

Messaging in a 2.0 World

Twitter & SMS

Messaging has changed as well in the time since the last “Web 2.0 & Libraries,” a little over a year. One major change was the advent of Meebo and Meebo Me, described in chapter 1. Others include the introduction of Twitter (a microblogging/messaging tool) and the use of short messaging text to enhance library functions via cell phones.

Twitter

Fred Stutzman, in his “12-Minute Definitive Guide,” describes Twitter this way:

Twitter has been labeled anything from a microblogging application to a continuous presence notifier to a viral, social instant messaging client. Whatever Twitter is, it has certainly caught the attention of a wide swath of people and it appears to be well on its way to establishing itself as the first breakout Web 2.0 application of 2007.¹

Users can access Twitter messages—called Tweets—via the Web, via an RSS feed, and via text on their cellular phones. As of this writing, IM support was in place but is on hold. Stutzman divides uses into two areas: social updating and microblogging. Accessing a Twitter user, one might find an update on his or her day, a direct message to another Twitterer, or a bit of wit and wisdom.

In this time of exploration and play by many library professionals, it’s not surprising that libraries are experimenting with Twitter as well. The Nebraska Library Commission recently blogged about their use of Twitter. The librarians decided to add their reference questions

to a Twitter account. For example, here are the five most recent questions:

1. NLC Reference: Need names of staff members of Governor Kerrey.
2. NLC Reference: Need the address to the Better Business Bureau in Marietta, Ga
3. NLC Reference: Was there ever an International Wildlife Park in Grand Prairie Neb.?
4. NLC Reference: WHAT YEAR WERE DRIVER LICENSES FIRST REQUIRED IN NE?
5. NLC Reference: There is a Gdowski Dam in Nebraska. Who it is named for and a little history?²

Other libraries are also experimenting with Twitter. These include the Cleveland Public Library, which is Twittering events and notes about the library; the Lunar Planetary Institute, which is Twittering information about the library podcasts and more; and the Casa Grande Library.

Casa Grande Library’s director Jeff Scott shared his thoughts about adding Twitter to the library Web site. Inspired by a post from Jenny Levine, Scott wondered if a library could dump all its RSS feeds into Twitter using Twitterfeed.

“Then whenever the library did anything, catalog a book, have a program, put out a newsletter, anyone on Twitter would know about it,” he said. His second hope was that people would then be connected to Casa Grande Library via their mobile device. The second part is slow to come. “I have many friends and followers of the library, but I know for sure only one or two are from Casa Grande, some others from Arizona.”³

Scott promoted the innovation in the library news section of the newspaper and the library's e-mail distribution list. He also plans to put it on the library's main Web page: "I just need to find a way to put it there without junking up the page. If I place the Twitter feed into the Library in Your Pocket Section at <http://cglibrary.org>, not many people will read it. If it is not on the opening page, most people wouldn't investigate what it is."⁴

Seeking participation

Scott also noted one of the issues with libraries using 2.0 technologies. Sometimes it seems all the subscribers are other librarians—turned on to the service by the biblioblogosphere. "From talking to other libraries on social networking, many of their friends are just librarians and other libraries instead of patrons. It is the same for the library's Twitter feed," he said. "I would like to go out and seek locals to get participation, but most of them don't say where they are from and I have no way to identify them. I can put it up and let them come to me, but that typically doesn't work."⁵ Scott was awarded a grant to hire a librarian to work with the Casa Grande teens to develop more of these sites for the library as a way to connect with young adult users.

You may not have experienced Twitter yet. You may love it or hate it. But Twitter and tools like it will be ones to watch as we move forward into 2008. Where will microblogging, presence, and converged devices take us next?

SMS Text Messaging & Libraries

Another type of messaging is SMS, or short messaging service. Almost all cell phones now come equipped to send and receive text messages. Currently, SMS is incredibly popular outside of the United States. As our devices converge further, we may see SMS integrated more fully into our lives.

I recently interviewed Angela Dunnington, coordinator of library science, and Beth Stahr, interim head of reference, from Southeastern Louisiana University, about their use of SMS as a reference tool.⁶ The library got a grant in 2005 to implement short messaging service texting and contracted with Australian company Altarama to implement an SMS reference service.

The service is integrated into the reference work flow at the library. Dunnington noted, "The 'Send by SMS' tool works with existing e-mail systems and simplifies the creation of SMS/Chat abbreviations."

When students send a message, the message is routed to the Altarama server in Australia to be converted into an e-mail message to the library reference mailbox. The librarians answer the question and reply. The process reverses.

Stahr told me that the types of questions received by the library include short-answer reference questions, non-serious questions, library questions, and sometimes more complex questions. She reiterated: "It was an easy thing to do—both to set up and to train staff." Stahr reported that usage of SMS reference has been low. Stats for 2005:

- SMS questions: 84
- E-mail questions: 489
- Chat 24/7 questions: 1,060

But she was pleased to say the service will continue and has potential. Both Stahr and Dunnington agreed that the service needs to be marketed more—with sustained and repeated promotion as students come and go. Past promotions have included an information kiosk, a "Text a Librarian/Taste of Australia" contest, campus media, business cards, library "scrap" notepaper, table tents, mouse pads, and posters. They incorporated texting into the branding of their suite of reference services. The information kiosk, located at the student union to promote the library and the service, included a laptop, marketing materials, etc.

More on SMS Text Reference at SELU

In a July 11 e-mail, Beth Stahr responded to my questions about the SMS text reference service at Southeastern Louisiana University:

MS:How did the program come about?

BS: The SMS text-messaging reference originated with our former Head of Reference, a very forward-thinking librarian named JB Hill, now Director of Public Services at Indiana University—Bloomington Libraries. He was the pioneer who brought virtual reference ("chat") to SELU in 2002. He brought new ideas to our library and was known throughout the state of Louisiana as an innovator. In Spring 2005, JB asked Beth to co-author a grant application to the Student

Technology Fee Committee for purchasing software and a "text-message bundle." The stated goal of the fee is "to provide opportunities to increase student access to technology and/or use technology in ways that would benefit student life and/or student scholarship and learning." Beth is the Library's Distance Learning Librarian, and one of the project objectives was to "provide more effective library assistance and instruction to commuting students as well as distance learning students."

The grant was funded, and the project was implemented in Fall 2006.

MS:What has been the response? What do students say?

BS: We've seen limited use of this service. We know that our students are texting. However, there are some obvious reasons that this service has not developed as robustly as we would like. First, the telephone number that students must use is based in Australia, and students may have additional charges for international texts. (We've been told that our vendor, Altarama, is currently seeking a North American partner to alleviate this problem.) Secondly, students have to know the number in order to use the service. The number is available on the Library website, but if they are already using a computer with an Internet connection, they can also use the 24/7 chat reference service. Since they are holding a cell phone in hand, they can also easily phone the library for reference assistance. Marketing away from computer labs seems to be the key to increased usage.

Some students have suggested that text-messaging is recreational and social, and they prefer not to use this tool for academic research or information needs.

Additionally, we don't have any data about user satisfaction. The email and chat reference services both offer a form at the end of the transaction for feedback. That feature is not built into the SMS text-messaging service. Anecdotal evidence indicates that students think it is "cool." When mentioned in instruction sessions, students take note and seem to appreciate text-messaging as an option fashioned with them in mind. And clearly the student representatives who sit on the Student Technology Fee Committee felt that this service was worthy of funding.

MS:What do the librarians say?

BS: Text-messaging is a trendy technology used to disseminate information. We all wish the technology was used more. The software is very easy to use, and there is no downside to providing the reference service. However, a sustained marketing program stretches our people resources.

The original grant proposal also suggests that the Library might text students for non-reference purposes, e.g. ILL or document delivery alerts or overdue material notices. To date, librarians have been reluctant since this method does not provide reliable, documented contacts and because there may be a fee for the patron to receive the messages.

At Southeastern, reference librarians also teach a credit-bearing information literacy course, required

of about half the academic majors on campus. This text-messaging technology can be used by our library science instructors as a mechanism for communicating with students enrolled in this eight-week one-hour freshmen level information research skills course. In fact, Angela co-authored an internal teaching initiative grant in 2006 to explore text-messaging in our information literacy class. Text-messaging with existing cell phone technology can increase student involvement and improve student learning. Students who participate in this mobile learning initiative have the opportunity to receive class announcements, faculty correspondence and course content delivered to their cell phones in discrete packets as text-messages.

Overall the software functions well and tech support has been helpful when needed. We're still experimenting. We remain hopeful that other suitable uses for SMS text-messaging will be found in our library.

MS:Why is it worthwhile?

BS: The Library offers a suite of five Ask A Librarian services for students: telephone, email, appointment-based, 24/7 "chat" and text-messaging. Four of the five approaches provide reference service to remote and distance learning library users without having to visit the library. Students who live off-campus and/or those enrolled in electronic courses taught at the university stand to benefit the most from the text-messaging service. According to the 2002-03 Current Student Survey, prepared by Southeastern's Office of Institutional Research, 39% of respondents travel more than 30 miles one way to the main campus, and another 39% travel between 5 and 30 miles. Southeastern Louisiana University also offers courses at remote sites in 8 parishes and via BlackBoard and Moodle courseware.

Text-messaging has great potential for ensuring equivalent library services to distance learners. It represents another way to meet the needs of faculty and students, regardless of where they are located, per the ACRL "Guidelines for Distance Learning Library Services."

MS:What other 2.0-related ideas are you implementing?

BS: In the June 2007, Reference/Instruction Librarian Mary Lou Strong created a Reference Department wiki with RSS feed for departmental communication.

The Library's Government Documents Librarian, Lori Smith, created a Gov Docs Facebook presence in July 2005 and a MySpace blog in April 2006.

As a result of the MS Library 2.0 summit, we are considering the purchase of library promotional flyers for Facebook and a "laptop librarian" program.

Included with the e-mail message was the following handout about the Mississippi Library 2.0 Summit:

Net Generation Reference: SMS to the Rescue

Mississippi Library 2.0 Summit
June 15, 2007
Mississippi State, MS

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Sims Memorial Library at Southeastern Louisiana University has provided an SMS reference service since 2005. The presentation will show how this easy, inexpensive software is used to receive text message questions at the reference desk and return short answers to our patrons. We'll include information on the limitations of SMS technology for reference work, the limitations of our SMS service and the promotional challenges of a text-messaging library service. Finally, we will discuss other possible library applications for SMS.

Selected Resources

- Altarama Information System (2007). *Reference by SMS*. Retrieved June 8, 2007, from <http://www.altarama.com/refxsms.htm>
- Emling, Shelley. (2005), "Can You Transl8 Txt?" *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. 27 November: 1B.
- Horizon Report. (2006), New Media Consortium and the EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative. "The Phones in Their Pockets." Retrieved June 8, 2007, from http://www.nmc.org/pdf/2006_Horizon_Report.pdf
- Pew Internet & American Life Project. (2005), "34 Million American Adults Send Text Messages on their Cell Phones." Online. 14 March 2005. Retrieved June 8, 2007, from http://www.pewinternet.org/press_release.asp?r=99
- Potter, Ned. (2006), "Digital-Age Hazard: Sore Thumbs." ABC News: Technology & Science. Retrieved June 8, 2007, from <http://abcnews.go.com/Technology/story?id=1646688&page=1>
- Student Monitor. (2005), "Study Finds Record Number of Cell Phone Owners." 21 January. Retrieved June 8, 2007, from <http://www.studentmonitor.com/press/02.pdf>
- Wagner, Ellen D. (2005) "Enabling Mobile Learning." *EDUCAUSE Review* 40.3: 40-53.

What You Can Do Now

Here are some steps you can take now to begin using the ideas in this chapter:

- Experiment with a Twitter account with your colleagues. Try updating your status throughout the day. Discuss uses of the tools at your staff meeting.
- Investigate using Twitter and Twitterfeed to display multiple RSS feeds on your Web site.
- Investigate if your users might want to text the library or receive text notifications for materials.

Resources

Altarama Reference by SMS
www.altarama.com.au/refxsms.htm

Casa Grande Public Library
<http://cglibrary.org/polaris>

Casa Grande Public Library Twitter
<http://twitter.com/cglibrary>

Jeff Scott on Twitter at Casa Grande
<http://gathernodust.blogspot.com/2007/04/twitter-update-or-how-i-was-able-to.html>

Kathy Sierra on Twitter
http://headrush.typepad.com/creating_passionate_users/2007/03/is_twitter_too_.html

LibrarianInBlack on SELU SMS

http://librarianinblack.typepad.com/librarianinblack/2005/11/text_a_libraria.html

Six Biggest New Ideas in Chat

www.techcrunch.com/2006/11/24/the-six-biggest-new-ideas-in-chat

SMS & Libraries

www.librarytechnology.org/ltg-displaytext.pl?RC=11902

Top Ten Twitter Apps

www.readwriteweb.com/archives/top_10_twitter_apps.php

Twitterfeed

<http://twitterfeed.com>

Twitter: What are the Possibilities

<http://libraryclips.blogspot.com/2007/03/14/twitter-what-are-the-possibilities/>

Twitter Start 4 All

<http://twitter.start4all.com/>

Notes

1. Fred Stutzman, "The 12-Minute Definitive Guide to Twitter," April 11, 2007, on the AOL Developer Network Web site, <http://dev.aol.com/article/2007/04/definitive-guide-to-twitter> (accessed July 12, 2007).
2. Michael Sauers, "Our Reference Department Is Twitter-Pated," Nebraska Library Commission Blog, March 23, 2007, www.nlc.state.ne.us/blogs/NLC/2007/03/our_reference_department_is_tw.html (accessed July 12, 2007).
3. Jeff Scott, "Twitter Update or How I Was Able to Exploit the Latest Social Networking Site without Really Trying," Gather No Dust, April 29, 2007, <http://gathernodust.blogspot.com/2007/04/twitter-update-or-how-i-was-able-to.html> (accessed July 12, 2007).
4. Jeff Scott, e-mail interview by the author, July 3, 2007.
5. Ibid.
6. Angela Dunnington and Beth Stahr, interview by the author, June 15, 2007.