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Original Citation

Walsh, Andrew and Barrett, Lynn (2009) Text a Librarian @ Huddersfield. CILIP Update. pp. 44-45. ISSN 1476-7171
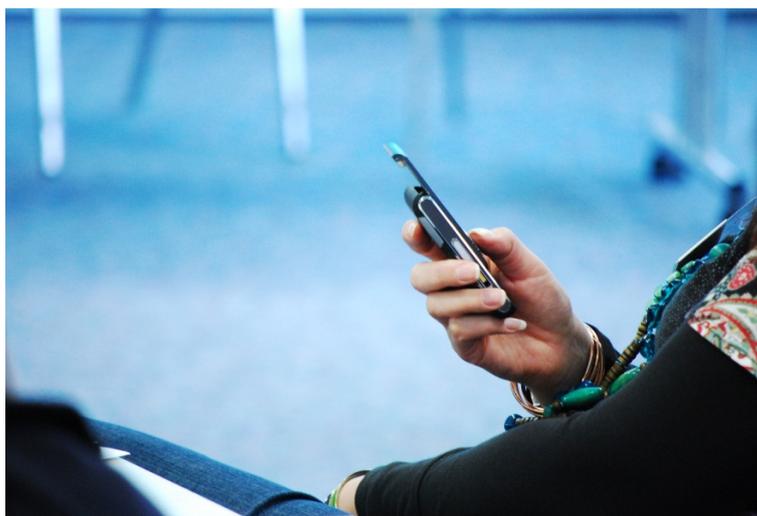
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Text a librarian @ Huddersfield

Someone using our "text a librarian" service at a recent training day. Photo by Dave Pattern.

At the University of Huddersfield, we pride ourselves on providing a high level of customer service in the Library and were the first University service nationally to gain the Cabinet Office's new Customer Service Excellence (CSE) award in May 2008, building on our success with the Charter Mark award that preceded it. As such we like to make it as easy as possible for our staff and students to contact us and have their questions answered without unnecessary delay.

We already had a wide range of ways people could contact the library, from physical desks on the main entrance floor and subject floors of the library; 'phone numbers and email addresses for all our services, including subject teams; and a virtual enquiry service via QuestionPoint. Computing and Library Services at Huddersfield have a history of innovation and early adoption of technologies, also introducing many Web 2.0 applications. We were also one of the earliest UK adopters of chat based enquiry services through the QuestionPoint platform and recently started using Twitter on our webpages (http://twitter.com/hudlib) as yet another way of people communicating with us.

Research shows that over 9 out of 10 adults own a mobile 'phone in the UK and in 2007 there were 116.5 'phones per 100 people, with the trend continuing upwards. Out of those mobile 'phone owners, around 99% of them make calls and 95% send text messages (figures from Mintel, October 2007). With these statistics in mind, we felt we should be exploiting this technology within the service, as it seems almost impossible to separate the modern student and their mobile, in-house surveys indicating that they are more likely to respond to 'phone messages than email. Although we discourage people within the library from disturbing others with their mobile 'phone and direct them to particular areas to make 'phone calls, text messaging with the 'phone on silent is perfectly acceptable within the building.

We've experimented with the use of mobiles in various ways over the past year, especially using text messaging (SMS) functionality). One obvious avenue to investigate was in the provision of an enquiry service, where we already have a history of innovation and early adoption plus a CSE-led desire to always look at continuous improvement in our services to our users. Text messaging seemed the ideal way to reach more of our users using a technology with which they are comfortable and which they use every day. It also has the benefit of reaching our part

time and distance learning students, who may rarely or never make it onto campus, as well as our on-campus, traditional full time students. Although it has been introduced elsewhere, (see Sonia Herman's case study), it seems little used within the UK, despite the prevalence of text messaging amongst our population.

There are several options for providing such a service, including just passing a mobile 'phone around, using existing email functionality or developing your own in-house web based solution. We could only find two current examples in the UK and Ireland – one of which receives and answers messages through their Outlook email system (Stockport libraries) and one of which uses a "real" physical mobile (National University of Ireland, Maynooth).

We considered using a physical mobile, or the email functionality built into our unified messaging system (which would work through our Outlook email), but wanted the ability to build on this text messaging service to develop other SMS services, so looked instead at JANET txt (http://www.pageone.co.uk/janettxt/) as a web based service developed specifically for the education community. However, luckily for us in the library, our telephone services department had just started to trial a service from MeerCat Communications (http://www.meercom.co.uk/) which offered similar functionality, so we gladly took advantage of this existing trial to test text messaging through the library.

They provided us with a short code 'phone number (81025) and a keyword that would direct text messages into an online portal. Text messages are viewed and answered through this portal, so can be accessed from anywhere with Internet connection. There is also the ability to set up a default, automatically sent response which gave us the opportunity to send an instant short message thanking them for their question. Templates can be set up within the portal to offer default answers to questions, making it quick and easy to answer many of the common questions. We experimented initially with the text portal to make sure we were happy with the operation and to decide how we would be most comfortable using it. After a fairly short period of testing, we decided to introduce a text service alongside our other enquiry services as soon as was practical and to brand it "text a librarian" to complement the "ask a librarian" web based email service and the physical "ask a librarian" desk on the entrance floor of the library.

Our main concern was that the 'instant' nature of text messaging would lead users to expect a quick reply, so we felt the ideal responsibility for responding to texts should lie with the staff on the physical "ask a librarian" desk. As a minimum, staff are asked to check the text portal when they arrive on the "ask a librarian" desk, meaning that from 08:45 to 20:00 the text messages should be checked at least once every 2 hours and except in the very busiest periods, answered within 2 hours of being sent.

The short limit (160 characters) on the length of text messages was also a concern. We felt that the ability to provide "templates" within the text portal would save a significant amount of effort for librarians answering SMS questions, who might otherwise waste time trying to compose concise answers that don't fall foul of the 160 character limit. This option has always been used effectively within our virtual enquiry service and is an excellent time-saving device. We also made sure that promotion for the service stressed the short nature of the medium, so that users asked quick and easy questions by text message and used other, more appropriate media for more involved enquiries. We also made sure the templates included plenty of options for redirecting users to get in touch with us in other ways if we felt the questions could not be satisfactorily answered in a quick text message.

Users have to include a 'keyword' as the first word of their text message and we decided the easy to remember LIBRARY would be the obvious option. Users of this service, therefore, just need to text LIBRARY followed by their message to 81025 for us to see their question in the web-based portal.

With the range of potential users of the service (staff, students, old and young) it was decided to avoid completely the use of "text speak" and associated abbreviations and this was stressed to all library staff likely to answer questions through the text messaging service. Although some of our staff and many of our users may be comfortable using such a dialect, we could not be sure it would be understood by, or acceptable to, our all users, so all answers are sent out in full, avoiding text speak completely.

Summary of key decisions:

- Users text the keyword LIBRARY plus their message to 81025
- Questions answered from the physical enquiry desk and checked regularly
- Plenty of "templates" provided
- Promoted for short and easy questions only
- Branded to complement existing "Ask a Librarian" services
- Avoid "text speak" in our answers

Once we had the service ready to operate, it was quick and easy to train all our "Ask a Librarian" desk staff in the operating guidelines for the text portal. One mass training session gave our librarians the opportunity to practise sending and receiving questions from the portal and a small number of one to one sessions "mopped up" any missing staff. For some of the staff, using the portal was the first time they had sent a text message, but all found the system easy to use.
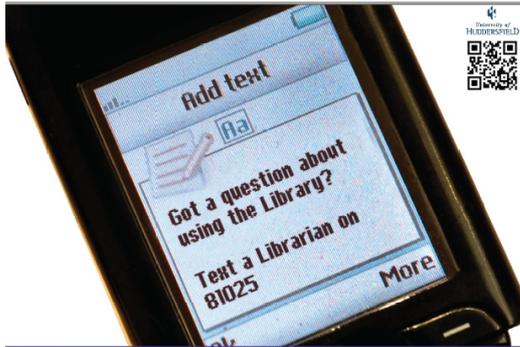
The service hasn't been up and running for long, so our future plans will involve us contacting a selection of users (via text message of course!) to ask for feedback and look at future improvements, in line with our desire for continued excellence in the service we offer our users.

We also see Text a Librarian as being only the first mainstream mobile 'phone service we offer our users through the text portal. Our intention is to offer a series of tips via text messages in the Autumn term (2009-2010) to complement our existing face to face and online induction materials (http://www.hud.ac.uk/cls/thebasics). We will rent an alternative keyword (rather than risk confusion amongst those answering the questions by using LIBRARY) and invite people to sign up to a series of tips and help in September and October 2009. Using this alternative keyword, we will be able to send out mass texts to all these subscribers offering tips such as how to renew books, how to add credit to printing and photocopying accounts, and reminders about many other services offered by the library.

References:

Herman, S. (2007) *SMS reference: keeping up with your clients*. The electronic library, 25(4), pp. 401-408

Mintel, October 2007 *Mobile phones and network providers*

Sample poster…