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Predicting the Success of Commercial AskA Services in the United States and Abroad

By Jenny Baum & Kate Lyons

SUMMARY. This article discusses the quality of commercial and library-sponsored AskA services and uses this as a prediction for the success of the programs. The authors also explore the idea of the commoditization of information and its acceptance rates in different countries, and use these to predict the success of commercial and library-sponsored AskA services both in the United States and abroad.

KEYWORDS. AskA, online reference, international AskA programs, information brokerage

You have a question. You need an answer. Maybe you don't have time to do the search yourself. Or, maybe you're unsure of the best way to go about your search. You decide that you need an information professional, and that you want to interface with this person via online communications, like a web-board, chat or e-mail. You could go to one of the many library sponsored online reference services to Ask a Librarian for free, or you could go to a for-profit site and pay for help.

Searching through Google Answers, a fee-based, virtual reference service, it's clear that some people choose to pay for commercial AskA services. Commercial question boards are full of users asking questions and commenting on other users' questions. The services are not deserted and unused. Perhaps these commercial reference services will become wildly popular, while library online reference services sit idle. Today we take the part of fortune teller and try to predict the success of the commercial and library-sponsored programs, based on the quality of their services and the popular perceptions about the commodization of information.

Ann Marie Parsons ends her article, "Digital Reference: How Libraries Can Compete with AskA Services" (2001) with the following statement:

If librarians create standards for how and when quality information will be delivered to patrons educated with the knowledge of what information to accept and from whom, libraries will no longer be beholden to the standards set by AskA services. Instead AskA services will find it necessary to keep up with libraries.

Now, two years after Ann Marie Parson's article, librarians can reflect on how their own digital reference services have evolved, and compare their work to that of commercial services. Generally, library sponsored online reference sources meet all the criteria for satisfying a user's information needs.

Library AskA services are often better established than for-profit AskA services, partly due to the fact that they have more combined global resources. According to Kasowitz, in 1999, “45% of academic libraries (Janes, Carter, and Memmott, 1999) and 13% of public libraries (Janes, 2001) offered digital reference services through e-mail and the Web” and that “a later study found that 99% of 70 academic libraries offer e-mail reference and 29% offer real-time reference service” (Tenopir, 2001).

In the U.S., the Collaborative Digital Reference Service (CDRS), seeks to link academic, public and governmental libraries and the Virtual Reference Desk (VRD) “consists of almost twenty AskA services (specializing in science, math, education, art, general reference, and other areas) that submit out-of-scope and overflow questions via e-mail to VRD to be redistributed to other member services or answered by librarian volunteers” (Kasowitz, 2001). Librarians are filling the need for these services. CDRS launched a collaborative site by librarians for librarians, called QuestionPoint.org. Their “Global Network” lets the user choose the question language and reply language.

These services in particular, and libraries in general, have channeled their organization’s efforts towards smoothing the mechanics of AskA service, meeting the criteria for finding an information professional, and bridging cultural and language barriers. The type of service that library-sponsored online reference services are able to provide, a global network of other information professionals, about their online reference projects and each other’s, gives library-sponsored online reference services an added edge, a collaboration between peers that competitive commercial businesses often lack.

Libraries have made steps towards smoothing the mechanics of information service. The tradition of reference librarianship has paved the way for new technology standards among AskA services. However, technology standards have yet to be established between AskA services, much less international AskA services. Kasowitz defines this problem as including “specifications for expressing, sharing and storing data captured in digital reference transactions (i.e., question-answer exchanges).”

There are several criteria for finding an information professional. Commercial services have been participating in information brokerage for years, for the medical and law professions. Only recently have commercial services sought to answer the information needs of Everyman. While the information needs of the average user may not appear to be as crucial as in a medical or law setting, the accuracy of the information is always of the utmost importance to the person receiving it, especially since users may use online information to make critical life decisions. Imagine a user on an online question board asking for advice on whether to visit a doctor, given a set of symptoms, or whether they need counseling for a problem. A typical consumer needs accurate, objective information as much as any business or corporate user. Cultural and language barriers are an obstacle to providing patrons with their information, that information professionals face regardless of whether they answer reference questions over the phone, online or in-person.

Cultural and language barriers cannot be addressed as thoroughly online as they can be in a library setting. The Web is notoriously English-based and America-centric. The United States accounts for 29% of global Internet access according to the Nielson/Netratings report for 2/20/03 (Library Journal, April, 2003). This is a large percentage for one country, but is still only a fraction of who's online. While Google and Babblefish translators have helped to bridge language barriers, there is simply not the wealth of information available online in other languages that is available in book resources and proprietary databases in English. If the user is not a native English speaker, or if there is some cultural dynamic to their question, the user may also lose out on making their questions fully understood. The potential for an erroneous or misleading answer is that much higher in an online setting. Reference question leads such as body language and inflection cannot be conveyed as accurately online as they can in a face-to-face interview. Because librarians have so much experience with in-person reference interviews, they may be more sensitive to realizing these differences between electronic reference and in-person references, and are great candidates for figuring out how to adapt to the electronic reference interview. One criteria for comparing information professionals might be this experience with a diverse patronage, both in face-to-face reference interviews and in cyberspace.

Commercial AskA services in the United States have tried to smooth the mechanics of AskA service, meet the criteria for finding an information professional, and bridge cultural and language barriers by emulating the library's question board services. In doing so, commercial enterprises changed certain aspects of the online reference interview. For example, online for-profit services often only check online resources, can pick and choose the questions they want to answer, have employees that may or may not be certified librarians, do not offer phone support, and refer patrons to the sources that provide the best domain names regardless of whether they are the best resources. Unlike libraries, commercial services can often provide marketing for their services that libraries cannot. Unfortunately, overzealous marketing can sometimes extend to commercial AskA results. Moreover, for-profit search engines, such as Google and Ask Jeeves, have been known to change search results that do not reflect well on the company, or that are perceived as not being conducive to a search (Tomaiulo). Most users would agree that having a company with outside agendas censor their results does not make for the best information professional.

Lisa Guernsey's New York Times article in 2000, "Suddenly, Everybody's an Expert on Everything," states "An expert, it seems, is now an ordinary person sitting at home, beaming advice over the Internet to anyone who wants help" (<http://www.william.russo.com/timesarticle.htm>). In examining criteria for choosing an Information Professional, we can better understand other qualities required in an online reference librarian. Besides the ability to work with a diverse patronage, the Information Professional must have access to the most diverse and most authoritative information, be familiar with all of the available resources, be readily available (return answers quickly), motivated to answer all questions equally, and thoroughly understand the question (be a good reference interviewer).

The question of whether a researcher on a commercial AskA site has access to more information than a typical AskA librarian depends both on the library-sponsored AskA program and on the researcher working for a commercial AskA service. Typically, a librarian would have

access to all of their information available at their library, including the Internet, and all other library materials and electronic resources. A Google Researcher, for example, might also have access to all the library resources their local, academic, or corporate library provides, but it is also possible that they only have access to the World Wide Web for their information. Thus, a user choosing between a commercial or a library-sponsored AskA service who is concerned that their researcher definitely has access to the largest collection, might be more likely to choose a library AskA service than a commercial AskA service.

Users may realize, however, that regardless of the quantity of information an information professional has at their fingertips, their ability to search through their information vastly impacts the quality of their answer. The FAQ on Google Answers states the following, in response to a question about the expertise of their Researchers:

All Google Researchers are tested to ensure that they are expert searchers with excellent communication skills. Some of them also have expertise in various fields. Your question may be answered by an expert in a particular field or by an expert searcher. (<http://answers.google.com/answers/faq.html>)

The Google FAQ continues with an explanation about an essay researchers must write, and practical experience they need, with answering sample questions. Also, Google provides their users with a “moneyback guarantee.” The screening process for a librarian position is not only more rigorous, but also more standard. Most library reference positions require their staff to have Master’s Degrees from accredited universities. Accreditation establishes a standard. A user concerned that the person answering their question is the most skilled at finding information, might be more likely to choose a library service, where the user is assured that every librarian meets these standards. A user choosing a commercial AskA service may or may not find similar standards.

Users may also worry that the person answering their question determines how much time to spend on the question, and how thoroughly to answer, based on the complexity of the question. The professional answering the question, who is paid hourly or on salary, will not have any financial motivation for answering one question more thoroughly than any other. Users who cannot afford to offer as much money for an answer to their question, will find that library-based AskA services will be more in their price ranges.

A user concerned that the person answering their question takes the time to conduct a reference interview and thoroughly understand a question before answering might find that a library service would better suit their needs. Again, a researcher paid on a per-question basis might invest less time and energy into a question, because they know that the outcome would be less.

Despite their drawbacks, it appears that people will pay for what AskA services offer. As mentioned earlier, the commercial sites are not languishing unused. North Americans accept the idea of information as a commodity, and we’re willing to pay for services that were once free. However, if services like Google Answers do not provide better service than libraries, it is unlikely that they will succeed globally, unless people perceive that they get more by paying.

From medicine and food to education and recreation, everything in American society is a commodity. Just as every aspect of American life has been commoditized, so has our access to information. In its mission statement, The New York Public Library states that it “provides free and open access to the accumulated wisdom of the world, without distinction as to income, religion, nationality, or other human condition.” Public libraries are built on the principle of free and equal access to information. However, people in the United States are more accustomed to paying for services.

International libraries, despite different adoption rates of Internet technologies, often seem to lean towards the free and democratic distribution of information, even as for-profit services gain footholds in their countries.

In Norway, the service “Harde Fakta” (Hard Facts) was established to sell information on regional trade and industry. Their public library rules and regulations required that the service be changed to a free system (Lamvik, 1996). Another Norwegian for-profit based system is the INFOSOK project. This project focuses on engineering special libraries and the team leaders carry degrees in multiple fields in order to be more authoritative. According to the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), Norway’s Act on Library Services, amended in 1997, aims to make “all suitable material available free of charge to all those who live in Norway.” Norway public libraries have moved away from a fee-based system in favor of an open-access system <<http://www.ifla.org/V/cdoc/norway.htm>>.

In Sweden, democratic principles also encourage the nonprofit services, like the library’s, to thrive. BTJ (Bibliotekstjänst, or Library Service) is a company dealing with services to libraries, they have recently started or will soon start a for-profit AskA service. Some Swedish libraries have an “ask a librarian service” on their web sites, but the perceived trend is that users prefer talking to a librarian by phone or visiting the library, even if the service is free. Birgitta Sandell of Uppsala University Library wrote, in an e-mail to the authors, that “the Swedish policy is that libraries should keep traditional free services. However, companies have to pay for special services and at the Stockholm University Library students have to pay for lending course e-books [. . .] Inter-lending loans outside the Nordic countries also have a charge.”

Jesus Lau, of the Special Libraries Association, wrote in an e-mail to the authors that, in Mexico, the consensus is that government, library, education, etc., should all be free, and that this is mainly because of the political climate of the country, the government and policies that they’ve had for more than 100 years.

In France, the phone-company’s Minitel service predates the advent of the Internet. Since Minitel already cost money to use because of the phone company’s monopoly, their users are used to the pay system. The convergence of older and newer technologies also means that not everything is on the Internet, as many people are prone to believe. Moreover, many of their libraries do not grant universal access without written permission or do not allow the checking out of books; all books must be read on premises.

In 2000, Gisela Delgado, head of one of Cuba’s independent libraries, said of the government, they “consider [independent libraries] to be dissidents, opponents, when all we have

wanted to do is promote culture” (source: <http://www.cnn.com/2000/WORLD/americas/11/12/reading.freedom.ap/>). While the government does not ban books, they are able to control the flow of information by making politically sensitive books harder to find. Allowing various sources of information can make it more difficult to stem the flow of information.

There’s nothing new about businesses offering services similar to ones that libraries have traditionally offered for free. And often, there is some added value to fee-based services. For example, video rental stores may have different hours than a user’s local library, and the user may decide that convenience is worth a fee. That’s the Capitalist view of information services, that weighs perceived value against supply and demand. As a result, the commoditization of information does not strike North Americans as unusual.

In a country that does not offer global health care, global access to information is a desirable, but lofty goal. Charging for access to information is not seen as a sacrifice of democratic principles as long as there is value added by the service. International libraries appear to be more resistant to adopting for-profit services.

Thus, the authors of this paper make their prediction. In the future, and possibly already, library-sponsored online reference and AskA services provide a more desirable service. However, because users are willing to pay for information, and may perceive an added value to the service simply because there is a charge associated with the service, commercial services may succeed in the United States. Within groups of people who are resistant to the commoditization of information, commercial AskA services will not succeed, simply on principle. And, the authors predict that globally, enough areas exist with people resistant to the idea of the commoditization of information, that commercial AskA services will be more successful in the United States than abroad.

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