

Text a Librarian: Delivering Reference Service via Texting

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Funded by Institute of Museum and Library services



Texting: a significant avenue for
communication and social activities in
people's daily lives

Question 1: Do you own a cell phone?

- A. Yes
- B. No


Question 2: Do you text?

- A. More than 50 messages/day
- B. 21-50 messages/day
- D. Less than 20 messages/day
- E. I don't text at all.



According to the Pew Internet & American Life Project:

- As of September 2010, about 72% of adult cell phone users send and receive text messages, up from 65% in September 2009.
- Among teen cell phone users, 87% text on a regular basis .
- In terms of the daily amount of texting, adults on average text 10 messages per day and teens 50.



Given its popularity, texting has been adopted by libraries as a reference service technology – **Text Reference Service**

An IMLS-funded project to examine:

- text reference service delivery models
- information needs fulfilled by text reference service
- competencies requisite for providing text reference service

Delivery models

I. Adopting a dedicated mobile device (usually a smart phone)



Advantages:

Since a cell phone is associated with a straightforward 10-digit phone number, users can easily store it in their own devices and text to this number without any special instructions.

Librarians are able to communicate to users through the same technology and hence are able to experience the service from the user's perspective.

Certain cell phones display text messages in threaded mode, enabling librarians to see all the exchanges associated with a particular phone number.

Cell phones can be set to vibrate or emit an alert sound when new messages arrive and thus lead to more timely responses.

it is relatively inexpensive to purchase a cell phone with a calling and texting plan.



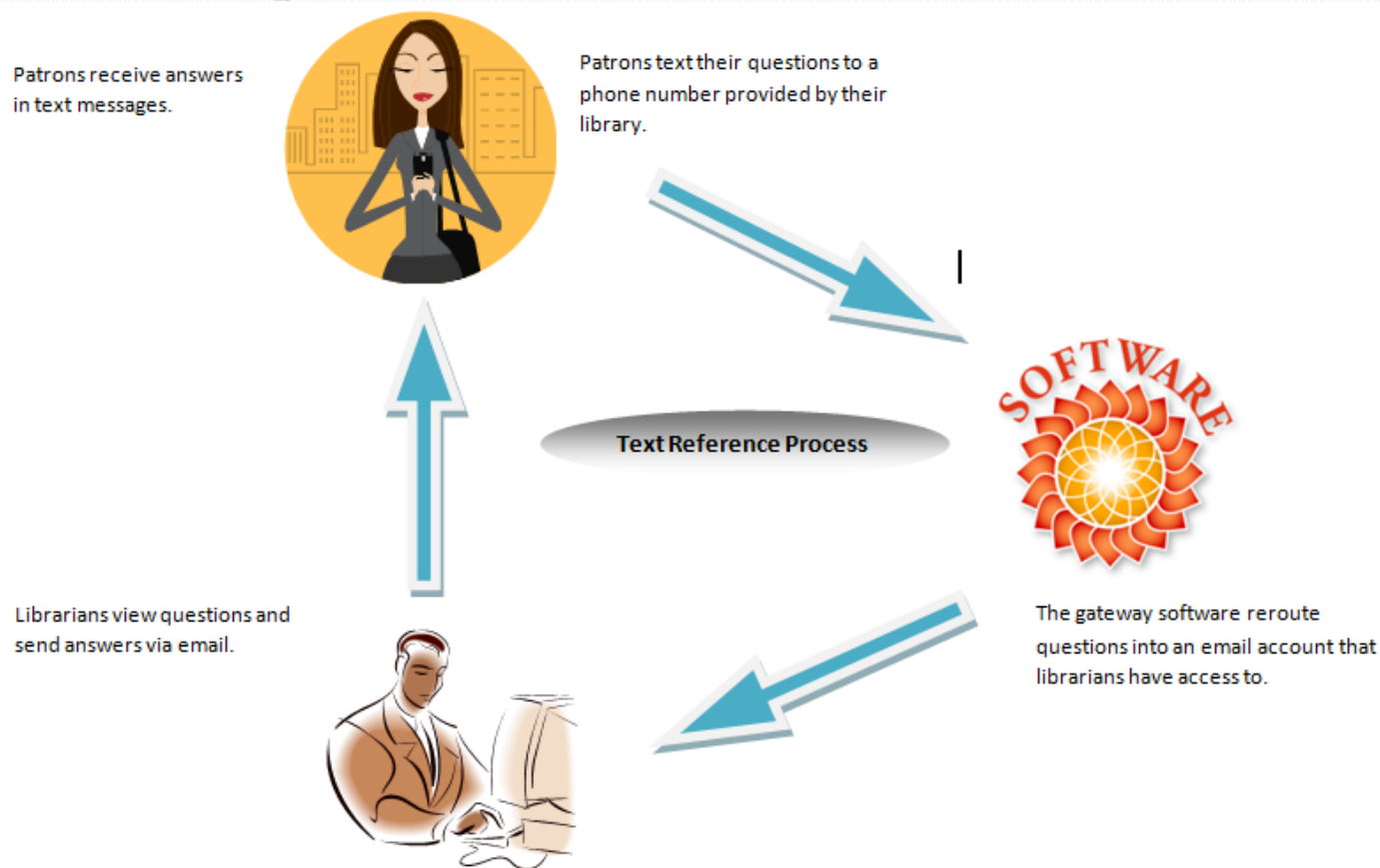
Drawbacks:

It cannot be integrated into any of the existing virtual reference services and thus poses extra work for librarians.

typing on a cell phone keyboard is far less comfortable than typing on a computer keyboard and may slow down the service's response time.

Staffing can be a challenge when the cell phone is not stationed at the reference desk.

II. Utilizing computer applications like email, instant messenger (the “do-it-yourself” approach), or a vendor-developed system (the “commercially developed” approach) to process users’ texts



“Do-it-yourself”

It is free.

It usually requires special texting instructions.

Privacy concerns.

General-purpose applications lack certain features useful for the specific purpose of providing text reference service.

Librarians may still have to learn how to use an application such as AIM or Gmail if it is not already used by the library for chat and email reference service.

Libraries have no control over these free service providers and are subject to whatever changes they make.

“Commercially developed”


It allows text reference service to be integrated into the library’s existing email or chat reference service.

Some software does limit the length of librarians’ responses to users questions.

Most commercial software allows libraries to have a dedicated phone number that users can store in their cell phone. Generally, no special instructions are needed for texting to this number.

Users’ privacy is better protected as the service is run on software vendors’ private servers and access to user information is strictly limited. Some software even masks users’ phone numbers and replaces it with a unique patron ID in order to further alleviate privacy concerns.

It is usually costly.



Lippincott (2010) listed some **broad questions** to consider when planning text reference service:


- What is the current state of mobile device deployment at your institution or for your population?
- What are your goals for providing service and what are your strategies?
- Who should you work with in your institution or service area?
- How will you know if you are successful?
- What is your strategy for the next two to three years?

There are also some *specific considerations* that can be helpful to the service implementation process:

Budget: How costly are the different service delivery models? What is financially feasible both in the short term and in the long run?

Staffing: Should text reference service be integrated into existing virtual reference services (e.g. email, IM/chat) for question processing, or running as a separate service point? Is it preferable to maintain the current staffing schedule or to use a different schedule for text reference service? How much extra work is reasonable for librarians to adapt to the new service venue?

Usability: What is the acceptable amount of instructions for users? When considering features of the service software (e.g. message organization and display, character limit per response, capability to accommodate collaboration among libraries, capability to send and receive graphics), what is important? What built-in tools of the service software are necessary – character counter, URL shortener, new message alert sound, mechanism to claim questions, etc.?



Clear service goals, a detailed picture of the library's wants and needs, and a thorough understanding of what each service delivery model offers, are key for a library to select a proper model to implement and deliver text reference service.

Information needs fulfilled by text reference service

- A sample of **My InfoQuest** transcripts from four randomly selected months in the period of July 2009 to December 2010
- Unit of analysis: an **independent question** in a text reference transaction that represented a distinct information need
- A total number of 3103 questions in the sample

• Question Types

Question Category	Percentage%
Clearly Worded Questions	
Local Library Related	13.3
Non Local Library Related	
Ready Reference	69.8
Specific-search	9.2
Personal Knowledge Related	1.3
About My InfoQuest	2.4
Out of Service Scope	1.5
Unclear Questions	2.5



- *Local library related*

- About a known item

- do you have the 10-cent plague? It's a history book about depression-era America banning comic books.

- About library resources

- How would I be able to do a computer search through magazines for a topic I need to write a long essay on?

- About library policy and procedures

- Do I still have to pay for the item replacement fee even though I returned the book to the library?


- About library services

- where is the Orinda library book sale being held today?

- Ready reference - questions that require a single and straightforward answer, consisting of a specific and definitive piece of information.
 - What is the airspeed velocity of an unladen european swallow?
 - Who won the 1955 superbowl?
 - who is callie Koziel
 - How do i get from the intersection austin st and pecan st to 1634 chestnut st in denton, TX?
 - wut does comme d'habitude mean in French
 - what is the weather forecast for portland, oregon?
 - What is the recipe for coca cola cake?

- *Specific-search* – questions are not answered with a particular piece of information. librarians provide information sources (e.g. Websites, books, periodicals or referrals) for patrons to review, synthesize, and ultimately conclude how to formulate their own answers.
 - Can I contract an STD from having intercourse with my female doberman pinscher?
 - What is the reason for each country having its own currency?
 - What is a good book about 17th century warships?
 - Why are so many players in the world


- Personal knowledge related – questions require librarians' personal knowledge to answer. These questions are usually word puzzles or mathematical problems. However, librarians do not necessarily possess the knowledge to answer all of these questions.
 - ms.choo is replacing the floor in her kitchen.the plans for her house use a scale factor in which $\frac{1}{5}$ inch equals 1 foot. if the plans tht her kitchen is 2 inches by 2.5 inches wht are the actual dimensions of the room
 - Do you know how to find the last term in the pattern? 2 3 6 1 8 6 8
4 8 4 8 3 2 3 2 3 _

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- *About My InfoQuest* – questions specifically seek information about the service provided by My InfoQuest Some of the questions were asked by curious patrons, and some were asked by library colleagues who would like to know more about the service.
 - Are you a computer, or a human?
 - Can you tell me about your service? I am a reference librarian and am interested in providing such a service to our patrons.



- *Out of service scope*

- Occasional spam messages.
- Inquiries about on-duty librarian's personal life and personal information. It is likely that some patrons are just bored and want to chat with someone via texting.
 - HIII! how is your fine evening going may i ask?
- Questions seeking on-duty librarian's personal opinions.
 - Who do you think would win in a fight between a hotdog and a taco?
- Questions that are impossible or unethical to answer.
 - Wats a good excuse to tell your parent about your not going to skool?

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- Unclear questions – questions are worded unclearly or ambiguously, and are difficult for librarians to interpret. Such questions usually need to be rephrased and clarified in order for librarians to gain a clear understanding of them. It is likely that some of the questions are either test messages to try out the service, or mistakenly sent to My InfoQuest
 - Need 2 b home b4 11
 - Did you break the board

Text reference competencies

- Identified by librarians with text reference experience
- A total number of 49 competencies were determined

Top 5 text reference competencies:

1. Ability to compose answers to patrons' questions concisely, quickly and accurately
2. Ability to construct effective search strategies and skillfully search online information sources
3. Ability to quickly evaluate information and determine the validity, credibility and authoritativeness of sources
4. Knowledge of information resources, especially online information resources
5. Ability to interpret patrons' information needs with limited context in text messages

Best Practices - Approachability

Promote service proactively.

Provide clear instructions on how to use the service.

Clearly list service hours, response time, types of questions most appropriate for the service, and types of questions considered out of scope.

During the hours when the service is closed, set up an auto-responder alerting users about the service hours and letting them know when they can expect an answer.

Make sure users are properly acknowledged when their questions cannot be handled immediately.



Best Practices - Interest

Be informal and personal while maintaining professionalism.

Use “word contact” such as using emoticons or common abbreviations in their greetings and closings.

Best Practices - Listening/Inquiring

Given that users use text reference service mostly for specific and straightforward information needs, a comprehensive reference interview is usually not as critical of a component in the text reference process as it is in other service venues where more complex information needs are addressed.

If a user submits a complex question that would require an extensive reference interview, librarians can let the user decide whether they want to continue the transaction across multiple messages, or if they would rather be referred to other reference services.

Best Practices - Searching

If a response takes multiple messages, librarians may offer users the option to receive the answer in multiple messages or to receive an URL that contains the information.

When there is not a definitive answer and users have to be referred to a source, it is helpful to provide an informational summary along with the source.

The same concern of mobile Web access also makes it necessary for librarians to include a phone number, rather than simply providing a URL or an email address, when referring users to a third party (e.g. an organization, a merchant, etc.).

An easily accessible cheat sheet containing useful sources on the Web and information on how to consult colleagues will be helpful.

Best Practices - Follow-up

When message length/cost is not a concern, it is necessary to confirm whether a user's question has been answered and to suggest other means of reference help when needed.

Still, there are ways for librarians compose their answers succinctly (e.g. use a URL shortener, use common abbreviations) in order to leave room for follow-up.



Questions/Comments?

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