cannot be overstated—it appears that it is the systematic communications efforts has given the service campus-wide recognition, resulting in a service model that has been adopted by several other campus service points.
In fall 2007 AU Library adopted use of Meebo. This web-based chat service allows us to provide research help to patrons using other IM services beyond AIM, including Yahoo, Google Talk, and MSN. In addition, we embedded the Meebo widget into our Ask-a-Librarian page, and this has increased the number of users significantly. This technology has proven to be easy to use, and we have experienced relatively few technological problems.

Future plans for the service include the possible expansion of our hours, an increased push of our SMS service, and the possible integration of Pidgin with our Meebo service.
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Chat with us
Email us
Call us
Meet with us
Ask a research specialist
Database problem?

Visit us:
Mon-Thu 9 am - 10 pm, Fri 9 am - 6 pm, Sat 10 am - 6 pm, and Sun 11 am - 9 pm
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Chat with a librarian using your favorite Instant Message program.

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MSN: AskAULibrary@hotmail.com
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Gtalk: AskAULibrary@gmail.com

Add us to your contacts — help is just a click away.