

# Broaden your Reach. Instant Messaging from the Reference Desk—It's Worth it!



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<http://jeffline.jefferson.edu/SML/reference/ask.html>

## ABSTRACT

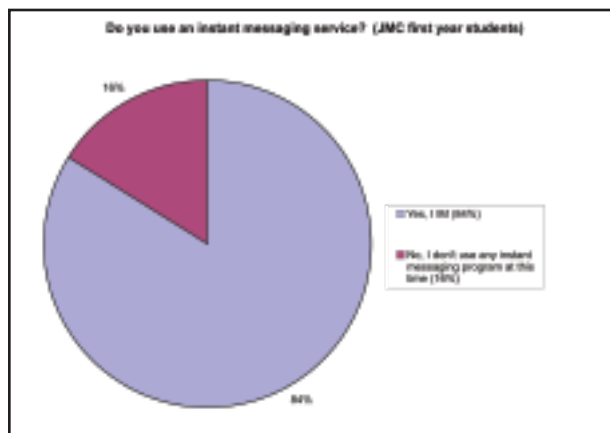
On January 23, 2006, the Scott Memorial Library started a pilot period offering Instant Messaging, first using AOL Instant Messenger (AIM), MSN and Yahoo! and then adding Google Talk and Meebo chat from our library web site. Our poster outlines lessons learned and successful strategies for implementing Instant Messaging simply and easily. In addition, we share analyzed data from the transcripts.

## METHODS

The poster examines the collection of 102 transcripts over a 13-month period to search for reference question patterns by our community.

## BACKGROUND

84% of the JMC class of 2010 reported using IM, with a mere 16% not using any IM program. Incoming students are instant messaging, and libraries can offer a free IM service with little additional effort.



## RESULTS

Sample questions answered by Scott Memorial librarians since IM service has started:

- How many students are enrolled in JMC? How many applied?
- Is the library open to the general public?
- Is OVID down? It keeps telling me my account is blocked.
- I'm looking for information on the history of APNs in New Zealand.
- I am wondering how I should change my settings so I can access RefWorks from home.

## SUCCESSFUL STRATEGIES

- Adding IM information on multiple pages on the library web site to attract more questions
- Promoting the service at all new student and faculty orientations
- Posting flyers and posters throughout campus to promote new service
- IM transcripts have time stamps to track length of interaction - great for statistics!
- IM transcripts can be saved for archival purposes. Great for looking at common questions and areas where reference and educational involvement are needed
- While a complex repository of pre-scripted messages hasn't proved necessary, a few suggested conversational gambits is useful: out of scope questions, survey queries, etc. We use a wiki to keep the list up to date.
- After answering an IM question sending a short online survey for immediate feedback.

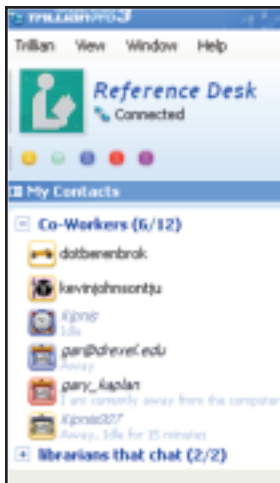
## MOST COMMENTS HAVE BEEN POSITIVE:

- o "Great idea, thanks!"
- o "This is a WONDERFUL service. My mother is a medical reference librarian and I told her how great and useful this is, especially for someone living off campus without easy access to the library and staff."

A few have expressed technological frustration such as:  
*"Instant Messaging - another technological bane of our existence. Another interruption. Another fixation on the 'instant.' I don't think it's the right direction for us to be moving forward in our technological - or overly technological- society. We need to foster the personal, the long-range view, and depth. 'Instant Messaging' fails on these counts."*

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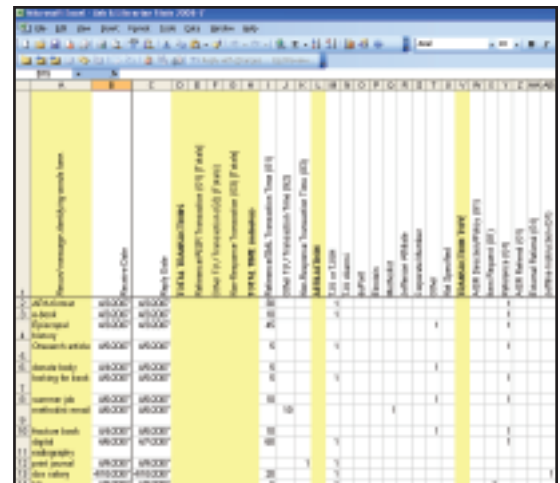
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Trillian Pro Client



Sample chat session



Excel spreadsheet to track statistics

## EXPERIENCE AND LESSONS LEARNED

### TECHNICAL

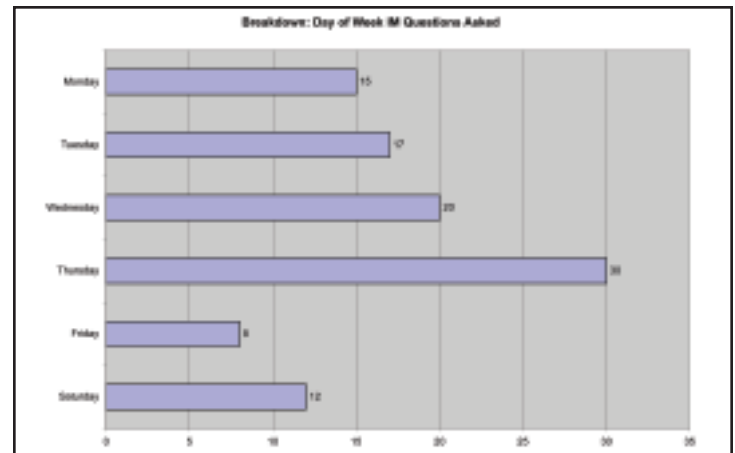
- Until habits are formed, assign someone to monitor that the librarian on duty is online and statistics are being recorded.
- Use a multi-protocol instant messaging application such as Trillian or Gaim to connect multiple IM networks such as AIM, MSN and Yahoo! Messenger. Trillian Pro (\$25) allows inclusion of Google Talk.
- Install a speaker to enable reference staff to hear incoming IM messages while helping another patron—we did this at the reference desk.

### STAFFING

- We began with a core group of 6 interested volunteers. After seven months we invited others to join. Currently, all 9 librarians who regularly staff the reference desk participate.
- Don't assume staff are comfortable "IMing." All staff should open their own accounts and practice with colleagues before answering live questions from patrons. Very few chat sessions included any IM lingo (21%).
- Initially we scheduled librarians to staff IM from their offices, but after 6 months we moved to a single service point model. Due to low volume of questions and increased complexity of scheduling, we recommend librarians monitor IM from the reference desk.

## CONCLUSION

- IM is free, easy to use for both patrons and library staff.
- IM also works easily with most computers, operating systems and connection speeds.
- Over 13 months, successive upgrades and improvements to service took place, including: expanding hours and staffing, adding additional networks and continuing marketing efforts.
- IM service is a natural extension of traditional reference services including telephone, email and personal interactions.
- Despite the low volume of questions, the low costs and high level of user satisfaction justifies the continued exploration of the service.



Reference Desk is closed Sundays (see screen shot on pg. 1 for hours)

