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Laura Kohl
Bryant University, lkohl@bryant.edu

Maura Keating
Bryant University, mkeating@bryant.edu

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A phone of one's own: Texting at the Bryant University reference desk

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by Laura Kohl and Maura Keating

More than 2.3 trillion text messages were anticipated to be sent worldwide in 2008, an increase of almost 20% from 2007.1 Shouldn't some of those be sent to your library? While there are 1.244 billion users on the Internet and about 1 billion PCs, there are 3 billion mobile phones in use today.2 Your students have cell phones and are using them every day. Are you? Is your library? On an average day, young adults ages 18–29 send text messages (60%) almost as much as they send or receive email (62%). Only 26% of these same young adults have ever used instant messaging, while a whopping 85% have sent or received a text message.3 Where is your library at the point of need? Students have questions and require answers at all times, not just when they are in the library or sitting behind a computer. How will you be there for them?

Libraries have always been at the forefront of finding ways to connect to students. As the student population has evolved, so have the ways in which libraries communicate with them. From the face-to-face reference interview to telephone, e-mail, instant messenger, and now Web 2.0 technologies, librarians take strides to be accessible to our patrons.

Meghan Fox, a librarian at Simmons College, introduced the idea of text messaging or SMS (Short Message Service) in a library setting to Bryant University library staff at the Rhode Island Library Association Annual Conference. In her presentation, Fox discussed the "Text a Librarian" service at Southeastern Louisiana University (SELU), which uses Altarama's SMS reference product to convert text messages that patrons send from their cell phones into e-mails received by SELU librarians, then reverses the process for return messages. Altarama sounded ideal, but it came with a high cost for a service that had not been tested at Bryant. In a brainstorming session, the Bryant reference staff discussed possible solutions that would work for our students. Some libraries, such as those at American University and Wake Forest University, use an AOL Instant Messenger (AIM) hack to enable patrons to use a special number and code to send text messages from their phone to a librarian using AIM. The price for this service was right, but we worried that the extra steps involved in this workaround solution would deter some users, especially a tired student needing help at midnight. The "eureka moment" came when we realized we could simply buy a cell phone and a texting service subscription for the reference desk. If it works for our students, why wouldn't it work for us?

Innovation at Bryant University
Bryant University serves about 3,200 full- and part-time undergraduate students and more than 400 graduate students, the majority of whom earn a degree in business. In 2004, the Princeton Review listed Bryant as the second most connected campus in the country. Innovation, and its importance in daily professional life, is at the heart of the university. The Douglas and Judith Krupp Library at Bryant University fosters a dynamic atmosphere that encourages staff to share new ideas. With a reference staff of seven full- and part-time

employees, our size and our commitment to the advancement of new ideas enable us to implement new services easily and efficiently.

Purchasing the phone and service

It was easy to purchase the telephone and corresponding calling plan. Bryant University has a pre-established relationship with a telecommunications carrier that provided us with an inexpensive cellular phone with a QWERTY keyboard that was perfect for our needs. We chose a plan with the lowest monthly calling minutes possible and about 200 text messages per month. The service costs about $240 per year. Our total expense to implement the texting service was $340.

A few Bryant reference librarians harbored texting phobias, but with minimal staff training we were able to banish their fears. Most of our apprehension centered on the actual process of sending or returning a text message to a patron. Some avid texters use their cell phone with a traditional telephone keypad to "write" a sentence or paragraph. By selecting a cell phone with a full QWERTY keyboard, librarians were able to "type" entire messages with their thumbs—a fast and user-friendly approach that made everyone comfortable. Frequent texters often use a shorthand lingo that includes acronyms like TTYL (talk to you later) or LOL (laughing out loud) in their communication to their friends. Our librarians worried that incoming messages would be unintelligible without learning this new language. We didn't have to worry—it quickly became clear that students knew that they were talking to librarians. They spell out words in text messages and use punctuation. We were impressed.

Concerns involved in purchasing a small stand-alone piece of technology focused on security. We keep the texting phone at the reference desk to make it easily available to reference staff, but we stash the phone away when it is not in use. Remembering to remove the texting phone from its hideaway every morning has become part of our opening procedure. We set the phone to a low volume alert tone after we discovered that the phone danced across the reference desk if we used the vibrate setting, disturbing nearby students and staff.

Getting the word out

We launched the "Text a Librarian" service at Krupp Library at the end of July 2007. We had the month of August to work on an advertising campaign before the start of the fall semester. We included the following promotional efforts:

• Incorporated information about the "Text a Librarian" service to the Bryant library Web site, under the "Ask a Librarian" link umbrella

• Added information about the service to our e-mail signatures

• Advertised the service via flyers at the reference desk, as well as on bulletin boards across campus (Thanks to a suggestion from the SUNY Purchase Library MySpace page, we added tear-off slips at the bottom of each flyer with the "Text a Librarian" telephone number.)

• Promoted the service through Bryant's digital bulletin board, a system that displays electronic advertisements throughout campus

• Plugged the texting service in library tours and information literacy instruction sessions

• Mentioned the "Text a Librarian" service in one-on-one sessions at the reference desk, especially if a student arrived with a phone in hand

• Revised our MySpace and Facebook profiles to feature the texting telephone number

• Posted entries on the Bryant library's official blog that extol the virtues of texting a librarian

Publicity is an ongoing effort. We are always looking for new ways to market the "Text a Librarian" service, while promoting the mission and the goals of the library.

What are students asking?

Most questions that we received were academic or ready reference questions: "I'm looking for the case "Brady v. Brown, 51F. 3d 810" can you help me find it?" or, "I'm writing a paper on Congress. Could you please tell me the percentage of the Senate that needs to vote yes for a bill to get passed?" or even, "I have to write a paper on phytoremediation. Where is a good place to start looking. I want to prove or disprove that with phytoremediation we can remove toxins from soil to have a positive impact on the surrounding ecosystems." Other text messages had questionable motives: "How many licks does it take to get to the center of a Tootsie Roll pop?" When intermittent joke questions appeared, we responded with humor and grace, but these questions became low priority if the reference desk was busy.

Guidelines and policies

As the "Text a Librarian" service gained popularity at Bryant, we developed policies to address recurring issues. When we promoted the service, we encouraged students to "text a librarian from Trivia Night" to support the idea that librarians are approachable, and questions don't have to be school-related. Our objective was to gain students' trust, establishing the "Text a Librarian" service as a vital number to add to their speed dial. Our openness may have prompted prank questions, revealing the need to create a library policy to handle dubious inquiries. We now will ask a patron for his or her name and library barcode whenever multiple suspicious messages are received from one individual phone number. The hijinks died down after a few weeks, and we have not needed to ask for personal information. We believe that students were testing the boundaries of the service while exploring its effectiveness. As messages to the texting services increase in number and quality, we are confident that we passed the test.

We make every attempt to answer all text messages in a timely manner. The "Text a Librarian" service is available all hours that a reference librarian or reference assistant is available. If a question requires lengthy research, we send a text message to inform the user that we've received their inquiry. A librarian would never ignore a patron sitting at the reference desk without an explanation. It is important to keep the user updated in a search, whatever the venue, assuring the patron that the message has been received and will be answered. When the reference desk is very busy, we have an information hierarchy of importance. There are times when we have a line of students waiting at the desk with questions, a row of unanswered e-mails, a flashing instant messenger screen, and a ringing phone. An incoming text message can be enough to send a busy librarian over the edge. At these times, we prioritize by responding to in-person communications first, followed by telephone reference, instant messenger, text messages, and, finally, e-mails.

Text messaging can be perceived as more personal than other methods of communication. We respect our users' privacy and respect their communication preference. We will respond using another method only after asking permission to do so. Some questions that are easy to type may have complicated or long answers that do not complement the texting medium. If a question requires an in-depth response, our policy is to ask for the user's e-mail address, or to ask the user to come in or call the reference desk for a complete explanation. It is important to explain to the patron that the answer requires a depth that is beyond the capabilities of texting (or the librarian's thumbs).

Texting success

Between the "Text a Librarian" service's official kick-off in September 2007 and the end of the fall semester in December 2008, the library received 420 text messages. The months with the highest number of messages were those that tend to be busiest among all reference services—October and November in the fall semester and March and April in the spring semester. The Krupp Library staff and its patrons have contributed to the

success of the "Text a Librarian" service. We hope to see it grow in upcoming semesters while we explore complementary services via text messaging, such as circulation notifications, book requests, and more.

Text messaging enhances the quality of our outreach to our students. The "Text a Librarian" service at Bryant is not a replacement for face-to-face reference services, or even telephone, e-mail, instant messenger, or chat reference. Text messaging cannot replicate the rich dynamics that an in-person reference interview can provide. Different mediums work for different people, different questions, and in different situations. By offering another method of contact, we reach out to our users, affirming that we are where they are, and that we are there when they need us. By choosing to text message with our users, we offer further proof that librarians are current, relevant, indispensable—and it doesn't hurt if they think we're hip, too.

Laura Kohl is head of reference services, e-mail: lkohl@bryant.edu, and Maura Keating is reference librarian at Bryant University, e-mail: mkeating@bryant.edu