

## Reference services at McGill University: Reaching out!

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The first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is over, and the changes that it brought along are changing also our libraries, and our jobs as librarians. Constant change is now the only constant. In the year 2000, there was no such thing as Wikipedia, no iPods, no YouTube, no Facebook, no GPS and no wi-fi. A Blackberry was a fruit that I loved to eat and a Twitter was a lovely sound to enjoy during a walk in the park.

A decade ago, only a small percentage of people owned a cell phone, and I was not one of them. Today, using a smart phone, besides using it to communicate and managing your work schedule, one can access McGill University's online collection of 2 million e-books, 800 research databases as well as 50,000 e-journals with full text, all in the palm of your hand. But I will talk more about this later.

Academic libraries are facing changes at an astonishing pace, libraries today must expect and embrace change, and its accompanying challenges and opportunities, if it intends to keep pace with the university it serves. "It must transform itself from a static, reactive institution, into a proactive, dynamic learning organization".<sup>1</sup>

All these changes are also reflected in the new terms used for librarians. "The literature now refers to the embedded librarian, liaison librarian, blended librarian, outreach librarian, diffuse librarian, disembodied librarian, librarians without walls, and librarians on location, to cite just a few of the reworked appellations"<sup>2</sup> Our role as academic librarians is changing with increased emphasis on teaching information literacy skills, developing personalized information services, and digitizing resources.

Our libraries face high expectations from our users. They expect high quality information; resource material delivered to their chosen spaces, be it an office or their homes, via their preferred technology, like iPods, laptops or cell phones. Users want access anytime, anywhere – virtual, 24/7 and they want this information customized to their individual needs.

In order to serve our users, Reference Services are transformed, adapted and reinvented.

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<sup>1</sup> Strong, Gary E. Challenges Facing California's Academic Libraries. California Policy Options, UCLA School of Public Affairs, UC Los Angeles. P. 112

<sup>2</sup> Rudin, Phyllis. No Fixed Address: The Evolution of Outreach Library Services on University Campuses. The Reference Librarian 49, no. 1 (2008): p. 63

## CHAT SERVICES

Several years ago, it became common for students to use chat technology, either through their computers or their cell phones to communicate with each other online. So it was a natural step for the library, in order to reach more students, to take the library reference services into the virtual world. The Ask a librarian, virtual reference services, was launched in McGill on January 2006. The cyber-reference desk, managed by librarians from across the McGill network was intended for quick enquiries, and soon it was transformed into a very much liked feature.

Here are some examples of real questions received on the chat service.

Of course, the down part of this service is that we miss the personal touch and it requires both the library staff and the user to type out their questions and responses. This is time-consuming, and can cause anxiety at both sides; written messages provide no verbal cues and tone of voice is lost, so the writer must try to express tone in the words.

As you can see in the graphic, students are using the chat service and every year there is an increase in use. The main reasons students like this service are that they don't have to get up from their computers to get advice, they can reach us from anywhere they are located, anonymity (and this is a very important issue with students as they don't want to be perceived as "dumb" with a simple question) and speed of responses.

Total 2010 (January – May 30)

Questions (Total) Received = 981

Number of Chat Sessions Requested = 1910

Number(Total) of Chat Sessions Accepted = 1808

Number of Chat Sessions Accepted via Qwidget = 904

Total 2009

Questions (Total) Received = 1987

Number of Chat Sessions Requested = 2763

Number(Total) of Chat Sessions Accepted = 2595

Number of Chat Sessions Accepted via Qwidget = N/A

Total 2008

Questions (Total) Received = 1644

Number of Chat Sessions Requested = 2075

Number(Total) of Chat Sessions Accepted = 1868

Number of Chat Sessions Accepted via Qwidget = 9

### Total 2007

Questions (Total) Received = 1572

Number of Chat Sessions Requested = 1885

Number(Total) of Chat Sessions Accepted = 1700

Striving to reach our users, other venues are continuously explored, from second life, to facebook and twitter.

### **SECOND LIFE**

Second Life is an online multi-user virtual environment created by Linden Labs, Inc. where most content is created by the users, called “residents”. These residents are represented by an avatar that one customizes in terms of appearance and certain behavior, with a wide range of forms: from very realistic human-like forms to glowing orbs or animals. Residents can communicate via typed chat, both public and private. Avatars can teleport to different cities or lands.

McGill University was the second Canadian University that decided to acquire space on Cybrary City in November 2007. This was only an exploratory presence and was used as a way of showcasing McGill Library’s digital collections. In the space on Cybrary City, besides links to the catalogue, databases and several slides shows discussing the library and McGill University, a reference buzzer was set up to help visitors in contacting a member of the McGill Library Second Life reference group. In 2008, McGill’s libraries purchased her own Island for a pilot project to offer our reference services. The building on McGill University Library Island was an orientation center. The center offered a list of introductory courses given by the library, links to the catalogue and liaison librarians, the rules for borrowing from the library and other information such as slideshows of all library branches. The service was promoted – in real life – by librarians during orientation week and an announcement was made on the library web site. But despite this advertising, there were a total of about 10 reference interviews, and the main questions were about McGill University in general and Montreal. A second pilot reference project was done for the Winter session in January 2009 but all the visitors to the site were simply exploring, and were not coming for a specific information need.

Last year, at the library's main hall, the McGill Library's Rare Books and Special Collections organized an exhibition to celebrate the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's birth. The exhibition: Happy Birthday Mr President! featured selected pieces from its rare book collection. Those who could not make the trip to the library had a chance to do so virtually, by visiting the exhibition on Second Life.

Second Life wasn't successful as a reference tool. Some of the reasons for this are that it required the user to master a complex set of skills, there was not enough marketing among students, high technical computer specifications were necessary for the program to run it smoothly, and the staff time and training required was significant. In an article written by a student in the McGill Daily Newspaper, entitled , "My so-called Second Life", she states: "Given that I spend most of my time trying desperately to get my life in order, the thought of having to manage a second life makes me break out in a cold sweat".

So for the moment, McGill Libraries have decided not to continue with Second Life as a reference tool, but the experience was important in the sense of exploring virtual environments and their implications for libraries, as this is the way the technology is evolving.

## **FACEBOOK**

In order to make a friend on Facebook, a user sends a friend request to another user. If that user confirms that they are indeed friends then the users appear on each other's friend lists and they can send each other messages, write on each other's walls, or chat.

Proving that social networking is a huge cultural force, the New Oxford American Dictionary has chosen 'unfriend' as its 2009 Word of the Year. To unfriend means to remove someone from your friend list on a social network like Facebook or MySpace.

So another venue explored by the Schulich Science and Engineering Library at McGill was to use Facebook as a way to promote information literacy workshops. The library wanted to make friends with the students of a specific department in order to invite them for the workshop. The results: the students marked the library as unfriends and no one showed up. So the librarians decided to request the e-mail addresses of the students and send personal invitation for the literacy workshop. The attendance at these two sessions reached 200 at the first session and 30 at the second session. In conclusion, the students embrace the virtual social networking but they separate between their social and academic lives.

## **TWITTER AND MEEBO**

What friend is to Facebook, follower is to Twitter. In Facebook a friend is someone you must actively approve, unlike in Twitter, where anyone can read anyone's tweet. And McGill is tweeting. This is the 140-character answers to the micro-blogging service's question: "What's happening?"

And by Wikipedia definition, Meebo is an instant messaging program which supports multiple IM services, including Yahoo! Messenger, Windows Live Messenger, MySpaceIM, Facebook Chat, Jabber, Google Talk, etc.

Students are using Twitter and Meebo as a way to reach a reference librarian. From August 2009, when the library decided to open an account and start monitoring these sites, until May 2010, there were 107 reference questions. The librarian in charge of monitoring the chat service is also responsible for checking these two sites.

**MOBILE SITE - m.library.mcgill.ca (<http://m.library.mcgill.ca/>)**

The recent explosion of mobile technology, particularly the increasing prevalence of "smartphones" and the widespread adoption of cell phone technology in North America, presents a tremendous opportunity for libraries and librarians to connect with their users in meaningful new ways to foster information literacy and the development of research skills. Handheld mobile devices are now being used more as portable computers than simply as mobile phones. Therefore, the creation of specialized mobile web content designed to facilitate access to research tools and information resources through handheld mobile devices has become a priority.

The newest initiative by McGill libraries to reach our users was the launch, on June 1<sup>st</sup>, of a new Mobile Library website. Now, one can easily access library resources and services on the iPhone, iPod Touch, or any smart phone. No downloads are required and it should work on most phones with mobile browsers. Mobile library websites are different from traditional library websites because users have different needs and expectations in a mobile environment. The site is expected to change and grow rapidly.

Features on the mobile site include:

### **Catalogue search**

This searches the WorldCat catalogue. Users are provided with a basic keyword search option which searches the author, title, and subject fields. (Once useful feature is the ability to email records back to yourself or to others.)

### **Course reserves**

Users can look for their course reading materials using multiple search fields including: course number, instructor, course name, department, title, call number, and author. To access McGill licensed electronic resources, users must be on the McGill Wireless network or have their McGill VPN connection activated on their mobile device.

### **Ask us**

This button provides users with multiple ways to contact the library or librarians to get assistance with finding information and to get help with assignments and research. Branch phone numbers and addresses are listed, as well as a live chat option during chat reference hours. Other ways to reach a librarian includes: by phone (just click and the number will automatically dial); by sending an e-mail; in person (reference desk hours are provided); and a suggestion box to share ideas.

### **Library hours**

All the branch libraries and their service hours are provided, along with a map, telephone number, and a link to their complete schedule available through the main library website.

### **Library finder**

Each library is identified by name, address, and a photo. By clicking on a particular branch library, one can get driving, walking, and public transit directions via Google Maps.

### **News**

Mobile users can keep up-to-date on the newest services and events taking place in the library.

**FAQ** – An FAQ page is being developed to answer Frequently Asked Questions such as Why can't I access this eBook from my phone?, or How do I configure the VPN on my iPhone?

### **My Library Account**

Once this feature is activated users will be able to login to their account and view their checked out items, see their library fines, and change their library PIN.

### **Twitter**

Mobile users can see what the library is tweeting about. Click the Twitter icon and a direct link to the McGill Libraries Twitter feed appears. Of course, once you're done reading McGill Library tweets, the user could log into their own twitter account and start tweeting about the library.

### **Full website**

A link to the full library website is provided as not all services are mobile-ready. So with a bit of extra work such as, making pages larger and smaller, and other things you often have to do when running a non-mobile site on a mobile browser, one can move easily to several useful portions of the site.

Feedback from our mobile users, librarians, and library staff, will help guide the future development of our mobile library website to keep up with new mobile technology developments.

## **Conclusion**

Although for many users, the Library has become overwhelmingly a virtual destination, we are not only a cyberspace end. During the academic year 2008-2009 the gate count for McGill Libraries was over 5 million (5,142,934) attendance<sup>3</sup>. But the main challenge facing academic libraries and reference services is about creating a user responsive environment by focusing on the needs and preferences of our customers, if we want the academic library to survive into the next century, or at least... until our retirement.

Thank you

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<sup>3</sup> McGill University. McGill Library. Annual Report 2008-2009. P. 2

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