

Exploring collaborative reference

AskNow! Online answers Australia-wide

Australia's first nationwide reference service, *AskNow! online answers Australia-wide*, began operation on the morning of Monday 26 August.

AskNow! is a twelve-month pilot project of national, state and territory libraries in Australia and an initiative of the Council of Australian State Libraries' Reference Issues Working Group.

It is a collaborative reference service utilising chat software and staffed on a time-share basis, by librarians from the National Library of Australia, the State Library of Victoria, the State Library of New South Wales, the State Library of Queensland, the State Library of Tasmania, the State Library of South Australia, the State Library of Western Australia, the Northern Territory Library and Information Service

and the ACT Library and Information Service. It is available from Monday to Friday between 9:00am and 7:00pm eastern standard time.

AskNow! is being offered as an additional service integrated with existing on-site, e-mail, letter/fax and telephone reference services. Access is open to anyone, where-ever they are located. It is accessible from participating institutions' websites and at <http://www.asknow.gov.au>.

AskNow! uses 24/7 reference software provided by the Metropolitan Co-operative Library Service in the United States. It is hosted on their server and the look and feel of the service has been customised to suit our requirements. Key features of the live reference/chat service which distinguishes it from e-mail transactions are that the online transaction occurs in real time and provides the facility to 'push' web pages to the user and 'co-browse'. Users can be guided through their search, as inquirer and librarian view the same web pages. Help in searching library catalogues, the internet, and eventually online databases, becomes more useful and efficient. The technology can also have a valuable impact on information literacy development and its role in lifelong learning.

We were not sure what the demand would be, what questions would be asked or who would be asking them. We have been delighted at the response to the new service. In its first two weeks of operation *AskNow!* received 300 questions from all over Australia ranging from quite simple, able to be answered quickly through desktop access to resources, to more complex requests for information which have been referred

to the appropriate library's e-mail reference service. The average waiting time is only one minute. Enquiries are treated confidentially and the service ensures the client's right to privacy.

An exit survey has been developed which, apart from monitoring satisfaction with the service, provides demographic data such as age range, postcode and country, if not Australia. Feedback from users has been very positive with comments such as 'excellent service' 'marvellous idea and very helpful' and 'I had not previously known of the service and I am impressed'. Particularly amusing was one response 'Don't think librarians can be put into a category these days. I found the person I spoke with courteous and helpful' which makes you wonder what his or her past experience with librarians has been!

The *AskNow!* icons have been coded so that the organisers can track which websites requests are coming from. It is quite obvious from reading the transcripts that users think that if they click on the *AskNow!* icon in the State Library of New South Wales that a librarian based in New South Wales will answer their question. They will ask a question like 'Do you hold copies of old Australian newspapers?' which indicates a lack of awareness of the collaborative flavour of the service. This knowledge and awareness will come with further familiarity with the service and broader marketing and promotion.

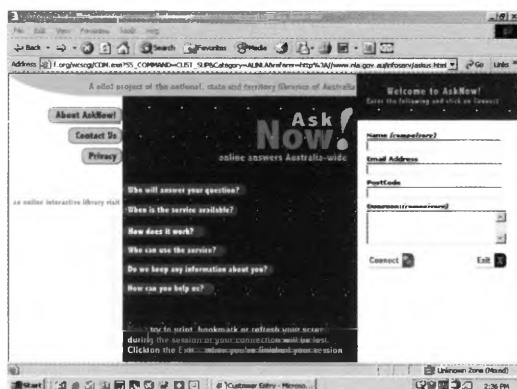
The ability to read and review the transcripts of each session provides the opportunity to share information and raise awareness of each library's collections and services, to enhance staff development and knowledge and to maintain quality control.

The State Library of New South Wales will conduct a formal evaluation of *AskNow!* midway through the pilot and again at the end of the twelve months. It will include an assessment of service sustainability; issues of standards and best practice; assessment of staffing levels, skills and training; participant and end-user feedback; analysis of service use and potential partnerships. Opportunities for other libraries to join the service will be considered after the mid-term evaluation.

The development of *AskNow!* has been a successful exercise in collaboration. Participating libraries are excited about providing the first nation-wide collaborative chat reference service. Staff have adapted well to this new service environment and are effectively crossing borders in identifying and delivering relevant information. It is new territory for all of us and adds a new dimension to the Australian library scene.

For further information on *AskNow!* contact Fran Wilson at the National Library of Australia on 02 6262 1606 or fwilson@nla.gov.au.

Fran Wilson, project manager AskNow!



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