Good, Fast, and Cheap:
The Pioneering Reference Chat Service at the University of North Texas

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Considerations When Establishing an Online Desk

- What level of technology is appropriate for your service?
- How much do you want to spend on the service?
- Who will staff the online desk?
- Where will the online desk be staffed?
- How will the staff be trained?
Considerations When Establishing an Online Desk

- What will be the hours of operation?
- Who are you targeting to use this service?
- How will patrons access your service?
- What level of assistance and how long do you assist a patron?
- How will you market the service?
Fourth largest university in Texas with over 30,000 students

Aggressively providing access to computer and database resources

Each year expanding offsite and distance course offerings
Background

- Began our e-mail reference service in 1998
- Began our chat service on May 17, 1999
- The UNT Online Reference Help Desk appears to be the second oldest online library reference desk
Goals

- To answer questions and assist patrons in a synchronous online environment
- To reach the largest number of UNT patrons
Designing the Service

- Chose to use the simplest technology
  - The more basic the technology the less that could go wrong with it
- Provide a service that would not require patrons to purchase or download any additional equipment to access
- Use technology that patrons were using already
- Did not want to spend a lot of money
Software

ConferenceRoom Professional Edition from WebMaster

- Can be accessed by up to 1000 concurrent users
- Web server is designed to serve out the java client
- Able to install and customize in-house
- Works with NT/Windows2000
- Cost $495.00
ConferenceRoom
Professional Edition

- Allows for private interviews with patrons
- Channel Operator Panel provides an easy way to manage room and users
- Can post dynamic URL links
Additional Equipment

- Speakers and Sound card
  - Needed to hear a patron enter the Online Reference Help Desk
  - Allows staff members to utilize their time constructively
Staffing

- Librarians, full-time staff members, and graduate assistants
- Three separate locations: Willis Library, Science and Technology Library, UNT Dallas Library
- Use a formal weekly desk schedule
Location of Online Desk and Staff

- A link can be found on numerous library web pages including the Libraries’ home page.
- Librarians staff the desk from their office but it can be staffed from anywhere.
- Found it did not work to staff the Online Desk from our physical reference desk.
Training

- Instructions should be in writing
- Does have a learning curve
- Skills are transferable
- On going process
Hours of Operation

- Based upon needs of patrons and staff availability
- Original hours were 2:00 pm to 4:00 pm Mondays through Fridays
- Expanded to 10:00 am to 8:00 pm, Mon. –Thurs, Fri. 10:00 am to 5:00 pm
Target Users

UNT Community - students, faculty, and staff
- Distance education students
- Students taking classes using WebCT software
- Students in computer labs and dorm rooms
- Commuting students
Assisting Patrons

- Works well for questions that can be answered quickly
- Works well for helping patrons find information on the web or in an electronic format
- Can “walk” patrons through searching a database
- Print resources do not translate well in this environment
Level of Service

- Is between what you can do for patrons over the telephone and what you can do in person
- Some patrons may want you to do their research for them
- Important to try to teach users how you found the information
Marketing

- It is an ongoing process
- Try different ways to let people know about your service
  - E-mail
  - Posters
  - Articles
  - Web pages
  - Library instruction sessions
Statistics

- From May 17, 1999 to April 26, 2002
  - 537 questions answered
- March 2001 vs. 2002
  - 11 vs. 31
- April 2001 vs. 2002
  - 18 vs. 51
- Usage fluctuates depending on the time of the semester
Ask a Librarian:
Reference Assistance at the UNT Libraries

- Reference Desks
  brief overview

- E-Mail Reference
  brief overview
  General Reference Questions
  Government Information Questions

- Reference by Phone
  brief overview

- Reference by Appointment
  brief overview

- Online Reference Help Desk
  brief overview

ONLINE REFERENCE HELP DESK

Ask a librarian for help in real time, using chat room technology.

The service is now available Monday through Thursday from 10:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. and Friday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., Central Time.
Get help from a librarian at our Online Reference Desk.

The Online Reference Help Desk is open Monday through Thursday from 10:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M. and Friday from 10:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. Central Time.

For after hours assistance visit the Ask a Librarian web page.
Basic Instructions:
1. Type your **name** (required) and **email address** (optional) in the pop-up window.
2. Click on the **Connect** button.
3. Press **Return** or **Enter** after typing your comment/question to post your comment/question.
4. If the pop-up window disappears, check the task bar at the bottom of your computer screen.
5. Click on the **Page a Librarian** button to summon a librarian.
6. To exit, type **/quit**

ConferenceRoomChat 1.9.115 Client is running in separate window
Chat Pop-up Window

Please enter your nickname (limit to nine characters): Guest
Your email (optional): Java User

Connect
@Librarian_Beth says, “Hi Debbie! Do you need some help?”
You said, “Yes, I want to know how to renew my library books online.”
@Librarian_Beth says, “Let me look that up for you. Do you have time to wait?”
You said, “Yes, I can wait.”
@Librarian_Beth says, “Be right back.”
@Librarian_Beth says, “To renew your books go to this web page:
https://www.library.unt.edu/eforms/circ/renewal.htm
Questions?