

INFORMATION CENTRAL: NOT JUST A CALL CENTRE...

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Abstract

Academic libraries have enthusiastically embraced the move from print to digital in the provision of information. There has not always been a commensurate development of virtual client services and often such services are treated as adjuncts rather than essential and integrated elements of the library's service to clients. This paper charts the efforts of University of Western Sydney library to create a comprehensive and integrated virtual information service to parallel the personal service received by clients in the physical library. Info Central is a single receipt point for all incoming telephone calls, chat-based reference queries and email queries staffed by a small team for all of the hours the physical libraries are open. Client service is enhanced through providing virtual clients the same access to service as physical clients enjoy, through greater consistency of response and through the access to cumulated data on client requests giving us a very accurate view of how all of our clients use the library and where they require assistance.

Introduction

What if all phone queries to 7 libraries were received at a single point?
What if all email queries were responded to within two hours throughout all Library open hours 7 days a week?
What if the Library virtual reference service operated throughout all Library open hours 7 days a week?
What if all phone, email and virtual reference queries were handled by one staff member in core hours supplemented by a small team on evenings and weekends?

Welcome to Information Central at UWS

Academic libraries have enthusiastically embraced the move from print to digital in the provision of information. There has not always been a commensurate development of virtual client services and often such services are treated as adjuncts rather than essential and integrated elements of the library's service to clients. This paper outlines the efforts of University of Western Sydney library to create a comprehensive and integrated virtual information service to parallel the face to face service received by clients in the physical library.

Information Central is a single receipt point for all incoming telephone calls, virtual reference and email inquiries and is staffed by a small team during all hours the physical libraries are open.

UWS Background

The University of Western Sydney is the ninth largest university in Australia with over 35,000 students including some 5,000 international students. UWS has six campuses served by seven campus libraries spread across the 9,000 square kilometres of Greater Western Sydney. Two thirds of our domestic students live in the region, which has a population of 1.8 million and the third largest economy in Australia.

The dispersed nature of the University creates particular challenges for the Library in terms of our ability to provide a consistent, timely and sophisticated information service across seven locations.

Genesis

Information Central began as a few bright ideas that coalesced and grew.

Though a single service point for Lending and Information Services had been successfully operating in each of the campus libraries since 2001, prior to 2006, there was no holistic approach to providing information to 'virtual' clients.

The telephone service was conducted via the seven campus libraries, each with its desk number advertised widely and with incoming queries taken by rostered staff juggling calls and assisting in-person clients. This led to interruption at the service points and at times impacted negatively on service to both phone and face to face clients. It was also difficult to monitor the quality of responses made to phone clients and there was variability of access due to differential campus opening hours.

The email inquiry service (*Contact Us*) was well established and popular, with a designated pool of staff responding. However, our 24 hour response KPI was not always met, particularly on weekends and evenings and there was considerable variation in depth and consistency of responses.

The virtual reference service (*Online Librarian*) was also well establish and well patronised but operated via a dispersed pool of staff for very limited hours with no connection to either telephone or email service. Variable consistency and depth of response was also an issue with this service.

As part of a quality process undertaken in 2005, staff suggested that a call centre approach to telephone queries be investigated. Another suggestion was that the Library operate *Online Librarian* throughout Library open hours. There was a further suggestion that the Library improve its response times to *Contact Us* queries. These disparate suggestions developed into a brief for investigation by one of the Library's quality teams:

To improve service to clients by investigating a range of flexible communication options - Contact Us (email) analysis; automatic phone

call distribution; a phone call centre service and extending the hours of Online Librarian (VR) service; and where possible implement them. (UWS Library, 2005 Opportunities for Improvement internal document 2005)

First steps

The Quality group charged with investigating the viability of the service had representation from Lending Services, Information Services, Systems and Technical teams and worked closely with both the Client Services Associate Librarian and Manager to prepare for a pilot of the service in first semester 2006.

The initial stage of the project was an extensive literature search to see if anyone had trodden this specific path before in libraries. While librarians often discuss the need for the profession to look beyond libraries to commercial models of service delivery, we were unable to find any reports charting the actual establishment of a comprehensive and centralised virtual contact centre in a library despite the large volume of relevant literature relating to the commercial sector, where such service models are commonplace. (Anton, 2000)

There are a large number of articles on virtual reference services. Invariably these relate to setting up and evaluating real-time reference and investigate software, implementation, efficacy and relationship to synchronous information services.

There are also articles on developing email reference services and on centralised telephone query services, often offered over limited hours via diversion of calls rather than using full call centre software. (Burke and Beranek, 2006)

In the absence of guidance from library literature, we relied on the commercial literature and adopted a pragmatic approach, developing a checklist of issues to be addressed: where would to base the service, how to staff it, call centre software to be used, how to manage the workload given the anticipated peaks and troughs, and finally, the service parameters? As these were determined, the concept of the service firmed into a reality, and the pilot could begin.

Pilot overview

It was determined that the service would be conducted from the Penrith Ward Library so that it would be co-located with Library Systems, Technical Services and relevant Client Service managers. This Library also has the longest spread of open hours to maximise client access but relatively low in-person usage in the evenings and weekends.

A new Library information phone number was set up and advertised via the Library webpage replacing the individual campus desk numbers, in all Library publications and via the UWS switchboard. The campus desk numbers

continued to operate but the bulk of calls started to come to the new number. This number was serviced via call centre software which facilitated queuing of calls, a recorded opening hours option and generation of detailed statistical reports.

It was decided to use Q Master software, which was already in use at the University call centre and Information Technology Help Desk. So not only was there was an existing UWS licence but also considerable local expertise.

Information Services staff across the six campuses were invited to submit expressions of interest to a secondment as 'Information Central Librarian', with the successful applicant operating the service during core hours of 9.00am-4.00pm. Excellent submissions were made and the staff member finally selected had a strong background in Systems as well as extensive experience as a liaison librarian and in working on library service desks across a number of UWS campus libraries.

The Information Central service was conducted from an office set up with a computer loaded with call centre software (Q Master), virtual reference software (Ask a Librarian) and email program (Contact Us developed in-house). It utilised double screens and a telephone headset. Outside the designated core hours, the service was run from the Ward Library service desk by the rostered Information Services staff member backed by the rostered Lending services staff member. One desk computer was set up with all software to support Information Central for evening/weekend operation.

Preparation for the pilot

The project had tight timeframes in order to be ready to begin for first semester. Preparation centred on staff training, installation and set up of required telephone call centre software and recorded messages and in resolving various logistical issues. These revolved around maintaining an operational roster, achieving seamless staff changeovers in the morning and evening, producing requisite support material (a manual was developed and refined), drafting and testing procedures, establishing reporting and feedback mechanisms and briefing staff frequently.

The Information Central Librarian and the backup team of 9 Penrith Information Services staff all required training in Q Master desktop operation and some required additional training in *Contact Us* and *Online Librarian*. There was also training on contact centre strategies and basic form responses were developed for email, virtual reference and telephone queries.

While most staff involved were familiar with the use of the email and virtual reference software, establishing the telephone component of the service proved slightly more problematic. This required much assistance from the Library Systems team and UWS IT Communications team. Hardware and software had to be set up, tested and retested, recorded messages and schedules established and required reports decided upon and set up.

This was a challenging time and all staff involved responded with consummate professionalism, particularly the Information Central Librarian, who was instrumental in bedding down Q Master, developing procedures, scripted responses and on-training evening/weekend support staff.

The learning curve

Despite some technical teething problems the pilot was deemed highly successful and we would not look backwards. Why?

The single greatest benefit of the converged phone, email and virtual reference services has been the rich repository of management data generated. With services spread over 7 libraries and dispersed in-person, telephone, email and virtual reference operations, it was difficult to garner a detailed and comprehensive picture of our clients and their concerns, issues and priorities. Now the majority of telephone, email and virtual reference queries calls are passing via a single staff member and the Information Central Librarian notes any trends, 'hot topics' or systems problems. Telephone, email and virtual reference queries are all assigned a wrap-up code so we can generate reports on the nature of client inquiries during various time periods.

We also have data on exactly when our clients use us – hour of the day, day of the week, week of semester/semester break and so forth. Analysis of this time data has revealed some surprises. It had been assumed that the majority of clients would use the virtual reference service in the afternoon and so it was previously only available 1-5pm. In fact, the highest usage has generally proven to be before noon.

Information which previously filtered in slowly is now being received and acted on even more rapidly. For example, if off campus access is interrupted even for a few minutes, Information Central receives calls and/or emails and alerts the co-located Library Systems team for a speedy resolution. Similarly, any database access problems are reported centrally, almost immediately, which allows us to take action in an even more timely manner .

Information Central Librarian also reports regularly on frequently asked questions and/or misunderstandings which have lead to a review some of our procedures, our use of terminology and adapting some of the text on our website and in our publications. We have also fine tuned a number of procedures, amended some web page content, substantially updated our OPAC and revised a number of publications in response to client inquiries and feedback.

The other major benefit of Information Central is the ability to better monitor the quality, consistency and timeliness of our responses to telephone, email and virtual reference queries. With these queries now channelled through a small group of staff there is significantly less potential for local interpretation and variation in response. As this group handle a large volume of queries they are extremely familiar with the range, depth and breadth of inquiries, with

current assignments and any temporary access issues and respond accordingly. They have become particularly skilled exponents of the 'speed' reference interview and are adept at discerning the 'hidden' question.

Telephone abandon and response rates are monitored to ensure industry standards are maintained and we remain well within the accepted maxima for abandoned calls. Scripted responses for Contact Us and Online Librarian have been developed and refined to ensure consistency in response to some of the more common queries such as 'why can't I get off campus access', 'how do I reference using Harvard?', 'why can't I renew?', 'do you hold this article' and other similar inquiries.

The bigger picture

Much has been written about where academic libraries are positioned in the postmodernist era and of the net generation, digital natives, gen Y, millennials and their characteristics: high expectations, desire to multitask, desire for customization, ability to utilize technology, consumerist approach and desire for instant and uncritical information gratification. (Harley and Dreger, 2001), (Gardner and Eng, 2005).

There are arguments about a devaluation of the role of the professional librarian in the face of the expectations and information seeking behaviours of millennials. (Braxton, and Brunsdale, 2004). There are also concerns that no one will come to a physical service desk any more. Martell (2000, p. 104) predicted "librarians will deal with users almost exclusively in a virtual environment."

Though the development of Information Central has been largely driven by the desire to offer a better quality and timeliness of service, it has also tapped into this larger picture. Despite the rostering of knowledgeable and approachable staff in our libraries, it is not unusual for students to log into Online Librarian or post an email query from the library floor.

Information Central has clearly struck a chord with our clients. It allows them to choose which method of interaction is best suited to their information and learning needs. Usage of the service continues to grow apace with over 16,000 inquiries received to December.

Where to from here? We will continue to carefully monitor inquiries received and listen to what our clients are telling us and act on it. We will also continue to look for additional ways to communicate with our clients. Will Information Central exist in 10 years time? Maybe not in its current iteration but as long as there are clients there will be inquiries and libraries will be seeking effective ways of responding.

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