



Virtual Reference

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Welcome! My name is Julie Strange and I am the Operations Supervisor for Maryland AskUsNow!, the Maryland state-wide virtual reference service. Today I'm going to speak to you about Virtual Reference. What it is, how we got here, and where we're going.

What is Virtual Reference?

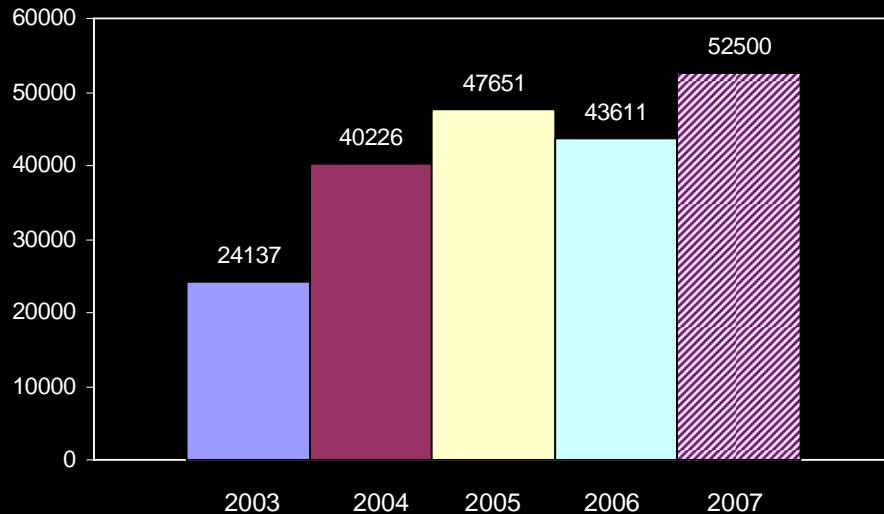
- Another access point for the library
 - A way to serve customers without them coming into the physical library
- Digital Reference
 - Chat, IM, Email, Texting, VoIP, etc

Maryland AskUsNow!

- Chat reference service born 2003
- one of only 20 [state-sponsored services](#)
- 33 partner libraries - 19 public, 11 academic, 3 special
- Staffed by over 300 librarians in Maryland for 320 hours each week
- Participant in OCLC's QuestionPoint 24/7 Reference international cooperative

We're growing!

Total Number of Questions Submitted per Year



This graph shows the total number of questions submitted to Maryland AskUsNow! per year. As you can see we've been steadily growing. There are two things on this graph I'd like to bring your attention to. You'll notice a slight dip you see in 2006 is due to a software shift that occurred in March of that year. It was a rough transition but we've pulled out of it. The 2007 portion of this graph is my projection for this year. It may be a low estimate because I did not take into consideration the assumed increased traffic we'll get from the radio spots we're running this year.

How we got started

- Baltimore County Public Library idea for central telephone reference in 2001
- The first DLDS grant proposal was turned down (thank goodness!)
- Planning started 2002, launched 2003

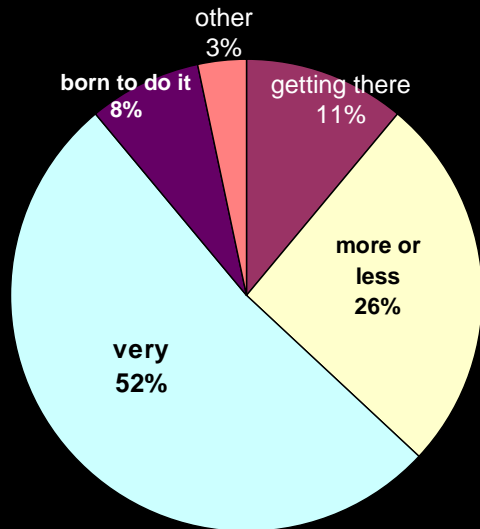
The idea for AskUsNow! actually blossomed out of an idea within Baltimore County Public Library for a central telephone reference service. The Maryland State Department of Education's Division of Library Development and Services denied the grant proposal for BCPL's VRS because it had the foresight to realize that a statewide project would be more meaningful. State-wide planning started in 2001 and 9 months later out popped an adorable baby reference service on March 17th 2003.

Profile of the average AUN provider

- has been providing AskUsNow! for 1-2 years
- volunteered to provide AskUsNow!
- is attached at the hip to email and the internet
- uses databases daily, the internet for entertainment such as movies and music weekly
- was comfortable at providing virtual reference after 1-5 sessions and consider themselves “proficient” at it

I could talk about VR all day. All week, if you let me. How wonderful it is, how it has the potential to change the world. But I wanted to give you the view's of as many people as possible. I created a free survey on SurveyMonkey.com and sent it out to our 300 providing librarians around the state. We had a 33.3% response rate, which I'm very proud of.

Comfortable doing Virtual Reference?



- No one said they were uncomfortable providing virtual reference!
- 82% of those surveyed said they were proficient at virtual reference!

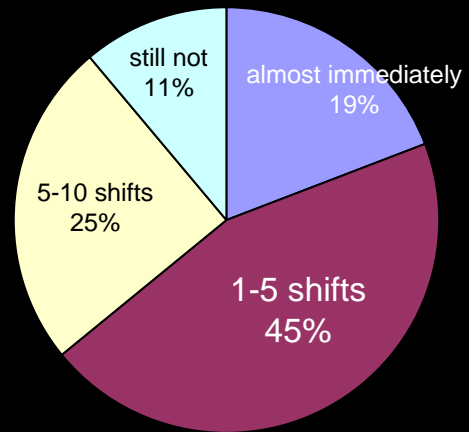
* from most recent survey data, 4/17/07

78% of those who responded to this survey said they were “very” to “more or less” comfortable providing Virtual Reference! Those who are “getting there” were those who have not been providing for that long yet, or have not had the opportunity to have many sessions yet. The “other” folks were those who said they could use some refreshing on certain software features.

How long did it take to be proficient?

Those who said “still not”

- are still very new
- only provide a few times a month
- want a review on certain features



* from most recent survey data, 4/17/07

The average for most of our providers is “immediately” to “1-5” shifts.

Why you should care about VRS

Ease of access is everything
if you aren't the easy option for people,
they will find something that is.

You should care about virtual reference because if you are not where people are when they need help, they will find someone who is. Why go out of your way to do something when there is a "good enough" right in front of you?

QUIZ!

physically go somewhere
call someone and ask
get help online

Quick Quiz. Here's the scenario: a student is finishing up a paper that is due tomorrow and they realize they have a gap in their research. They need something NOW. They have 3 options to getting the information they need. They can a) find their keys, leave their apartment or dorm, go to their car, realize they have no shoes on, go back to their apartment to get their shoes, and then drive somewhere that has the information (the library, for instance). They can b) pick up the phone (which is in the other room) to call someone and find out. Or they can c) open their browser and find the information online.

Right. C. They're already on the computer. The path of least resistance is to go online. If they can get "good enough" information from Google with little to no effort, they will. BUT if they could get BETTER information with the same little to no effort by chatting with a librarian, THEY WILL! (providing they know we're there for them).

What do our librarians think of VR?

- “Virtual Reference is exciting!”
- “A good tool in our toolbox of reference services”
- “very useful and convenient for today’s patrons”
- “a great way to reach out to our customers”
- “the next logical step in reference service”

These are actual quotes from the providers survey from our librarians. I like the last comment because it speaks to the fact that reference service is not a static thing – it is something that evolves with the needs of our customers. And customer’s needs are always evolving so if you haven’t evolved in a while – it’s time to take stock and reevaluate how you’re doing things.

What do our customers think of VR?

- “One of the great unknown resources in the library system.”
- “I love this!”
- “It really helps when I get stuck”
- “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”
- “YAY!!!! :o)”
- “I felt totally comfortable and enjoyed my experience!”
- “It saved me a trip to the library.”

Here are actual customer comments from the QuestionPoint surveys customers can fill out after their sessions.

The last comment speaks to the reason why virtual reference is important. It's another contact point for libraries and librarians. Why have a customer drop what they're doing to come to the library when they can pick up the phone – or chat with us online, if they're already on the computer! That's the point of virtual reference – to have the library be present wherever the customer is. If we're not where they are – there's a million other things that might be. Like Amazon.com or Google.

Remember – there are tons of organizations and people out there willing to take your customers away from you if you let them.

What might VR look like in the future?

- “more universally assessable”
- “it’ll be on your palm pilot, cell phone, everywhere!”
- “expanded coverage... everyone doing it”
- “audio (VoIP) and visual!”
- “unlimited!”
- Collaborative IM, homepage widgets, more embedded and integrated.

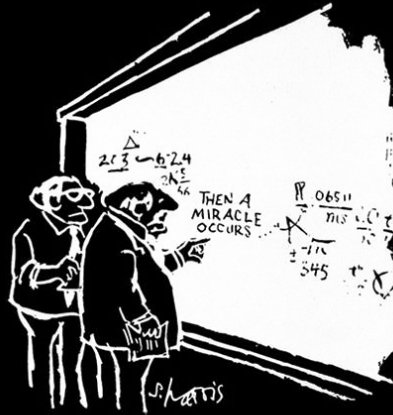
* based on librarian comments through providers survey

The last comment is actually mine, not from the provider survey.

I see Virtual Reference as being more embedded and integrated into the world of customers and libraries. I see widgets on homepages (personal or library) or websites (google or worldcat) where a customer can type in their name and question and immediately be connected to a librarian who can help them! This future is not too far away.

Want to get started?

- Maryland libraries can join AskUsNow!
- Talk to your librarians
- Talk to your customers
 - What will best serve them?
Chat? IM? Which kind?
Email? Texting?
Can you join a system or state service?
- Find stakeholders
- Talk to IT!!
- Just do it.



"I think you should be more explicit here in step two."

If you're a library in Maryland that isn't already a partner library, contact me. Even if you don't think you can provide staffing, I want to talk to you. (jstrange@askusnow.info).

If you're not part of Maryland and you want to start a VRS, have a talk with your librarians. Get some ideas – are they willing to do this? How do they want to do this? If you don't have any interest, drum some up. Get them on board.

Also talk to your customers – are they cool with an email service? Would they love to be able to text you? (Some libraries are doing it now – a customer text is sent to a librarian email and the librarian replies in an email that is sent to the customer as a text!) If you want to try IM- what software are your customers using? If all your customers (and potential customers) are using AIM – use AIM! If you have a broad range (which you probably do), look into Meebo, Trillian, or Gaim!

Make sure to talk to your tech people. Let them know what you're thinking. They may have awesome solutions or suggestions!

If your state has a state-wide VRS – see about joining them!

The important thing is to just do it. Make sure your customers have more options than face to face and telephone for when they need you. Go to them, don't make them come to you.

Thank you!

Julie Strange

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Presentation posted at

<http://askusnow.info/presentations>

<http://strangelibrarian.org/pres>



Please feel free to contact me with ANY questions you may have!