

# An academic library knows virtual reference services are an essential communication channel for its students

*Upgrading to a feature-rich system pays off for the Newman Library*

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## Situation

By 2001, staff at the Newman Library at Baruch College acknowledged that their Web site and its expanding collection of online resources had become a virtual library. Online visitors would likely need reference assistance as much as those in the physical library.

Although the library had offered e-mail reference informally using an e-mail address on the library's Web site, to expand the use of the service, the library needed a more sophisticated system for receiving and replying to e-mail inquiries. Staff decided it would be a good time to launch a pilot program for a chat reference service.

## Solution

In January 2003, library staff began using the 24/7 Reference software for their online chat reference service, replacing chat software they had used since March 2001. In doing so, they gained the ability to let librarians and users co-browse, a function that helps library staff provide instruction to their users in reference interactions.

By July 2003, the Newman Library was ready to join the 24/7 Reference cooperative. By contributing ten hours per week of staff time toward the cooperative's virtual reference desk coverage, library staff could offer their users round-the-clock access to reference help. Library users were thrilled to find a librarian online at 3 a.m., Sunday evenings, and all those other odd hours of the week when the library is closed.

With the service available 24 hours, 7 days a week, library administration could review statistics to identify peak user hours and then staff accordingly. Both the chat and e-mail reference service gradually grew and developed a regular group of users.

## AT A GLANCE

### Newman Library, Baruch College, New York

- Serves 16,000 students faculty and staff
- 76% surveyed respond they were satisfied with their online answer
- 81% surveyed say they likely would use the service again

***“Having this chat reference service available to them around the clock gives them a lifeline to the library whenever they need it.”***

In the meantime, 24/7 Reference was integrated with OCLC's virtual reference service, QuestionPoint. Stephen Francoeur, Information Services Librarian at Baruch College, says staff were excited about the integration that was announced in late 2004 and completed in early 2006. “We would be able to upgrade from a serviceable, Web-based e-mail client to a feature-rich system that would seamlessly blend questions from our chat service.”

## Results

As usage of 24/7 Reference grew over the course of the first year it became part of the library's core reference service. The students are all commuters and are mostly on campus just when they have classes. Questions related to research assignments are being tackled online during hours when the library is closed.

“We get a lot of comments from our users who are amazed that someone from the library is online late at night,” says Francoeur. “Having this chat reference service available to

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them around the clock gives them a lifeline to the library whenever they need it.”

Viewing the library as a place of teaching and learning has been an essential part of the mission at Baruch College. Together, QuestionPoint and the 24/7 Reference cooperative have helped to fulfill their goal of promoting information literacy skills for their users.

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For more information about QuestionPoint, visit [www.oclc.org/questionpoint/](http://www.oclc.org/questionpoint/), call 1-800-848-5878, or send e-mail to [libservices@oclc.org](mailto:libservices@oclc.org).

