July 2014

Evolving to Meet Changing Expectations: Adult Services at the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library

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Our patrons' expectations of the library and the services we offer are shifting. They use technology differently, and ask us to help them use their gadgets to access our collections and services. Our patrons also have an increasing appetite for online interaction with the library. In response, the librarians in the Adult Services division at the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library have evolved our reference service to include local chat, increased our social media presence, and have started a collection of popular devices for staff training.

We were the first public library in Oregon to take the opportunity to use L-Net's software (Spark) for local chat reference service. Launched in May 2009, use of the service is increasing: we currently average 77 chat sessions per month. We wanted to pursue a local chat reference service to better serve our patrons at their point of need on our Web site. John Meier writes in *Computers in Libraries* that "[o]ur Web sites are frequently the first—or only—point of contact with users, but even with our best usability studies and universal design, the sites can still be confusing" (11). He continues that we need to be in that virtual space ourselves, as "[a]n instant response is what [patrons] want and need" (Meier 11). The sort of questions we answer using chat reference reinforces Meier's argument. Most questions are related to holds, accounts, or database access, all things which are very particular to our library, our Web site, or a specific resource a patron is having trouble accessing. Our chat patrons show great enthusiasm for the service; much of the feedback we receive includes comments such as "Thank you, this chat opportunity is a GREAT service!" and "Thank you! I love this service. Online chat is great."

The option to use L-Net's software for a local chat service came up as we were looking into the various options for local chat. We jumped at the chance to be able to provide the service we wanted to our patrons, plus having all the benefits of using L-Net, including great support and easy access to statistics and transcripts. It was important to us that our local chat service was one where patron privacy was valued and protected, and where transcripts and user data aren't owned by a commercial entity. Also, by using a product that most staff already knew how to use, we were able to save some of the time we would have spent on training staff on new software.

Caleb Tucker-Raymond, the Service Coordinator at L-Net, set everything up for us. He created our own Corvallis queue for us to log into and monitor using the Spark software we already use to staff our L-Net shifts. He also coded a chat box widget where patrons enter their questions. We can link to this widget anywhere, meaning we can give patrons as many chances as possible to chat with us from our various web pages. In addition to our homepage and our contact pages, we have also put chat links on our Facebook page, our blog, and on all of our subject guides. We monitor the queue at the reference desk, but most Adult Services librarians also log into the queue in the workroom as well, so that we have more than one or two librarians monitoring it. If we are not online, patron questions are routed to L-Net for assistance 24/7.

The challenges we faced in offering this service have been relatively minor. There was a period of a few weeks where we were getting swamped by class visits at the same time each day. We were able to determine that the questions were coming from a school in another county. We decided to let students know that our local chat service was for our patrons in Benton County, and that there was a link to L-Net on their local library's homepage. If we

were using a service not tied to L-Net, we would not have necessarily known where the questions were coming from, and we would not have been able to direct these students to the resources that are available through their local library.

Our local chat service enables us to answer questions from our own Web site, but we also want to make ourselves visible in more locations online. Like many libraries, we try to maintain an active and engaged presence on a number of social networks. In the Adult Services division, we focus our efforts on maintaining our blog, updating the library's Facebook fan page, and posting to Twitter. Some may wonder how this fits into an article about reference service, but we believe that having a dynamic social media presence is a necessary part of our job, because our patron expectations are no longer what they used to be. Social media has changed how many of our patrons seek out and consume information, and we need to keep up.

Lee Rainie of the Pew Research Center's Internet and American Life Project encourages libraries to "embrace the move toward mobility, constant connectivity, [and] perpetual contact." He argues this because many of our patrons are what the Pew Center calls *networked individuals*. These are people who "have a different sense of information availability—it's ambient." Their sense of time is "oriented around continuous partial attention," and their "sense of community and connection" is of "absent presence" (Rainie). In this distributed information environment, having a presence in a place that our patrons frequent is important. Rather than limiting our patrons to contacting us at the reference desk, we can take the opportunity to reach out and be visible and available in their Facebook or Twitter feed. Why not take advantage of the ability to have our information "ambiently available" in a place where patrons are already spending a lot of their time? We are also giving our networked patrons the opportunity to feel a "sense of community and connection" with their library, and to participate in that community online (Rainie). The result is that we build goodwill with our patrons, share information with them, and receive feedback in return.

We think that reference work doesn't need to be about us passively waiting for people to ask us questions. Via social networking, we try to be active as reference staff and share information we think might be useful to our networked patrons. It also markets reference staff as being knowledgeable and relevant in the new information environment. Examples of topics we have posted include online search tips, recommended reads, or information to help people use the web safely. We also try to build a positive sense of community by posting about light-hearted or uplifting topics. We hope to facilitate patrons asking us questions via social media by encouraging comments and dialogue. Queries we have received range from dates for storytime, to purchase requests, to people asking what the library thinks about ebooks and digital rights management.

There is a fairly significant time commitment involved in maintaining our social media presence. We try to post to our blog twice a week and update Facebook and Twitter every other day, but sometimes more often than that. On top of posting, we also make sure to monitor Facebook and Twitter throughout the day, looking for comments, feedback, and any opportunities to interact with our fans or followers. There are a number of rewards in return for the time commitment. One payoff is a steady increase in the number of our fans and followers. This is a sign that patrons find value in what we post, but also means that we are fostering a group of people who are interested enough in the library to have our informa-

tion available in their personal online space—a 2.0 mailing list of sorts.

Another reward for our social media presence is the information we gain about what most interests our patrons. By looking at blog post statistics, the numbers of retweets on Twitter, or the amounts of comments and "likes" on Facebook, we are able to see what people find interesting or appealing about the library, the services we offer, and our online presence. When thinking about these sorts of statistics, it's also important to remember that user demographics vary between different social networks. For example, 31% (the largest demographic group) of our Facebook fans are women 55 and over. In contrast, the average Twitter user is 31 years old, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart). So by diversifying our social media presence, we are able to reach different user groups. As new networks and services develop, we try to be in those places as well; we recently added the library as a venue on Foursquare, and are seeing usage there steadily increase.

Just as our patron expectations about information and online interaction are changing, the way our patrons use technology is changing as well. They are using many different devices to access our services, and the popularity of the Oregon Digital Library Consortium's Library2Go service (and the myriad of devices patrons use to access it) only compounds this. An increasing number of our reference questions are from patrons who need assistance using their devices to access online collections and services. This becomes challenging for staff, especially when we've never used a particular device. Examples of the devices we're asked to help troubleshoot include smartphones (including iPhones), laptops and netbooks, mp3 players and iPods, ebook readers, iPads and more. Some of our librarians attended a Management of Technology workshop in November 2009, and another attended the Technology Petting Zoo at the Tualatin Public Library in the same month. Taking inspiration from these two events, we hatched the idea of developing a "gadget lab" to help us get familiar with different devices.

After securing funding for the project from our Friends of the Library group, we worked on creating a list of devices to buy. We decided to focus on the gadgets that a large number of people have, and the ones we are asked to troubleshoot most often. Another consideration was getting gadgets that we could potentially use in other situations and settings. With these things in mind, we opted to start with a Macbook laptop and an iPod Touch. There are no Macintosh computers at the library, but we are asked regularly to help patrons with theirs, often to use the Library2Go download service, or to troubleshoot problems connecting to our wifi. Overdrive, the vendor behind Library2Go, recently released its smartphone app for audiobook downloads, and we have begun to get questions from patrons about it. For this reason, we purchased an iPod Touch, which is essentially an iPhone without the phone; a more economical way to get the same device. We will be downloading the Overdrive app on the iPod Touch, so that we can download audio books and understand how the process works. We still have funds remaining for the gadget lab project, and don't have immediate plans to buy any additional gadgets at the moment. Since technology changes so quickly, we will wait to see what we may want to buy in the future.

We just acquired the devices at the time of writing this article, so they have not been used extensively yet. The biggest advantage we anticipate from this project is being able to better assist patrons. Rather than saying simply "the directions say to do this," we will now be able to tell patrons, "Yes, I've downloaded an mp3 using the iPhone app, and I can help

you troubleshoot this." The more comfortable staff feels working with a variety of devices and platforms, the better we'll be able to serve our patrons. We feel comfortable answering traditional reference questions because we know we have a lot of knowledge and experience to rely on. However, with technology questions, we often don't feel as empowered to answer them and service to our patrons suffers as a result. We hope this growing gadget lab will address some of these issues, and that we will be able to assist our patrons with technology questions as well as we can assist them in traditional reference transactions.

The more flexible we can be as Adult Services librarians, the better we can expand our services to meet the expectations of our patrons. We can meet them and help them where they are at. They may not visit our reference desk as often, but they welcome us into their personal spaces via social media. We should welcome questions about troubleshooting technology—it means our patrons think librarians are expert enough to assist with the latest gadgets. Extending our reference service can be challenging, especially in a time of budget cuts and increased workload for staff, but meeting and exceeding our patrons' expectations is a great way to ensure community support for their library.

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