



Evidence Summary

Undergraduate and Postgraduate Students in a North American University are Choosing to use Chat Reference Services for all Kinds of Reasons

A review of:

Ward, David. "Why Users Choose Chat: A Survey of Behavior and Motivations." Internet Reference Services Quarterly 10.1 (2005): 29-46.

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Abstract

Objective – To investigate reasons why undergraduate and postgraduate students choose to use chat reference services and their satisfaction with the experience.

Design – User survey.

Setting – Large academic library in the United States.

Subjects – A total of 341 library users took part in the survey. Of these, 79 were graduate students, 215 undergraduates, 21 staff, 5 alumni and 21 members of the public.

Method – A user survey form was posted on the library website for a period of one month (March 2003). Users of the chat reference service received an automatic

closing message asking them to complete the survey. Responses were fed into a database to be analysed by the research staff. Additional data was also gathered about the behaviour of *all* users of the chat service during that period – both responders and non-responders.

Main results – The most popular reason for choosing to use a chat service was the desire for a speedy response, followed by 'distance from the library'. Responders chose to use chat to ask a range of different kinds of questions. Nearly half (45%) were looking for a specific resource and 23% were seeking help at the beginning of their research. There were notable differences between undergraduate and graduate students. Twice as many undergraduates as graduates used the service to help them get started on their research. Graduates were three times

as likely as undergraduates to be using the service to address technical problems they were having with the website. Overall satisfaction with the service was extremely high, with 77.5% rating it 5 out of 5 and 94.5% giving it 4 or 5 out of 5.

Conclusion – Chat reference services are popular with users primarily because they are quick and convenient. However, users expect that these services will be able to deal with all types of questions, including help with research. This challenges an assumption by library staff that the medium is only suitable for short factual enquiries and general questions about library services. It is suggested that a detailed analysis of the chat transcripts from this period could provide a valuable addendum to the survey results.

Commentary

Librarians carrying out user surveys sometimes make the mistake of trying to collect too much information. In this study the researchers have chosen to focus on 'three major research questions' (although question 2 appears to incorporate two research questions):

1. **What** are patrons working on before they go to chat?
2. **Why** do they choose chat...as a method of getting help, and **what kinds** of questions do they think chat is best suited for?
3. **How well** do they think chat works for answering their questions? (30).

The author designed the online survey to be short and simple in order to encourage busy online users to complete it. This paid off with a respectable 54.9% response rate. The survey questions are provided as an appendix. There are seven questions, one of which is open-ended and one requires a

yes/no response. The other questions invite participants to choose from a list of options (e.g. types of questions posed to chat services) and we are told that these have been extracted from an analysis of previous chat transcripts.

The pilot survey was conducted during March 2003 and during the study period 628 chats were conducted (345 responded to the survey). There is no reason to believe that these would not be representative of the general population of users of the chat service although it would have been useful to know at what times of day and days of the week the survey was active, as this could have been influential. Similarly, the timing of the survey (in the context of the academic year) needs to be taken into account when considering implications of the results.

This research is timely since the use of instant messaging is becoming increasingly popular and more and more libraries are either using the technology to deliver services or are planning to do so. It would have been useful to know how many reference enquiries the library received in total during the study period, to see how many patrons did not choose to use chat, but this was clearly outside of the scope of the study. It would have been helpful to test the survey responses against the chat transcript data and the author does point this out as an area for further study. From this report, the main message for those who are reviewing their chat reference services or setting up from scratch is to avoid pre-defining how the service will be used. For many students this technology is second nature (far more so than for the majority of librarians) – they themselves will define the use and future development of the service.