

Instant Messaging @ Bobst Library

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WHAT IS INSTANT MESSAGING (IM)?

Instant Messaging, or IM, is one of many online communication methods available today. Unlike email or message boards, however, it allows people to communicate with each other synchronously. IM works via a downloadable piece of software that allows users to see if their friends are online; send them a real-time message or share files; and, with the newest versions, even see and hear each other. IM is increasingly the preferred method of communication among students, and many commercial email providers like Yahoo! and Google, recognizing the demand, have bundled IM into their programs and even added functionality for mobile devices like cell phones and PDAs. IM is not a new technology, but it is quickly evolving, and its potential benefits for academia are just beginning to be explored.

HOW IS BOBST LIBRARY USING IM?

In the fall of 2005, a group of librarians at NYU's Bobst Library hatched a plan to start a synchronous question-answering service using IM technology. There had recently been a resurgence in libraries' use of IM technology to deliver reference service, and we too wanted to reach out to those individuals who had adopted this technology as their communication mode of choice. We decided to implement a service

prototype, and selected a third party IM aggregator product called Trillian to deliver the service. This aggregator allows patrons to reach us regardless of which of the three major IM services—AIM, Yahoo! Messenger, or MSN Messenger—they use. Open source and free for download, Trillian simply acts as a single portal that creates three conduits to the major services, allowing patrons to add the NYU service to their “buddy list” (address book) regardless of their own choice of software.

Anyone serving as the IM librarian at a given time uses the same screen name (“AskBobst”) and the recognizable NYU torch logo, so, once a person adds us to their buddy list, our screen name appears in their IM program whenever one of us is logged

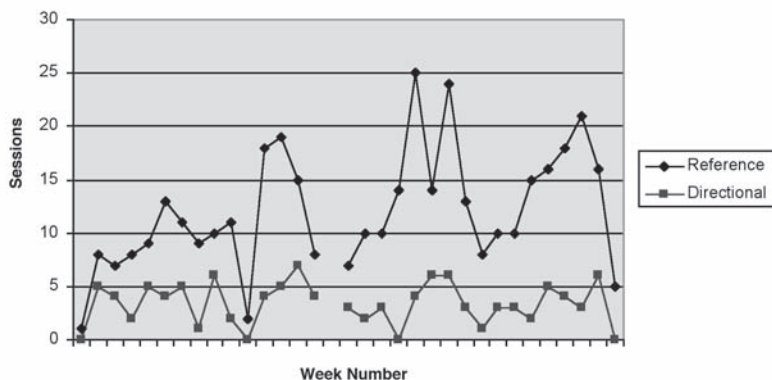
in, ready to help him or her when the need arises.

While our IM service was in the initial pilot phase, we decided to limit the amount of overt advertising we did, and we started by just adding a link on our Ask-A-Librarian web page to see what kind of traffic it would generate (see figure, below). As the service evolved, we began to encourage use of the service in the Library's instruction sessions, mentioning our AskBobst screen name and highlighting the speed and convenience of the service. We also added it to the news banner at the top of the Library homepage. Lastly, we wanted to make sure all of our librarians, even those who were not participating in our pilot project, knew about the service, so we highlighted



The “AskBobst” IM link on the Ask-A-Librarian web page
(<http://library.nyu.edu/ask/>).

AskBobst Use, Fall 2005 & Spring 2006



it for our own community in open houses and meetings.

HOW HAS THE SERVICE BEEN RECEIVED?

So what did our initial users think of the service? After all, the major impetus for the service was to reach NYU community members at their “point of need” via a familiar communication medium. On a deeper level, we also wanted to see how this technology could be deployed to help us meet our educational mission of creating solid, “information-fluent” users and to see if IM could augment our physical services and reach out to people who might not come in to the library. We developed an easy-to-use statistical web form to track the use of the system, as well as any interesting comments that users made during IM interactions. Through this data we have been able to get a good preliminary picture of the use of the service.

One of the first things that became apparent in reviewing these statistics was that adoption of the AskBobst service was relatively fast. We logged nearly 15 chat sessions by the second week, with no advertising and only the small mention on the Ask-A-Librarian page. The service grew noticeably as the semesters passed, and it became common to receive 25–30 queries in a week. We also immediately discerned that the statistics closely corresponded with milestones in the semester, with slight upswings during the midterm and final paper seasons, and precipitous downturns during the Thanks-

giving, Winter, and Spring Breaks (see figure, above).

25–30 questions per week is not a massive result, to be sure, but over two semesters of activity, they account for slightly more than 500 reference transactions. There is no clear way to know how likely these patrons would have been to use another form of contact with us, but it stands to reason that at least some of them were drawn to the service because of the medium. Indeed, some of the user reactions seem to bear this out, with comments like: “by the way, I think this is a great system. Really convenient;” “it’s actually really cool that NYU has this service;” and “so nifty...this is great, thanks!” Further cementing this impression is the high number of repeat customers. Librarians have reported receiving multiple queries from a patron over the course of a semester, and because they have added us to their IM “buddy” lists, people appear to be enjoying the ease with which they can return to us for help. Analogous to the tech-help buddy that comes preinstalled in many IM programs, AskBobst gives them a go-to resource for research help.

Whether this service facilitates our educational mission is harder to measure, but two things lead us to believe that it is making a contribution. The first is the nature of the interactions. Where we originally expected that patrons would take advantage of the service to ask quick questions, it has turned out that very often the interactions take significant amounts of time, as librarians help people who are in the middle of doing their research. Many

of the sessions involve librarians giving complex instructions about the use and evaluation of information-finding tools, a key skill to possess in the networked world. The second indication was the positive impression of the librarians who staff the service; they noted that they felt better able to promote core information competencies over this medium as compared to email. The longer interactions and dynamic nature of the give and take between librarian and patron has provided us with a service platform that more closely mirrors our traditional physical services. These positive signs speak to the potential power of using IM to promote better information fluency in the library.

WHAT’S NEXT?

Our experiences have convinced us that IM is a worthwhile and relatively durable service option, so we will continue to expand on our marketing efforts to further increase its visibility. Based on our positive experience, we think that readers should consider whether they too could make use of this technology in larger educational settings. For instance, how would students react to being able to attend office hours with their professor via IM? How might students’ collaborative work evolve differently if there were an IM component built into course projects from the start? How might students take advantage of the technology to create innovative text, audio, and video presentations or performances? How could IM conferencing options be used to extend the physical classroom?

These are only a few of the many possibilities, and all are simple and reliably available in the current generation of IM; future iterations will no doubt create even broader opportunities. Even setting aside how enamored of IM many students are, there are plenty of good reasons to think about what IM could do for you.

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