

Maryland libraries never close with state's 24-Hour Live Information Service

Harnessing the power of digital reference cooperation yields optimum results



Situation

In March 2003, Maryland AskUsNow! joined forces with the state's public, academic and special libraries to bring together a live online interactive reference service using QuestionPoint 24/7 Reference. Through a format of live chat with email follow up, librarians provide answers to questions and research guidance, and help customers navigate the Internet. AskUsNow! serves the information needs of Maryland residents and students of academic institutions using the expertise of over 300 librarians statewide. Within Maryland, virtual reference services are provided by 33 public, academic and special libraries that commit 266 reference hours per week. In addition, librarians from around the country using QuestionPoint 24/7 Reference back them up at their busy times, overnight and weekends through a national reference cooperative.

Solution

Maryland AskUsNow! 24/7 virtual reference service has become an example for others including state projects in Arizona, Florida, Louisiana and Quebec, Canada. Spring and fall are the busiest times of year, when students are working on research projects and assignments. In total they have received over 150,000 questions since the service launched. Over 45 percent of customers surveyed consistently identify themselves as students, and about half of all survey responders say they've used the service more than once. Over 40 percent of customers discover the service by seeing the link on the library's Web site. Customers can locate the service from partner library home pages, library Web site links, and directly from www.askusnow.info. Schools,

AT A GLANCE

www.askusnow.info

- Launched statewide virtual reference service in March 2003
- A reference cooperative among 33 public, academic and special libraries
- Participate on a national level to provide resources 24 hours, 7 days
- 300+ Maryland librarians actively provide online reference service
- Recipient of the Virtual Reference Desk
- Project's Exemplary Digital Reference Service Award

“We want to be our customer's first choice for quality information on the Web.”

nonprofit and other community organizations have also added a link on their Web sites. Most individual participating libraries contribute just a few hours per week to the service.

With this type of personalized cooperative reference service, a librarian is available to the customer where and when they need help. Librarians receive training that helps them expand their reference skills, thereby increasing their value to the library and the customer. QuestionPoint 24/7 has helped Maryland AskUsNow! unite chat and instant messaging services to deliver an innovative reference communications tool between the library and the customer.

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Results

Maryland libraries have discovered the benefits of offering interactive online reference services. It enables students and the public to access the same trusted library service in a new and effective way. Expanded customer service hours means convenience that customers need which keeps the library itself relevant to the public. By participating in a virtual reference cooperative, the libraries are drawing from each other's strengths in staff, resources and technology. Librarians are also learning more about using online sources to provide quality reference service. They have found it to be cost-effective and have built a valuable communications and learning network among libraries in their state. Keeping up with the growing demand will be the next challenge. Maryland libraries continue to find it a cost-effective means of serving their customers' information needs.

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For more information about QuestionPoint,
visit www.oclc.org/questionpoint/,
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to libservices@oclc.org.