

Who? What? Where? Ask?Away Illinois librarians can be heroes to their users

Access to many subject experts, one great way to offer virtual reference service

SITUATION The Internet can be difficult to navigate, and good information can be hard to find. Sometimes reliable information is available only from a library resource. Libraries are implementing Internet help desks in response to the ubiquity of online resources and Internet access. Many librarians are providing virtual reference services in addition to telephone, fax or in-person requests for information.

SOLUTION Ask?Away is an online reference service developed by the Illinois State Library, a division of the office of Secretary of State and State Librarian Jesse White. Based on OCLC's QuestionPoint reference management service, it provides Illinois libraries with the tools they need to interact with their users in multiple ways, using both chat and e-mail. This statewide, multitype partnership includes public, school, medical, college and university librarians working together to offer the broadest possible Internet help service, including professional research expertise for help accessing nearly anything on the Web or in print.

Ask?Away is part of the 24/7 Reference Cooperative of hundreds of librarians around the world who work together to provide 24/7 reference service. Local Illinois librarians contribute time to the consortium—35 “global coverage” hours per week—and residents benefit from the expanded service. Librarians who staff the service find it rewarding to help users globally and use the experience to strengthen their own reference skills.

Ask?Away is easy to use and designed so that anyone can use it. Using a chat/instant messaging format, a user 1) displays the Ask?Away Web site; 2) types in a question and; 3) a librarian responds. The librarian may ask additional questions to determine the specific information requested. Users access Ask?Away directly through the Web site or by finding the Ask?Away button from their local library Web sites. Answers are reliable, well-researched and available from the library or from a library's Web page.

Librarians can cobrowse Web pages and databases with the user and help find useful information. Questions

AT A GLANCE

www.askawayillinois.info

- Free professional service to Illinois residents based on OCLC's QuestionPoint reference management service
- Provides local and global 24/7 Reference Cooperative coverage hours
- Number of participating libraries: 125 public, 39 school, 37 academic, 14 special and five regional library systems

“This product has revolutionized reference services.”

can be referred to local and national experts for further follow-up when appropriate. Users receive transcripts of chat sessions through e-mail to refer to later. Ask?Away provides a way for residents to use the expertise and resources available at their library when they can't be there in person.

RESULT Statewide cooperative ventures like Ask?Away are more vital than ever. Libraries still need to compete with the growing virtual environment, and online reference services provide a needed solution. QuestionPoint has allowed the expansion of off-site, virtual reference services to 24/7/365 for library users in Illinois. This product adapts to all types of libraries to meet and expand their reference services.

“A library should not be limited to the quality or availability of reference services (a core library service), based by the locality or economic base of the library. QuestionPoint 24/7 is a great equalizer of reference services for patrons.” says Debbie Aggert, Illinois State Library Virtual Reference Coordinator. “This product has revolutionized reference services much like the establishment of interlibrary loan.”

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