LibAnswers Usability: Rethinking Online Reference

Background

❖LibAnswers was launched as the platform for UNC Chapel Hill Health Sciences Library 's Ask a Librarian services July 1, 2010. The UNC-CH HSL serves schools of dentistry, nursing, medicine, pharmacy, public health and a large teaching hospital.

❖LibAnswers is a third-party application that serves as a presentation and management tool for email, chat and in-person reference services.

❖LibAnswers' Ask Us system tries to match a user's query with previously answered questions. If no match is found, the user can click the Ask Us button to send email.

❖Library staff can make the answer to a question public or private. They can also create public question / answer pairs in staff mode.

Study Objectives

❖The objective of this study was to determine strengths and weaknesses of the library's LibAnswers Ask a Librarian public interface in order to improve the users' experiences.

Study Methods

❖Analyzed LibAnswers data for queries / questions submitted and usage.

❖Analyzed Google Analytics data for patterns of user interaction.

❖Conducted a usability lab study to determine what works and what needs improvement with the HSL's LibAnswers implementation. Ten participants were asked to think-aloud while completing tasks designed to lead the participant to seek help.

Conclusions

❖Usability participants used a variety of methods to seek assistance, although they didn't explore the LibAnswers knowledge base without direction from the moderator. Analysis of LibAnswers and Google Analytics data confirms that users will find stored answers and that stored answers have a wider audience than the library's direct user community.

❖Limitations include little undirected exploration of the stored questions during the usability study and lack of ongoing data about user interactions with elements on the Ask a Librarian home page.

❖LibAnswers is a effective tool that allows users to get help through self-service and allows the library to leverage the work of answering one question into service for many.

Key Findings & Action Items
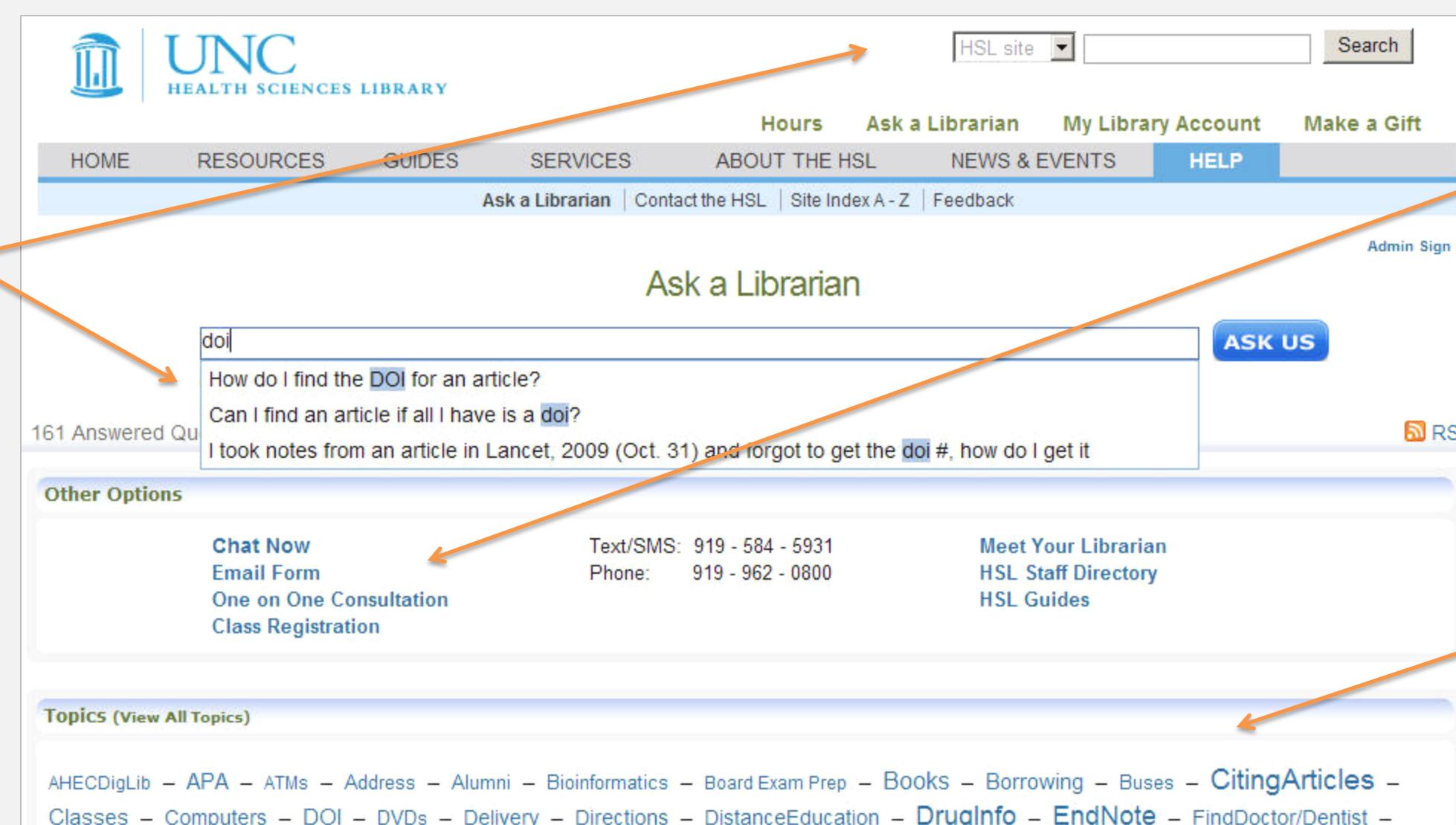
Minority of interactions resulted in a match with a stored question / answer.

Actions: Expand the scope of the question / answer knowledgebase to increase possible matches. Add stored questions / answers to HSL site search to provide an additional means of discovery.

❖59% (N=720) submitted an email question, either through the Ask Us search path or via a direct link to the email form

❖28% (N=339) entered search words, did not find an answer and did not submit an email during that interaction

❖19% (N=233) viewed a stored answer

Analysis of 1215 user interactions recorded by LibAnswers Query Spy 7-01-10 to 04-11-11.

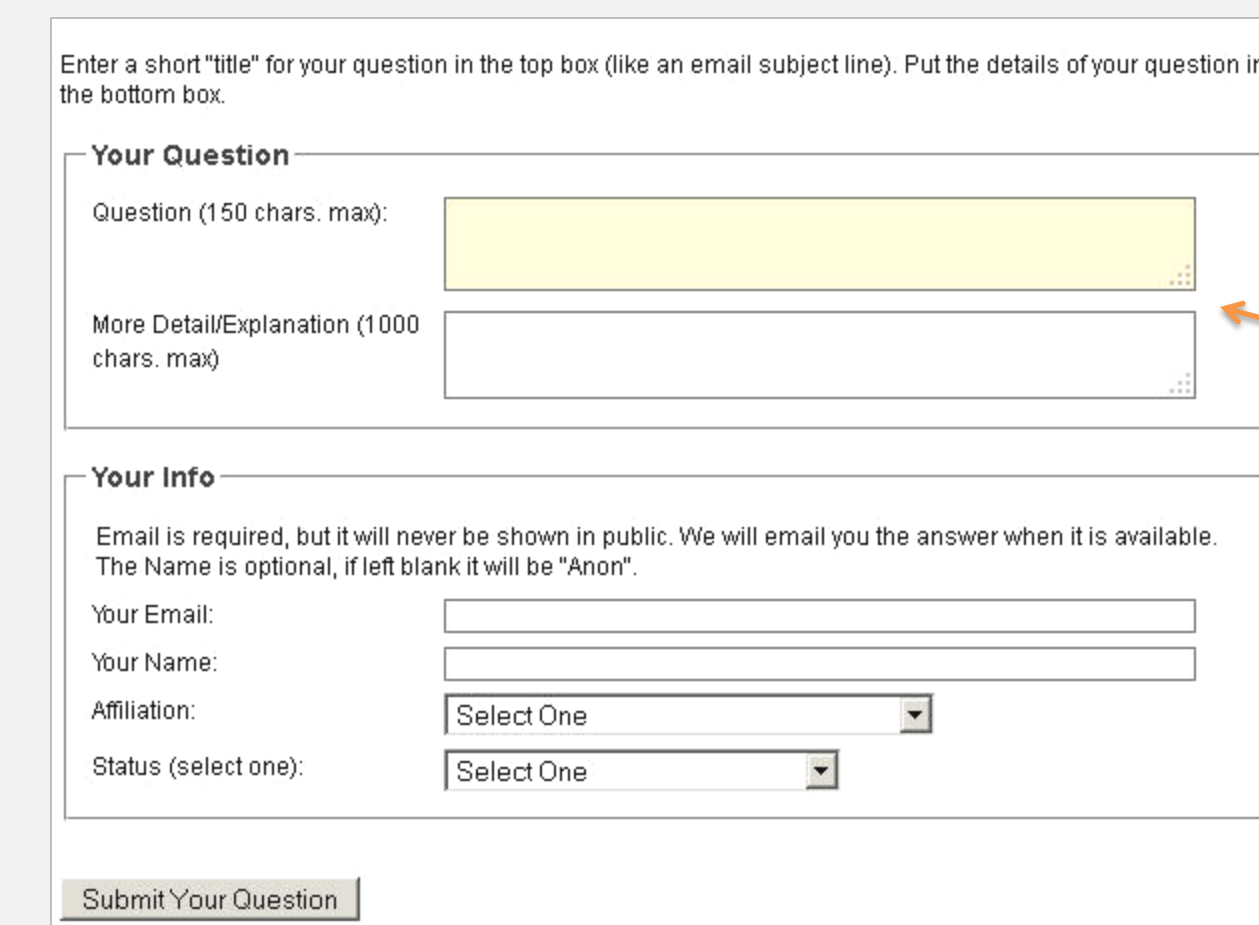**Stored answers are indexed by search engines and viewed worldwide.**

Action: Established a review procedure to assure stored answers remain accurate and current.

The DOI answer was selected 10 times via Ask a Librarian but has 94 total views.(LibAnswers). The question "does write n cite work with word 2010" has the most views with over 500 (Google Analytics 540, LibAnswers 626). 92% of views originated at a search engine with viewers located worldwide: Americas (51%), Europe (38%), Asia (2%), Africa (2%), and Oceania (0.8%). (Google Analytics)

Links to Chat Now and Email Form easily findable and frequently used.

Action: Retain Chat Now and Email Form links.

In usability testing, chat was initiated 6 times and email 10 times. Email was selected 4 times using the direct link and 6 times via other email links on the HSL website.

Data within LibAnswers shows that 47% (N=75) of emails are submitted via the Ask Us search path and 53% (N=83) via a direct link added by HSL.

Topic cloud was confusing or "gimmicky".

Action: Remove or de-emphasize topic cloud.

In usability testing, participants didn't realize that questions were tied to topics.

Analysis of Google Analytics data shows that topics are infrequently used with 1.7% of page views.

Two part question entry puzzling or annoying. Disconnect between form labels and instructions.

Actions: Work with vendor to combine into one field or improve labels and instructions.

In usability testing, one of the participants was annoyed by two part question entry. A few submitted questions have stopped in the middle of a word.

Answer and question buried in visual clutter.

Action: Add visual emphasis to answer and question and remove visual emphasis on other, secondary, items.

Usability test participants commented that they had to search for the answer to the question.

"I see a ton of text right now. And I'm trying to get just my answer."
Usability Participant

"And then more detail, like 'oh, I ran out of space, I guess I can add more here' -- why would they do that to me?"
Usability Participant

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