

# So What Do They Ask? Analyzing Content of Digital Reference Transactions

Kymerly Goodson, Decision Support Analyst (Library, University of California at San Diego)

## INTRODUCTION

- 1,758 questions asked by campus affiliates in Winter 2011 via UCSD Library's digital reference services were reviewed to determine the topic or content of each inquiry.

### GOALS:

- Determine the most frequent topics of user inquiry via chat, text, and email reference services.
- Determine number of non-library questions asked.

*Is the library open on Veteran's Day?*



## PROJECT SCOPE

- Included chat, text, & email questions received via QuestionPoint, January through March 2011.
- Focused on content of questions asked, excluding other assessment elements like volume, response time, accuracy, user satisfaction or demographics, timing of questions across day/week/year, etc.

*How can I access library databases from off-campus?*



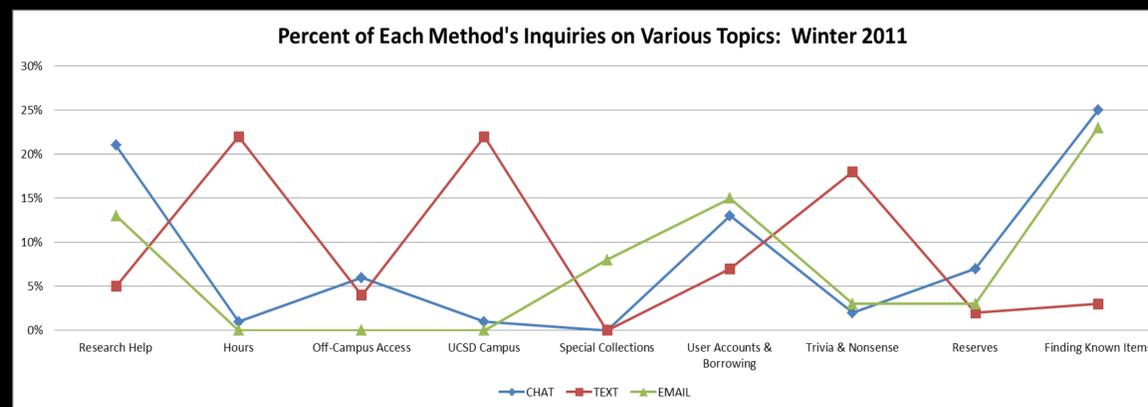
## SELECTED RECOMMENDATIONS

- Expand alumni privileges web page, stating that online journal/database access isn't afforded.
- Add detail (definition, cost, eligibility, turnaround time, etc.) to ILL & requesting book/article web pages for frequent referrals there.
- Give accurate, discoverable information online for visiting researcher use of Special Collections.
- Increase awareness of mobile website as an easy way to find hours, locations, and the like.
- Ensure that hours, locations, study spaces, & other basic information is easy to find on mobile & traditional websites.
- Consider staffing text service with non-librarians because of typical simplicity of those questions.
- Alert users to a variety of general purpose databases to reduce reliance on a single database like JStor.

## TOP 5 QUESTION CATEGORIES FOR EACH INQUIRY METHOD

CHAT	TEXT	EMAIL
Finding known items of interest: <b>25%</b>	Facility, technology, & equipment use, including library hours: <b>27%</b>	Finding known items of interest: <b>23%</b>
Research help: <b>21%</b>	UCSD campus (non-library): <b>22%</b>	Other library issues, including interlibrary loan: <b>17%</b>
User accounts/borrowing/privileges: <b>13%</b>	Trivia, incomplete, & nonsense: <b>18%</b>	User accounts/borrowing/privileges: <b>15%</b>
Online access issues, including off-campus access: <b>8%</b>	User accounts/borrowing/privileges: <b>7%</b>	Research help: <b>13%</b>
Reserves (electronic access & more): <b>7%</b>	Seeking contact information for person or department: <b>6%</b>	Facility, technology, & equipment use, including library hours: <b>12%</b>

## PERCENT OF EACH METHOD'S INQUIRIES ON VARIOUS TOPICS



## SELECTED HIGHLIGHTS OF EACH METHOD

	CHAT	TEXT	EMAIL
<b>Total Queries</b>	<b>1271</b>	<b>147</b>	<b>340</b>
<b>Staffing</b>	Shared service model with non-UCSD staffers responding to UCSD inquiries for assigned times; common patron surprise, confusion, and/or frustration when user reached non-UCSD staffer.	Responses only from UCSD librarians.	Responses only from UCSD librarians.
<b>Initial Inquiry</b>	Often began with brief, tickler-like query, developing to include extensive clarification & follow-up between user & staff. Users perhaps not tried chat before & unwilling to detail a query while unsure if inquiry/connection will be successful.	Typically straight-forward, quick response questions. Inquiry so brief that little time or commitment required on user's part.	Typically provided full detail of query in initial contact. Users likely confident in functionality, so comfortable detailing full query initially.
<b>Inquiry Complexity</b>	Typically lengthy & complex; very few simple questions.	Typically simple & straight-forward.	Variation in complexity; typically entailed a single, complete response from librarian.
<b>Follow-Up</b>	Often included multiple follow-up questions and extensive back & forth between librarian & user.	Never included follow-up questions.	Very rarely developed beyond initial inquiry; included very little back & forth between librarian & user.
<b>Disconnection</b>	Occasional disconnection before librarian joined, in middle of transaction once user frustration increased if librarian had trouble with query, or where user asked question & responder investigated but found user disconnected upon return.	Numerous queries in which user immediately disconnected; may have been testing service to see if it worked.	Very few incomplete initial queries.
<b>Referrals</b>	Fairly common referral from non-UCSD to UCSD responder; follow-up from UCSD librarian needed regularly when query was first handled by non-UCSD responder.	Few referrals necessary because of inquiry simplicity.	Inquiry typically accepted by or directed to appropriate UCSD staff upon initial receipt; only occasional further referral.

## SELECTED OBSERVATIONS

- Patrons self-select consistently & appropriately when choosing an inquiry method.
- These services rarely used to lodge complaints or ask about events, exhibits, or instruction.
- User confusion over lack of access to online journals directly from publisher/association website or via Google search.
- User problems searching for articles in OPAC & not understanding difference between OPAC & databases.
- Strong user preference for electronic access to known items of interest; little time or patience for ILL or library visit.
- Few patrons specifically seek contact information, though many receive referrals to another person or service.
- Heavy use of JStor for user's every research need; little understanding of how to choose databases for different topics.
- Some patrons submitted the same or similar questions to different responders on different days; perhaps unsatisfied with initial results or seeking further assistance or ideas.
- Sometimes several similar chat queries came from same class; perhaps instructors guided students to service or classmates alerted others to it.

*I need help starting a research project and finding primary sources.*



## USES FOR THE ANALYSIS

- Share findings with all library staff, so reserves, interlibrary loan, circulation, reference, instruction, and others benefit from the insight.
- Write or update canned responses or scripts to be used.
- Develop new or enhance existing web page & publication content to address common questions.
- Address frequent questions in staff training & user instruction.
- Adjust staffing types & levels based upon complexity of questions typically asked.
- Promote resources & services about which user's seem unaware.
- Work with consortial chat service partners to improve their ability to address UCSD-specific questions.