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### Biography

Sonia began her professional career as a librarian ten years ago at Channel Seven Brisbane in the News and Current Affairs library, before heading overseas to London, England. Once in London, she worked as a librarian at Imperial College and later at APTN (Associated Press Television News). Imperial College is one of London's premiere Universities with a student population of over sixty thousand. APTN is part of a global television network, which collects vision from every corner of the world. These vastly different library experiences have given her a unique perspective on librarianship and the role of information professionals.

Once Sonia returned to Australia she worked for Moreton and Bremer Institutes before joining Southbank Institute. She is currently working as a Liaison Librarian at Southbank Institute of Technology in Brisbane specialising in the Hospitality and Tourism area. Sonia is the co-ordinator of *SMS a Librarian* and *Ask a Librarian* (the live chat reference service). She is particularly interested in library reference technology and as the Library Marketing co-ordinator feel that these services are only enhancing and updating the image of librarians in the twenty-first century.

## **SMS Reference: Keeping up with your clients!**

### **Abstract**

In an attempt to meet evolving client needs, Southbank Library needed to become more flexible in the way services were delivered. Providing a Short Message Service (SMS) for students to text the library for information offered a readily accessible alternative to email. This also gave the library the opportunity to access students via a familiar accessible service. SMS a Librarian has become part of the Southbank Institute Library *Ask a Librarian* service, which includes email, phone and live chat access for students and staff. By adding this new technology to our reference services, users are now able to send questions and receive answers from Southbank librarians by using the text messaging facility on their mobile phones. SMS has become a popular way of communicating particularly among the young, however, it is important that individual libraries evaluate the appropriateness of this technology for their clientele. For Southbank library it was a suitable technology as so many of our students use text messaging. We felt that our large number of International students would benefit from this service. Often students with English as a second language feel more comfortable texting a question than using more conventional methods of communication. The success of the SMS reference service at Southbank Institute library revolves around three key points: SMS meets our clients' needs instantly; SMS is a relevant form of communication for students; and lastly the ease of providing SMS technology.

## Introduction

The brief in 2005 was to see how Southbank Institute library could use and implement SMS Reference into our *Ask a Librarian* service already containing phone, email and live chat reference. Would our students use the service? Would it be difficult to implement? What would the costs be? At the time only one other academic institution in Australia was using SMS Reference, Curtin University. Although this proved a valuable example prior to our implementation, our experience would always be different as students in the Vocational Education environment are different learners and therefore different users of the library to University students. The critical issue regarding SMS reference for Southbank library centred on our students' willingness to use the technology to contact the library. Would the technology prove as relevant to our student population as we hoped, or would it be seen as another inappropriate use of their social technology for academic purposes?

## Why SMS Reference?

According to the Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) over five billion SMS messages were sent in the period 2003-2004 in Australia, and that figure jumped to over 6.7 billion in 2004-2005 (ACMA, 2005, p. 4). Adolescents in particular own mobile phones in very high numbers and participate in the highest rate of SMS communication. Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) on mobile phone usage in Australia reflect this trend in adolescents, stating that "persons with the use of a mobile phone in households that had no connection tended to be the young age groups, with

56.1% in the 18 to 29 year age group and 34.6% in the 30 to 49 year age group" (ABS, 2003). When looking at the age of our students at Southbank Institute it became clear that we also reflect this trend with fifteen to twenty-nine year olds the largest student age group and also the group with the highest mobile phone ownership (Southbank Institute, 2006). It would seem that the majority of our students are changing their method of communication and the library must keep up.

So what is SMS? Wikipedia defines SMS as "a service available on most digital mobile phones ... that permits the sending of short messages (also known as text messages, or more colloquially SMSes, texts or even txts) between mobile phones" (Wikipedia, 2006). For most people, it is the first step in transmitting data over their phones, an activity that can encompass everything from receiving updates from the Big Brother House to forwarding a note to a friend to let him or her know where you are or where to meet. SMS communication is particularly popular among young people who according to Telstra can send a text message for a standard fee of twenty-five cents per message (Telstra, 2006, p. 4). In comparison a mobile to landline phone call can cost eighteen to fifty cents per thirty seconds. Finding out information while on the go is cheaper and more likely through an SMS query than a voice call. This is also true for Library reference queries where an SMS message may be preferable to calling the library for information. It was felt that providing an alternative delivery method that is socially popular with the majority

of our students gives them more flexibility when contacting the library which is always a good thing.

### **SMS: the good, the bad and the ugly**

SMS marketing has emerged as a serious force and is reaping real rewards for companies of all sizes. The flip side of this trend is mobile spam which is unsolicited (and generally unwanted) commercial advertisements being sent to mobile phones through text messaging. In Southbank Libraries efforts to reach out to students via SMS Reference there was a real concern that it could be construed as a form of spamming. Some mobile phone plans will charge per text message received so it was vitally important that the library does not appear to initiate contact with students. Instead we are attempting to make it easier for a certain segment of our students (avid texters) to contact us. We saw that as reaching out, but not in an intrusive sense.

There was also the idea that our presence in this popular medium may appear as co-opting that technology for our own purposes. "SMS has been recognised as a more intimate medium than even e-mail" (Marketing Week, 2002). Does the library therefore have the right to use it for academic purposes? At Southbank Library we felt that the more ways librarians could make themselves available (face-to-face, phone, email, live chat) the more relevant we'll remain in our student's campus life. Far from intruding in students' private spaces we felt we were offering a new and innovative way for students to connect to the library with their own preferred technology. This is especially true for external and online

students who may not be able to use the physical facilities.

Other aspects to come under the microscope included the cost of implementing SMS Reference. Budget and Human Resource constraints are leaving libraries with more work than they have staff. This is not just affecting normal library workflow but also our ability to create and sustain innovation. Early research into SMS technology produced prices that were completely out of our reach. Another option considered was Telstra, our preferred Telco which seemed at first glance able to provide the sort of service we required. After navigating the maze that is Telstra's contact telephone system and weeks of frustration it became clear that this was not a feasible option. In fact, the wisest course appeared to be a relatively small Australian company who had a proven track record in SMS technology and some fifteen years longevity. There were several bonus options available from this company and most importantly the price was extremely reasonable. From Southbank Institute's point of view as a Vocational Education Library with a modest budget, the costs involved in SMS Reference are relatively moderate and were certainly no deterrent to providing SMS Reference.

### **The Southbank Experience**

Initial research into SMS Reference technology, lead us to look at two educational institutions using SMS Reference, Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia and Southeastern Louisiana University in America. Both Universities used the same Australian technology provider Altarama Systems and Services to

provide the backend software to run SMS Reference. Altarama have specifically designed SMS technology “to allow libraries to expand their reference delivery methods to include SMS” (Altarama. 2006). That Sims Library, Southeastern Louisiana University implemented SMS Reference using Altarama an Australian company rather than an American company was a testament to Altarama’s decision to focus specifically on Library Reference solutions. It was with great reluctance that Southbank Institute decided not to use the Altarama package at our library due to our budget constraints. A cheaper option giving us some of the same great facilities was required to meet our particular needs.

After researching several more companies we settled on an Australian firm to provide the SMS reference service. MessageNet advertises itself as the Global Business SMS founder. Established in 1992 for business messaging, MessageNet “supports approximately 50% of the BRW top 100 companies, along with over a thousand more” (MessageNet, 2006). Unlike Altarama, the technology offered by MessageNet was not specifically designed for an academic library environment. However, the advantage of using this firm was twofold. Firstly, we were able to select a dedicated mobile phone number unique to our library which allowed for effective marketing to our students, and secondly we were able to interface with our email software Microsoft (MS) Outlook to receive and respond to calls.

Another positive to the MessageNet package was a free trial of the software in our working environment.

Establishing the trial was relatively quick and easy, and enabled the library to test the process and technology at our leisure. This was quite an exciting part of the research process where we could see how the SMS message was turned into an email for the librarian, and then an email from the librarian was turned into an SMS message for the client. The product also ran seamlessly in MS Outlook with the email directed to a designated inbox. The trial confirmed that the MessageNet package was the right one both technologically and financially for Southbank Institute.

### **SMS Reference: The Nuts and Bolts**

The MessageNet package includes a unique text messaging number for all clients. However there was a catch, mobile phone numbers chosen by a library or any other client have only three options for the first four digits. In our case 0427 was the mandatory first four digits in our mobile phone number. This originally hampered our efforts to come up with a unique library word. However, after a small competition between all library staff the mobile number chosen encompassed commonly used words instead of numbers to be more easily remembered by our students:

**042 SMS INFO**  
**(042 767 4636)**

It was felt that using a slogan phone number allowed the library to promote the new service to students as an easily remembered number.

To receive an SMS message from a client the system has been set up so that incoming SMS messages are received in a common dedicated

mailbox in MS Outlook, accessible to all library staff. As an email inbox was already set up to receive our email reference queries it made sense to use the same inbox for SMS reference. It is extremely easy to differentiate between email reference and an SMS query as the sender shows up as a mobile phone number and the subject is always *SMS Message from (client mobile number)*. Southbank Institute currently uses MS Outlook 2003, which easily interfaces with the SMS reference technology. This simple process allows the library to keep track of the incoming and outgoing messages for future assessment and review.

One drawback of SMS Reference whether with MessageNet or another company is that text messages are limited to one hundred and sixty characters, so unless you are quite concise, librarians may need to learn some texting abbreviations. It is possible to send the response in multiple messages (known as spanning); however, our librarians try very hard to fit a reply into one. An important issue for any library is the explanation given to students when they are informed about any new technologies. At Southbank Institute our Information Literacy classes explain the

functions of our different *Ask a Librarian* services which include phone, email, chat and SMS. It is made very clear that SMS Reference should be used for short simple factual questions. Longer more complex queries should be asked either face-to-face, on the phone, via email or through our live chat service. We feel that providing our students with a quick to-the-point short question/answer reference service is allowing Southbank Library to tap into an area that had not been previously addressed.

Once SMS Reference had been established a rostering system for answering the queries was arranged and staff given training in this new technology. Certain procedures are required when answering an SMS message from a client and it was important to provide guidelines and standards for our staff to follow when responding. Steps when replying to an SMS message include removing auto signatures, answering in less than one hundred and sixty characters, inputting the correct inbox location and adding a new subject line. SMS Reference training took about fifteen minutes with a handout and proved easier to master than instant messaging, which was far more involved.

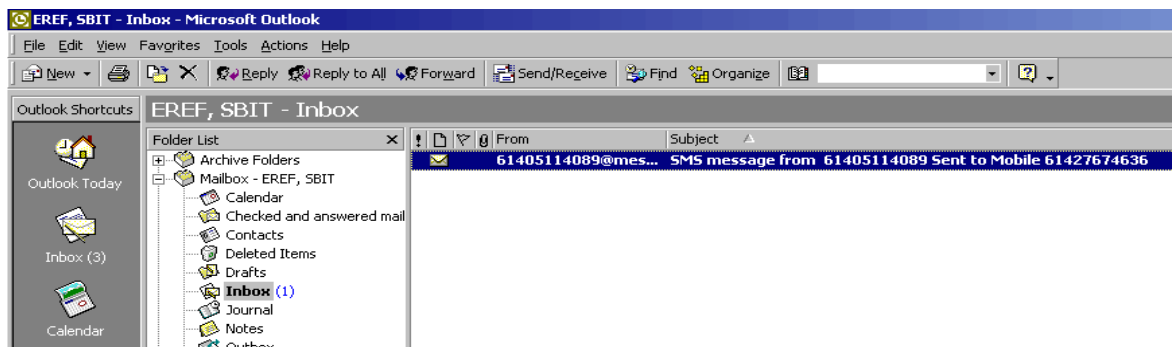


Figure 1 SMS email enquiry from student

SMS messages from students will appear in the EREF inbox (Figure 1). This inbox also receives our *Email A Librarian* queries. Incoming messages via email and SMS are visually different from each other allowing staff to respond accordingly.

SMS messages from students when opened will look similar to Figure 2. The students' mobile number is visible in the From: field and has the Australian international phone code attached to the front of the number (61) with the normal 0 (zero) removed.

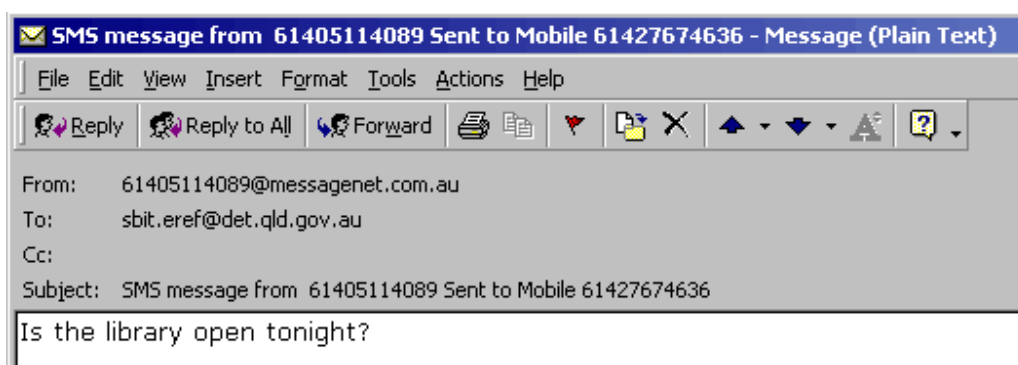


Figure 2: SMS message from student

### Replying to an SMS message: The Steps

When replying to SMS messages from a student, all text from the message body including the message from the student and any auto signatures that may be generated are deleted. Staff must choose the EREF, SBIT inbox name in the FROM: field. Staff can add this in the same way as searching for a contact name. Only the dedicated inbox chosen by Southbank Library is able to send

SMS messages. No other inbox within Outlook can send or reply to SMS messages.

The last step to take before writing the response to SMS queries is to change the SUBJECT: field to SBI Library. This will show up on the students' mobile as the header and identify Southbank library as responding to their question.

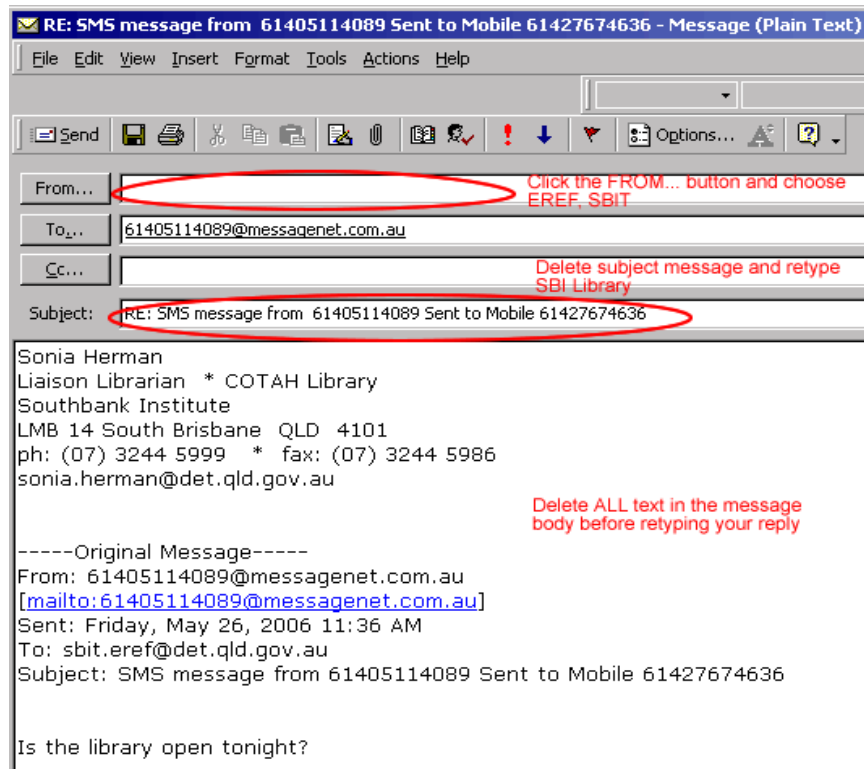


Figure 3: Highlights the required changes.

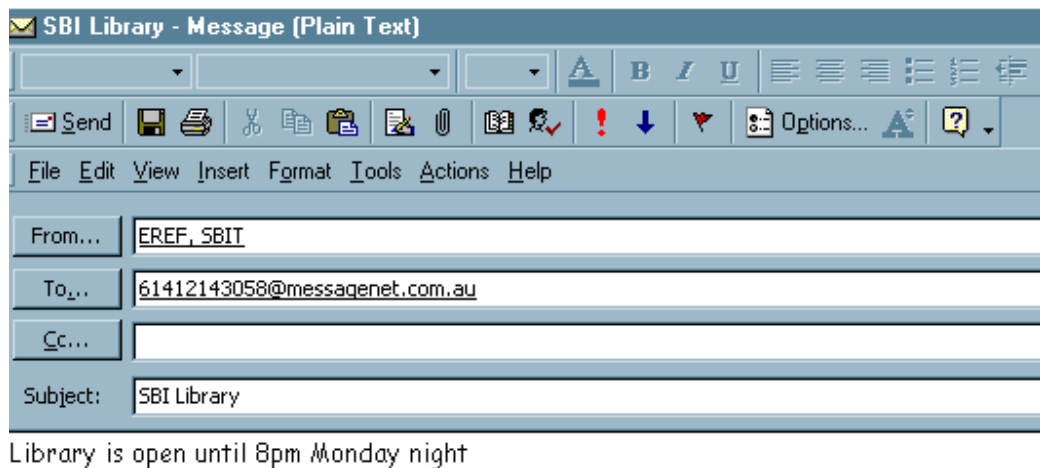


Figure 4: Illustrates how the message should look before sending back to the student.

Figure 5: Student view of library reply message.

The student will see SBI Library as the header for the text message sent from library staff. This only occurs when SBI Library is typed into the reply message Subject field.

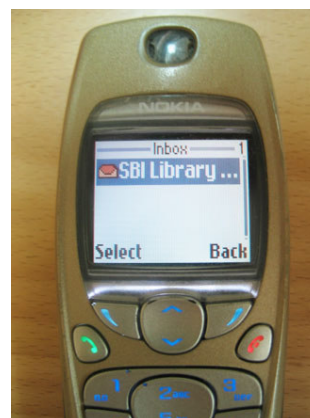
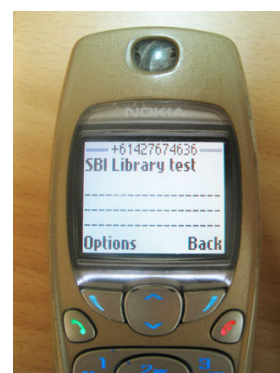


Figure 6: When the student opens the message the email subject line is included in the body of the message. The dotted lines at the end of the message (-----) are part of the Southbank Institute automated footer that is added to all outgoing messages. This cannot be removed or changed due to Queensland Government policy.



## Conclusion

Providing an SMS service for students to text the library for information can help our clients in a number of ways that traditional email and phone reference is not able to do. SMS can alleviate spoken language difficulties for the many international students enrolled at Southbank Institute by using SMS language instead of more formal English. Librarians responsible for answering SMS Reference queries are able to respond in kind if they are

familiar with the symbols. eg. U R (you are) / C U (see you) / L8 (late). It also offers an on the go, inexpensive, easily accessible alternative to email with students using a technology that most are extremely familiar with and have readily available. At Southbank Institute we feel that taking advantage of technologies popular with students for social interaction, and mobiles and SMS texting certainly fits into that category, is a new opportunity to reach out and connect with users.

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