

## Calling Yesterday, Texting Today: Starting a Text a Librarian Reference Service

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Current research references the increase of mobile devices amongst college students. Students use their mobile devices as their calendars, phones, cameras, etc. According to the Pew Research Center's Internet & American Life Project 2010<sup>1</sup>, 96% of undergraduates have a cell phone. The report also states, "Text messaging has become the primary way that teens reach their friends, surpassing face-to-face contact, email, instant messaging and voice calling as the go-to daily communication tool for this age group." If the Libraries want to meet our users where they are, text messaging seems like an obvious choice.

The UC San Diego Libraries were aware of the changing environment, but wary of adding a new service when we have less staff and resources available. After doing an environmental scan, we decided that using an outside vendor and system compatible with our existing email service made more sense than purchasing a phone for reference providers to pass around. We decided to launch a pilot of a Text a Librarian via QuestionPoint reference service from August 2010 to June 2011.

Collaboration was the key to making this project sustainable. We created a team of 20+ librarians and library staff to help monitor and answer the text questions. We noted that many articles on text reference mentioned the higher rate of directional questions. We branched out beyond staff in public services. Since there was a combination of staff on the listserv, the odd that someone would know the answer was higher! In addition, we're a multi-building library system, and at the time of the pilot we had 9 Libraries in 6 physical buildings. It helped to have staff from a variety of locations to help answer location specific questions.

To answer questions in a timely manner, we used a notification feature through QuestionPoint that allows us to send an email alert that a text was received to our email listserv of reference providers. Whoever sees it first claims the question, and lets the listserv know that they will respond to the text. Using a team of people and an email notification system spread the workload around so one person or unit wasn't overwhelmed.

Another practical consideration was the service model. We decided to commit to answering texts within 15 minutes, Monday through Friday, between 10 am and 4 pm. An evaluation of the service shows we answered the questions in less than 15 minutes 92% of the time during our service hours. We did get some questions over the night and weekends. It seems the users were satisfied with a response the next day or following Monday.

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<sup>1</sup> Lenhart, A., & Ling, R., Campbell, S., Purcell, K. (2010). Teens and mobile phones. Washington, DC: Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP-Teens-and-Mobile-2010-with-topline.pdf>.