

**It's All in the Marketing:
The Impact of a Virtual Reference Marketing Campaign
at Texas A&M University**

ABSTRACT

Current information science literature says that library services need to be marketed to users. While the literature has lots of advice on how to develop a marketing plan, there have been few reports on the actual implementation of a marketing campaign and the resulting impact on academic library services. This case study describes the design, implementation and evaluation of a marketing campaign to promote the use of a new virtual reference service at Texas A&M University. The overall impact of the marketing campaign on the use of the service is discussed.

Introduction

The popularity of the Google™ search engine and the notion that all information is available on the World Wide Web has created a very competitive service environment for academic libraries. To compete effectively, academic libraries need to aggressively market the variety and quality of their information resources. The concept of marketing in libraries, and specific library services in particular, has been discussed in the literature for some time. While the literature has lots of advice on how to develop a marketing plan, there have been few reports on the actual evaluation of a marketing campaign and the campaign's actual impact on academic library services.

This case study describes the design, implementation and evaluation of a marketing campaign to promote the use of a new virtual reference service at Texas A&M University.

Virtual Reference at Texas A&M University

In 2003 the Texas A&M University System received a Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund Grant (TIF Grant) from the State of Texas. Synchronous virtual reference (VR) software was purchased with the funds and in February 2004 a joint VR system for nine Texas A&M University System schools was launched as a pilot project. Due to the uncertainty of user demand, it was agreed among the participating libraries that they would *not* market the new service. This would allow the libraries and librarians to grow accustomed to the software and learn to be effective in this new medium.

In December 2004, the project was evaluated for viability and user demand. The project had experienced a number of technical complications, attributed to the consortia arrangement, and overall use of the service was very low. At that time, Texas A&M

University Libraries, decided to completely revamp its approach to implementing a VR system. The consortium arrangement was discontinued. A new software application was purchased and the service was housed completely on site in College Station. The new service went live in mid-February 2005.

As part of the revamped approach to the Libraries' VR services, a VR Marketing Committee was formed. This committee was charged with developing a plan to promote the use of the VR service by university students, faculty and staff. The plan had to be ready for implementation by or before September 2005.

Literature Review

In the literature, virtual reference service is referred to by many names including: virtual reference, digital reference, chat reference, online reference and real time reference. As defined by Reitz (2004) virtual reference refers to the "reference services requested and provided over the Internet, usually via e-mail, instant messaging ("chat"), or Web-based submission forms, usually answered by librarians in the reference department of a library...". For the purpose of this paper, the term virtual reference will be used to refer to the reference services provided over the Internet via e-mail and real time chat software.

The most frequently discussed issues regarding live chat services in the literature are software selection, training, staffing, policy development and marketing (Bromberg, 2003; Dennison, Sanders & Sims, 2005). While most of these authors describe methods for collecting customer feedback and evaluation of the chat service itself, few suggest methods for evaluating a marketing program. Just as customer feedback and service

The Marketing Committee was very enthusiastic about the advertising potential of another widely visible communication mechanism that could be utilized at a very low cost: campus buses. Texas A&M University operates 46 buses on campus and throughout the Bryan-College Station community and the university transportation services department estimates that 5.6 million riders use these buses annually. University affiliated organizations and departments may place advertising on the buses at the rate of ten dollars per bus per month. To promote a consistent image, the same design used for the screensavers was used for the bus posters. By printing and laminating the posters in-house, the cost to print 60 posters was kept under \$100. Posters were displayed in all of the buses during September, October and November 2005, bringing the total cost of this promotional tactic to \$1,480.

The remaining posters were displayed in each of the five library lobbies, the Center for Academic Enhancement, the University Writing Center and used as part of temporary displays in various student and faculty orientation events. *ASK NOW* brochures and bookmarks were also distributed at fall orientation programs. Throughout the semester, bookmarks were distributed at the circulation desks and brochures were prominently displayed at all reference desks. Finally, two advertisements in *The Battalion*, the student newspaper, were purchased. The first advertisement ran for one day during the first full week of classes, along with a press release about the *ASK NOW* service. The second advertisement ran for one day the week of November 22, to coincide with an anticipated increase in student research activity.

Target Market Strategies. A market segment is a group of individual users with distinct characteristics. For a market segment to be considered a viable target for a

Tables 2, 3 and 4 focus on virtual reference activity from September 2005 to September 2006. The *ASK NOW* live chat service operated 72 hours a week and provided an automatic e-mail referral service to Subject Specialist librarians during off hours. Of the 4,404 *ASK NOW* interactions between September 2005 and September 2006, 61% were live chat transactions and 39% were e-mail questions. Questions that came in through the *ASK NOW* system when live chat was not in operation were referred to a Subject Specialist Librarian via e-mail. In general, these questions were answered within 24 hours.

Target Markets. Table 2 shows a breakdown of *ASK NOW* use by various user groups. After the marketing plan was implemented, virtual reference activity increased among all users, including the two primary target groups: undergraduates and distance education students. On-campus undergraduate students, asking 33% of the reference questions, were the primary users of the *ASK NOW* service. On-campus graduate students, with 27%, were the next most active group. Faculty, a user market that was not targeted in the promotional campaign, asked 7% of the questions. Users that identified themselves as distance education students represented 7% of *ASK NOW* activity.

Conclusion

The Texas A&M University Libraries experience provides evidence that the implementation of an organized, cohesive marketing strategy can have a positive effect on the promotion of library services. However, it also demonstrates the need for more systematic and quantitative analysis of the impact of marketing strategies. In particular, this study poses questions for further research: When should a marketing blitz take place? Should faculty, graduate students and undergraduates be targeted at the same time or at staggered times throughout the academic year? Should a marketing campaign be repeated? How often? Long-term evaluation of user statistics is certain to offer more insight into the process of marketing library services.