

Our library never closes

California public library embraces virtual reference technology



Situation

In 1989, Nancy O'Neill, Principal Librarian for Reference Services at the Santa Monica (California) Public Library, implemented an e-mail reference service that was embraced by her library's users. In 1998, she and 100 other librarians were invited by the Library of Congress (LC) to help pioneer a new, worldwide virtual reference service—the Collaborative Digital Reference Service (CDRS). O'Neill received needed support from her library and the City of Santa Monica provided financial backing for technology upgrades. "This community is technology oriented and was ready to respond to a new way of doing business," says O'Neill.

Solution

O'Neill approached the implementation of CDRS with "lots of planning." She worked with her staff on training and scheduling so they would be ready when CDRS went live. "We received the first question sent through CDRS in June 2000," she shares proudly.

Shortly thereafter, LC and OCLC joined forces to evolve CDRS into QuestionPoint, OCLC's collaborative, virtual reference service. O'Neill said the library trusted OCLC's commitment to continuing the development of the fledgling service. "After all, a group that put together something as good as WorldCat has the right idea when it comes to cooperation for better library service."

Santa Monica Public encountered very few challenges implementing QuestionPoint; O'Neill attributes that to the library's earlier experience with chat reference through the 24/7 Reference Cooperative (now a part of QuestionPoint) and the "global" component of CDRS. "We were the first

AT A GLANCE

Santa Monica Public Library, Santa Monica, California

- Main library and three branches in suburban Los Angeles
- Serves 114,000 registered, active users—well beyond Santa Monica's population of 84,000
- Santa Monica Public's usage statistics for QuestionPoint 24/7 Reference Services doubled from 2001–2005

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library to offer 24/7 Reference—always out on a digital limb—and we used the global option in CDRS from the outset."

Through the 24/7 Reference Cooperative, the library can provide reference service around the clock. "I've told many people who ask why we can't be open later that our library never closes—you just need to use a different door."

Results

O'Neill says that regular users seem quite satisfied with QuestionPoint based on their usage of chat reference and e-mail. "They use us all the time and give us really tough questions." QuestionPoint 24/7 Reference makes that work easier for Santa Monica Public and other libraries in this virtual reference cooperative who respond to questions from users in each others' libraries.

A move into a new Main Library in the fall of 2005 affords opportunities to expand the technologies that will help Santa Monica Public exploit resources like QuestionPoint

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even more effectively. QuestionPoint will be available on every public computer in the new library, making it easy for users to request help from anywhere in the building. And that's good news to O'Neill, who sees virtual reference as Santa Monica's future.

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For more information about QuestionPoint 24/7 Reference Services, visit www.oclc.org/questionpoint/, call 1-800-848-5878, ext. 6251 or send e-mail to libservices@oclc.org.