

AskWhyKY.org

A small group of public libraries in Northern Kentucky takes virtual reference technology statewide



Situation

When it came time to “go virtual” with their reference services, three counties in Northern Kentucky (Boone, Campbell and Kenton) were aligned with the idea that sooner is better than later. The idea made perfectly good sense since each county had been conducting e-mail reference as part of their core service. Kenton County Library had been doing chat during business hours. With that kind of experience, they knew they were prepared to execute well. Collectively they knew their primary customer was a member of their own state. The goal was to provide quality reference service to as many people as possible.

After comparison shopping other services and evaluating the QuestionPoint product, they found the features in QuestionPoint to be far superior. And, the price differential to implement the service throughout the state versus three counties was fairly small. After statewide grant funding approval, no time was wasted. Launch plans began in August 2005, and the three county library systems were open for “virtual” business on December 1. Four additional counties (Laurel, Pike, McCracken and Warren) are scheduled to join the 24/7 reference cooperative consortium between March and May 2006. Plans are underway to have at least four other counties join before October 2006.

Solution

Implementation was not a problem for this group of libraries. The three counties were geographically adjacent to one other so gathering for training and policy set-up was easy. Their major concern was getting the word out. As it

AT A GLANCE

Boone, Campbell and Kenton Counties in Northern Kentucky

- Since December 2005, 48 reference librarians within a three county area of Northern Kentucky answer questions for www.askwhyky.org
- Four additional Kentucky counties begin actively participating by May 2006
- Four additional Kentucky counties are expected to join by October 2006

“...this kind of service increases a library’s image in the community.”

turns out there was no shortage of ideas to market the new service. In no time branch flyers, radio spots and press releases were getting the word out. Kentucky is one of the first states to make QuestionPoint a statewide initiative.

Results

Within a short time frame, the number of users responding has nearly doubled from month to month. The number of questions being answered has doubled and is expected to continue increasing as more users come online. Virtual reference has changed the way users perceive the group’s libraries.

Nicole Frilling, a reference librarian at Kenton County Public Library, describes QuestionPoint as “a great expansion opportunity for us.” She says, “Most customers are shocked when they learn about all of our offerings. I think

that contributing to this kind of service increases a library's image in the community.”

What role will virtual reference play in the future for libraries? According to Michelle Foster, Technology Coordinator for Boone County Library, “It is just a natural extension of what the library does anyway. I would say that library users have every expectation that librarians will help them on-line and this belief will only increase.”

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