

CASE STUDY: Wakefield Public Library

Wakefield increases local use of virtual reference service with 'Qwidget'

Chat widget placed on library's Web site increases engagement with local citizens

Situation

Enquire is a virtual reference service, providing trustworthy, real-time, one-to-one assistance to users 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Enquire is an example of libraries working together to help users at their point of need. One of three People's Network services originally commissioned by the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA), Enquire delivers live assistance to information seekers via internet chat. Run by libraries in partnership with OCLC, the service gives public library users access to a global cooperative network of librarians who answer questions at any time of the day or night.

Over the last 5 years Wakefield has participated in Enquire – collaborating with 80 other local authorities in the provision of a 24/7 virtual reference service to users across the UK.

The question faced by Wakefield recently was how to build greater loyalty to this national service within their own vicinity?

Wakefield were keen to not only increase the level of engagement with users who would benefit from high quality answers provided by librarians, they also wanted to expand their usage of chat technology beyond the reference role for which they had traditionally used it for.

Solution

The solution lay within a recent development to the QuestionPoint software that powers the Enquire service. The chat widget developed by OCLC called the 'Qwidget' is simply a snippet of HTML code that Wakefield loaded throughout their library Web pages.

The Qwidget provided users of Wakefield Council's library Web pages with another entry point into the Enquire chat queue that they were helping to resource. It was hoped that this would increase awareness, accessibility and take up of the service at a local level.



As Wakefield Council loaded the Qwidget onto all library Web pages and not just those confined to the traditional 'reference' webpage territory it was intended that the Qwidget would also help provide users with better local authority information.

Reports and statistics provided as a result of deploying the Qwidget would provide Wakefield with valuable usage information within the context of the total reference service at the library and their Enquire co-operative relationships. This would enable comparison between Qwidget traffic and general chat and email.



“The Qwidget offers our customers, immediate response, simple to use and friendly. I hope I can see the day when it's the main way of communicating with our web customers, not just seen as a gimmick or extra service we offer, but as part of the mainstream library usage pattern – integrated everywhere as a first port of call.”

Claire Pickering, Cultural Officer, Wakefield Council

Result

In only the first few weeks of being deployed on Wakefield Council's library Web pages, the Qwidget is already being seen as successful in achieving the goals that were set for it and in addition some other less expected results.

Analysis of the initial weeks of statistics showed that 40% of questions received through the Qwidget were locally related, as opposed to 22% of standard 'reference' questions.

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In just a few short weeks this already represents a massive shift in the amount of questions being submitted to the Enquire service by people within the Wakefield area.

Taking the step of putting the Qwidget on all of Wakefield Council's library Web pages and not just the reference pages, had in a very short time dramatically increased the traffic from local users.

"Initially there was a worry that non-reference questions might be asked" explains Claire Pickering, Cultural Officer at Wakefield Council, "but Enquire is a tool for communicating live in the widest sense with customers, not just about asking classical 'reference' questions. Using the Qwidget in this way is a huge positive because we have been able to help a great variety of people at their point of need and widen take-up of Enquire to people who would not have thought of using it before. We would not distinguish between such users at the enquiry desk, so why do it online?"



Claire Pickering, Cultural Officer, Wakefield Council

An unexpected benefit reported by Wakefield resulting from deploying the Qwidget on all of the Council's library Web pages is the insight it gave into the users thought process. Being able to find out where people were on the site when the urge to ask a question overcame them can be immensely valuable feedback.

Sometimes, the customer thought process is not obvious as the question bears no relation to what's on the page, but sometimes it is possible to identify common missing information that Wakefield could be providing on particular pages, or links that are not particularly obvious to users. This means that the Qwidget could have the effect of improving the user's online experience, including website content.

Customer's Qwidget behaviour tells Wakefield what they cannot find on the spur of the moment. This represents an immediate and unguarded customer response and a useful qualitative addition to standard website usage statistics for service planning.

Claire explains "Broadly speaking, so far, the referring pages reflect what statistics tell us are the most popular pages on our site anyway, homepage, libraries online (catalogue), online resources room, find a library etc. and as a more detailed picture builds, we will have a really useful tool to help us meet user's online needs better."

Summarising, Claire continues "The Qwidget offers our customers, immediate response, simple to use and friendly. I hope I can see the day when it's the main way of communicating with our web customers, not just seen as a gimmick or extra service we offer, but as part of the mainstream library usage pattern – integrated everywhere as a first port of call."