



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
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“What is Instant Messaging? (IM): a text-based computer conference over the Internet between two or more people who must be online at the same time. When you send an IM the receiver is instantly notified that she/he has a message.”

-Lansing Public Library, Lansing, Illinois, “Instant Messaging (IM) Information Page” (www.lansing.lib.il.us/im.htm)

One of the newest services offered by the Alameda County Library is Instant Messaging (IM) a librarian. This service has been added to the other kinds of alternative reference service offered by the Library, including Live Homework Help, chatting online with AskNow and emailing questions to the library. These services are described on the library’s website (www.aclibrary.org).

We have come a long way from being only available in person or over the telephone. Now library users can use the 24 hour a day AskNow to get answers to questions – answers that can include a link to a website or excerpts from the databases used by their own library. A consortium of libraries in California and other states provides this service – each library taking a time slot every week. Being the AskNow librarian can be challenging, especially if the librarian is used to answering questions in person, but there can be the same sense of satis-

faction as in any reference interview.

Emailing a librarian has been around even longer. I occasionally get an email from someone, usually asking me about a library program, but sometimes about specific library materials. I like the email questions – I find them less stressful than the AskNow ones, because I have enough time to respond without worrying about someone waiting impatiently at a computer screen while I search for an answer.

IM is similar to AskNow. Both involve online reference service, however IM is a more familiar method of communicating for many Internet users, particularly the younger ones. According to an April 1, 2005 *Library Journal* article, “IM Me” by Aaron Schmidt and Michael Stephens, a 2004 study showed that “53 million adults send instant messages on a daily basis.” So it is easy to see why some librarians have decided to embrace this method of reach-

ing out to their communities. In addition, it is a more relaxed way of communicating, with lots of abbreviations and less emphasis on correct spelling or grammar.

Although not all libraries have taken on AskNow or IM, it is astonishing how quickly the idea has been accepted. Cynthia I. Wilson, on her website, www.IMalibrarian.com, has a list of libraries across the United States that offer IM and it is amazing to me just how many have decided to try it – I had no idea it had become so popular.

I have to admit my favorite kind of reference service is the in-person kind. I like each interaction and I like the opportunity to do more than simply answer a question. On the other hand, I agree with those who argue that public libraries must offer a range of services and they must include ones that may bring in – even if it is only

virtually – a different group of library users.

Some library systems – like Alameda County – offer one contact point for IM patrons. Others, like Lansing, Illinois, have expanded the choices. Lansing offers three messaging names: one for adult reference desk, one for the adult reader’s advisory and adult programs desk, and a third for their teen and youth reference desk.

Offering services like AskNow and IM are two more ways we – as librarians – are adjusting to the modern world of communication. As Schmidt and Stephens say at the beginning of their article: “Instant messaging may be controversial, but remember, we also debated telephone reference.”