

The Boston Public Library knows the power of virtual reference

Online visitors ask a librarian a question anytime



Situation

In 2001, the Boston Public Library took the lead in bringing QuestionPoint virtual reference to the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. It began when Deirdre Brennan, Chief of Public Services, came back from a conference energized by a presentation about QuestionPoint. She brought the virtual reference idea back with her and shared it with the staff. With support and subsequent LSTA funding approval, the six library groups shared the 24/7 cooperative reference service in a statewide project named MassAnswers. Together, these libraries provide services to and support resource sharing among nearly 1,800 public, academic, school and specialty libraries in Massachusetts.

Solution

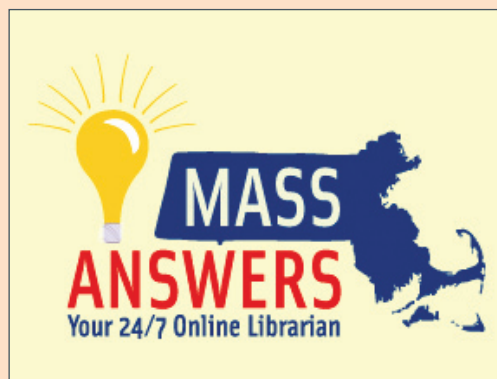
There were some implementation hurdles to cross. The initial decision to participate was met with some resistance from staff who felt they were short on time and resources. The skill sets of individual librarians varied widely, making training more challenging. To monitor progress, a skill survey was administered at the start of the MassAnswers launch and then again two years later—showing significant improvement. Scheduling was a challenge, too. Initially, each participating library was asked to contribute 10 hours per week of reference coverage to cover much of the Monday through Saturday hours. Eventually coverage participation grew to 84 hours per week with some overlap. Some libraries had limited technical resources, but the Boston Public Library was able to help those libraries as needed.

AT A GLANCE

MassAnswers.org

Commonwealth of Massachusetts

- Serves 5,336,404 active registered users
- A Question Referral Center ensures users' questions get answered
- Six regional library systems provide statewide staff support



“We know that QuestionPoint helps us equalize and narrow the digital divide.”

“We know that QuestionPoint helps us equalize access and narrow the digital divide. It improves librarian skills which are transferable to other reference posts in the library. By using a common platform across library types it is user-friendly and efficient,” said Susan Glover Godlewski, Manager of Reference and Information Services, Boston Public Library.

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Continued



Results

Library users receive an e-mail transcript of the entire virtual reference encounter including hyperlinks to resources at the conclusion of the session. If the question is too complex to answer using online resources or very local in nature, a transcript is sent to the Question Referral Center for pick-up by a Massachusetts librarian who will follow up with the user.

Usage continues to grow—14,121 questions were answered at MassAnswers.org in its third year, compared to 12,367 questions answered in the first year. Virtual reference is now considered one of Boston Public Library's core reference services. In February 2006, Real Simple magazine spotlighted MassAnswers in a feature entitled "Ask a Librarian Anything in Real Time Online," giving MassAnswers good exposure beyond Massachusetts. This exposure resulted in a jump in use from 691 interactions in December 2005 to 2,515 interactions in January 2006 when the Real Simple article appeared, illustrating the power of publicity.

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