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# The Man Behind the Slam

## *An Interview with Bill Pardue*

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Guest Columnist**

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This interview highlights one reference librarian's creative approach to marketing librarians' services. The goal of the Slam the Boards project, initiated by Bill Pardue, is to increase public awareness of the reference assistance that librarians can provide.—*Editor*

**B**ill Pardue is a virtual services reference librarian at Arlington Heights Memorial Library, a public library in Illinois. He recently spear-headed an innovative grassroots campaign, Slam the Boards, which encourages librarians from around the world to visit online answer boards such as Yahoo! Answers on a given day for the purpose of providing accurate and reliable reference services. By identifying themselves as librarians on these boards, the participants hope to make the public aware of the reference services that information professionals can provide. The first Slam the Boards was held on September 10, 2007, and has turned into a monthly event. Pardue has created a wiki with detailed information about the event, found at <http://answerboards.wetpaint.com>.

*Tell me about how Slam the Boards was conceived.*

It started as a loose idea that became firmer over time. I had been hearing that a lot of people were going to sites such as Yahoo! Answers, so I decided I needed to look into it to see what kind of opportunities were there. I thought it would be a good idea for librarians to go in, identify themselves as librarians and let people know we can help. One of my colleagues suggested we should have a lot of librarians doing this, not just a trickle. Then Caleb Tucker-Raymond [a virtual reference librarian in Oregon] had the idea to pick one day when this would happen.

*What does the name signify?*

It's a basketball term that refers to going for a rebound. I wanted to find a name that incorporated the word "boards" and reflected the idea that we were taking aggressive action.

*What did you hope to achieve with Slam the Boards?*

I wanted to achieve two things. First, I wanted to get librarians more involved. We need to figure out how we can get ourselves where the patrons are. Second, I wanted to let the public know what we do. There's a lack of awareness that librarians answer these questions every day.

OCLC did a study in 2005 that found the public's percep-

tion is that libraries equal books. Reference services are not even on the public's radar screen. People know about libraries, but not librarians. We all believe there's a role for us, but we've failed to market ourselves appropriately.

I have no illusions that this will change the world, but it's one way of doing it. Let's go out there and find questions, look for opportunities, go out in the community and show off our services. I like to call it "proactive reference" or [laughing] "predatory reference."

*How did you spread the word and elicit support?*

This was strictly a grassroots effort. I put the word out through discussion boards that I belong to, and then people started mentioning it in their blogs. Then there was an item in *American Libraries Direct*, and some newsletters picked it up.

*What was the response from fellow librarians?*

The majority of people I heard from were really excited about it and thought it was a fun idea. There were a few naysayers. At least one librarian/blogger took a more cynical view and said, "Oh right, we should give away skills for free to people who don't appreciate us." But that's just not the point!

*Tell me about the day of the first Slam the Boards event. What sites were involved?*

Yahoo! is the big one. Something like 96% of the business goes there. I tried to go to other sites as well, like Amazon's Askville, Ask MetaFilter, AnswerBag. With some of the sites that don't require registration, there's more frivolity. Some of the questions are just liberal-baiting or conservative-baiting, not serious questions. I ended up answering about twenty-five questions throughout the day, and I know of one librarian who answered twenty-five by noon. Some others answered two or three questions, whatever they had time for.

*How many librarians participated? Where were they from?*

There were one hundred people who signed up on the wiki saying that they would participate. I would guess, though, that it was as many as two hundred or three hundred. I'd say that it's in the range of possibility that we answered one

thousand questions that day. We had librarians from England, New Zealand, Sweden, and all over the U.S.

*Was the event a success?*

I did feel it was a success. I don't have anything quantitative, but most of the e-mails I received from people who participated said they were glad they had done it.

*Is there an opportunity for teaching information literacy through this event?*

I think so. One of the reasons we're better at this is that we give real answers. There are some people who will provide an answer like, "Just Google it." I think we have an obligation as librarians to give sourced answers, so I tried to provide links to where the answer was from. I tried to approach it the same way I would if it was by e-mail or VR, and ask myself, "Is my mission to just answer this, or to teach you?" It's always a gut decision.

*What was the most memorable question that you responded to?*

One of the good ones was, "What determines the difference between a lake and a pond?" I was able to find a great site that had a glossary of terms that defined things like lakes and ponds.

*What does the future hold for Slam the Boards?*

I'd like to see it happen every month on the 10th, where we see a spike in librarian involvement on the answer boards on that day. The first one was a huge push. I don't expect that I will do twenty-five questions every month, but I'll try to do five or ten. I'd like to see it take on a life of its own, so that it's not dependent on me having ownership of it.

*You've been interviewed several times now. How does it feel to be a celebrity?*

[Laughs.] It's been fun. I'm a celebrity among a very select crowd. Actually, I think I'm more of a squeaky wheel.