Chapter 6
Redefining Virtual:
Leveraging Mobile Librarians for SMS Reference

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses how the unique nature of texting sets SMS apart from other virtual reference tools. Near-synchronous, near-virtual, anonymous, and ubiquitous, texting blurs the lines between virtual and in-person communication. Drawing on the experiences of librarians at SUNY Purchase College and other public and academic libraries, this article addresses challenges and misconceptions surrounding SMS reference and suggests best practices for SMS reference interactions and staffing. Librarians are encouraged to explore new techniques like "mobile reference" or the "reference haiku" and return to long-standing practices like "saving the time of the user" and telephone ready reference. By embracing a mobile reference mentality and framing SMS reference as a hybrid between telephone, IM, and face-to-face reference, librarians can improve the quality of reference services and serve patrons at their point-of-need.

INTRODUCTION

Ubiquitous cellphone technology, affordable texting plans, and friendly software interfaces have contributed to the rise of SMS or text message reference services in libraries over the past decade. Increasingly, libraries are offering SMS reference as part of a suite of ask-a-librarian services, and virtual reference vendors like LibraryH3lp, Mosio, QuestionPoint, and SpringShare have jumped on the SMS reference bandwagon. Many vendors market SMS as an "add-on" module to tack onto well-established virtual reference tools like IM/chat, email, or LibAnswers. But is SMS reference simply the latest tool in the virtual reference toolbox? Despite increasing rates of adoption, librarians often report SMS reference services are not used as frequently as chat and email, perhaps due to lack of marketing or user awareness (Brooks & Zubarev, 2012; Hill et al., 2007; Luo, 2014; Ruppel & Vecchione, 2012). While text-a-librarian services are becoming standard fixtures in library reference programs, the professional literature has only recently

begun to explore the unique characteristics of SMS reference interactions. This article discusses how SMS reference programs can become more powerful when librarians stop taking the "toolbox approach" and deploy SMS reference in ways that cater to texting as its own, distinctive form of communication.

SMS (short message service) differs from other forms of virtual communication in significant ways. Unlike IM (instant message) or VoIP (video) reference where patrons are usually tethered to an off-site computer, perhaps at home or a branch library, texting services often cross into the realm of brick-and-mortar library services. Patrons text librarians from physical locations in the wider world: from a bus stop, a grocery store, a remote corner of the library stacks. SMS interactions walk a narrow line between the anonymous and the personal. Depending on users' expectations and communication styles, texting can be both synchronous *and* asynchronous, a distinction that distinguishes it from other virtual reference tools (Pearce, 2010; Ruppel & Vecchione, 2012; Stahr, 2010). For teens and millennials, texting has become an extension of the self and a nearly universal form of communication with its own etiquette and conventions (Duggan & Rainie, 2012; Smith, 2011). In short, the anonymity, near-synchronicity, mobility, and physicality of SMS communication distinguish text reference from other reference services and challenge common definitions of "virtual" reference. The guiding principle of this article is simple: SMS reference is more than "just another virtual reference tool." SMS reference services can be more effective when the physical, brick-and-mortar aspects of text messaging are understood and leveraged to the benefit of both patrons and librarians.

The following sections explore common misconceptions and challenges facing SMS, compare consortial and locally-staffed models for deploying SMS reference, and suggest best practices for responding to SMS queries. Step-by-step guidelines for implementing an SMS service and comparisons of SMS reference products are well-documented elsewhere and will not be covered here. This article focuses on user experience and how librarians can embrace a "mobile reference mindset" to meet users at their point-of-need.

Drawing on the author's experiences as Text Reference Coordinator at SUNY Purchase College Library and the experiences of other public and academic libraries, this article will present best practices for answering texts and adapting reference interview techniques to a mobile environment. Understanding SMS reference as a hybrid between telephone, IM, and in-person reference can help librarians better serve patrons and improve the quality of SMS reference services.

BACKGROUND

SMS or Text Reference is a fast-growing service that uses short message service technology to allow patrons to send librarians questions via cellphones in 140 to 160 characters. Curtin University in Australia and Southeastern Louisiana University were among the first academic libraries to offer SMS reference in 2004 and 2005, respectively (Brannon, 2010). Commercial services like ChaCha in the United States and Any Question Answered (AQA) in the United Kingdom emerged in 2006 and 2004, offering immediate, round-the-clock answers to users' questions via SMS (Ashling, 2006; Tynan 2011). These commercial services both worried and inspired library professionals who watched cellphone ownership and texting rise in popularity throughout the 2000s and 2010s.

SMS reference has evolved from experiments where early adopters answered text messages on communal cellphones passed from librarian to librarian into full-blown web-based services where librarians respond to text messages on a computer via SMS-to-IM software interfaces. In 2005, Southeastern Loui-

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