Increase Awareness for Virtual Reference Services: 

Best Practices for Link Placement
Library home page

For your virtual reference service to succeed, you need to make sure your users are aware of it (and can easily access it). An inexpensive way to increase awareness is careful attention to the placement of links to your service (called generically “Ask” in this Guide). Link placement is critical to success, and it doesn’t require a large marketing budget. The more awareness you can build for Ask, the more likely users will take advantage of it, ensuring that more people get the assistance they need. And isn’t that why you offer a virtual reference service in the first place?

As the most visited page on the library’s site, the library's home page is prime real estate. Every service will want space here, but Ask should stand out and not become lost in the shuffle of the rest of the page content. From the home page, the user should be able to quickly find how to ask for assistance.

Philadelphia Free Library Home Page

These tips will help your Ask service stand out on the home page:

• Place the Ask link above the ‘fold’ (above the scroll line). To check to make sure it’s above the fold, use 800x600 resolution.

• The most prominent areas on a home page (and good places to ensure visibility of Ask) are:
  – In the header itself, center or right (the library logo is likely to dominate the left of the header)
  – In the services bar under the header
  – In the navigation bar or column
  – Useful Links section

• If possible, the link should be part of the basic page template, so that wherever the user is on the library Web site, the Ask link will be there, too.

We are indebted to Bill Pardue for several of the ideas published in this brochure, which were first presented in his 2007 Webinar presentation, “Tripping Over Reference.”
Give Ask top billing—don’t bury it layers down in a menu or behind a hierarchy of links. Make it easy for the user to get to the Ask form. Ideally, the place where the user can ask a question is never more than one click away.
Other library Web pages

Any high-traffic page, or pages that past experience has shown require help, should have a link to Ask.

Consider changing the text of your link on different pages, to more clearly delineate the purpose. The link on the catalog page could say “Help me find,” while on the database page it might be “Help me search.”

A consistent page layout and structure will help initiated users know where to look for your services.

Examples of high-traffic pages include:
- Web catalog
- Databases page
- Resource guides
- Student portal site
- Homework help page
Look and feel of the link

Use an icon or image if possible. Users gravitate more toward images and icons than text. The link to Ask should be intuitive: any user seeing your Ask link would know that this is where they can get help.

For faster recognition, place a question-answering icon or an image that represents a librarian (such as a picture or a librarian avatar), to indicate that a real person is available to provide personalized help. This is something a search engine can’t provide!

- The icon or link should be in color but it should not be larger than the library logo.
- Use consistent colors or ‘look and feel’ so the user familiar with the service experiences instant recognition.

Consider including a mouse-over to display content about the link, for example:

- Have questions? Ask here.
- E-mail, chat live, or call—we love to help!
- Send us your questions. We’ll answer within 24 hours.
Presenting your Ask service

If you offer multiple ways for users to ask questions, the Ask page should set out all of the methods of contacting a librarian in one place.

If you are part of a statewide group, link to the statewide service on your own library’s Ask page.
Beyond the library Web site

Social networking sites
Consider including links to Ask on social networking sites, such as your library’s Facebook page or MySpace page.

Community sites
If your library already links to organizations in your community, ask for space on their sites for your Ask link.

Community site examples
- Chamber of Commerce and other business-related sites
- City or other government information page
- Social service agencies
- Cultural and historical societies
- Your parent organization, such as your university, school, local authority or museum

E-mail signature
Amelia Earhart
Aviation Library
60 Pacific Lake Road
Itascatown, Howland Island 96990
http://lib.howland.gov/ask-a-question

Make sure your link is easy to mount, with clear instructions and suggestions on placement.
Check the sites you don’t control, to make sure you are projecting the image you want.
If your link is a long URL, use the TinyURL utility to shorten, for example: http://tinyurl.com/yfwkpwy

Birmingham Council web page with link to Enquire nationwide virtual reference service

Ask a Librarian on the City of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania site
Qwidget, the QuestionPoint chat widget

The Qwidget presents an inviting, intuitive interface for users to type in questions for immediate help. Libraries report dramatically increased usage from the Qwidget. When the chat service is not available, the Qwidget can link to other options for users to ask a question. Many of the link placement suggestions apply equally to Qwidget placement.

Here are some advantages of the Qwidget over a link:

• The Qwidget presents an intuitive interface, inviting questions from users.
• Users can enter questions directly into the Qwidget, with no need to navigate to another page or fill out a form.
• Qwidgets can be embedded in Facebook and WorldCat Local, as well as many library catalogs and databases.
• The Qwidget is optimized for selected mobile devices (such as the iPhone), allowing users to chat with your librarians, wherever they are.

As with the Ask link, the library home page is a great location for the Qwidget because it’s the initial point of contact with the library Web site. The Qwidget can now be opened from a small, single input box and ‘unanchored’ to move from page to page with the user.

If space is an issue, consider a ‘collapsible Qwidget’: the library presents a small search box for questions, which immediately opens into a full-size Qwidget once the user begins to enter a question.