

Chapter 19

E-Reference in Public Libraries: Phoenix Public Library Case Study, Our Website is Your 24/7 Reference Librarian

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ABSTRACT

This case study offers insight into how Phoenix Public Library attempts to meet customer's needs for 24/7 access to Library information and services. Strategies to achieve quality results, successful and failed initiatives, and lessons learned are presented.

INTRODUCTION

The concept of e-reference was born in the early 1990s, with the advent of fledgling subscription databases in CD-ROM format, which contained many periodical indexes and only a small number of full text articles. These resources supplemented and expanded individual libraries periodical holdings, held the potential of solving storage issues, and augmented reference staff search capability with their multiple search engines.

Today, e-reference products comprise many tens of thousands of full-text periodical titles going back multiple decades; entire libraries of reference and research materials in a single database, with some having a limited subject focus and others covering a spectrum of disciplines; downloadable e-books, e-audio, and e-video; and integrated learning tools for self-paced customer use. In recent years, many producers have also embellished their products with hyperlinks to relevant Web-based resources, both subscription-based and free, social networking and blogging capabilities, and/or daily updates that help keep the content as current as possible.

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Unlike academic libraries, which make their selection of e-reference products based on clearly defined campus curricula needs, public libraries face a unique set of challenges when building and maintaining their selected e-reference library from the entire vendor spectrum. They must not only select the products that best fits the needs of the communities they serve, but also integrate them as a core function of their websites, make them easy to find, and market them to the customer.

The following is a case study of the Phoenix Public Library's e-reference experience.

BACKGROUND

To put Phoenix Public Library in to context for this case study, it is a system of 16 branches¹ and a large central library serving a population of 1.5 plus million in a metro area of 4.5 million. The metro area also includes 11 independent (some multi-branch) systems and a county library system serving the unincorporated parts of the county. In fiscal year 2009/10, the library housed 1,736,000 items; offered 78 subscription databases; circulated 14,447,111 items; counted 230,822 active customers (card used in the last year); had 850,940 customer-initiated public Internet PC sessions; provided 4,111 programs attended by 102,242 customers; and staff taught regular basic computer classes in five library training classrooms. They did this with a total staff of 330 FTE of which 22 percent were librarians.

The Phoenix Public Library approached the development of its e-reference library using a staff-developed ten step methodology. The process has been refined over the last 15 years, but the basic concepts have not changed.

- Know your community's needs. Facts and figures are better than assumptions and anecdotes.
- Develop an ideal collection development plan; review it annually.

- Review the marketplace which will take the plan from ideal to "what is available now."
- Arrange for both staff and public testing of the resources. Testing must also be done by the IT staff whose input will help eliminate any technical implementation pitfalls.
- Evaluate for content quality, ease of use (intuitive use without training to access the most relevant information), and technical/maintenance issues.
- Select resources based on a set of defined criteria. Criteria will evolve over time.
- Implement, bring the resource(s) live on the library website.
- Market every product to both the public and staff.
- Continually evaluate both from the usage/cost per search perspective and public satisfaction. This equals your return on investment (ROI).
- Repeat the process continually.

Another key component of the Phoenix Public Library's corporate philosophy is the maintenance of the best possible relationship with library vendors. In practical terms, this translates into being an active partner with the vendors. As an example, the Deputy Director for Technical Services has served on both the Advisory Boards of ProQuest and EBSCO products for the past ten years. The Collection Development staff has also served on a number of publisher boards (e.g., Emerald Press, Sage Publications, and Rosen Press). This ensures that the vendors and producers of content understand the needs of our customers and that their searching interface meets the rigorous standards that our customers have come to expect. By serving on these boards, staff brings the experience and expertise of Phoenix professional staff directly into the product development and search engine refinement processes.

Like most public library websites in the mid 1990s, ours was rudimentary. Staff was essential

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