



Information “Lost and Found” – new models for library reference service

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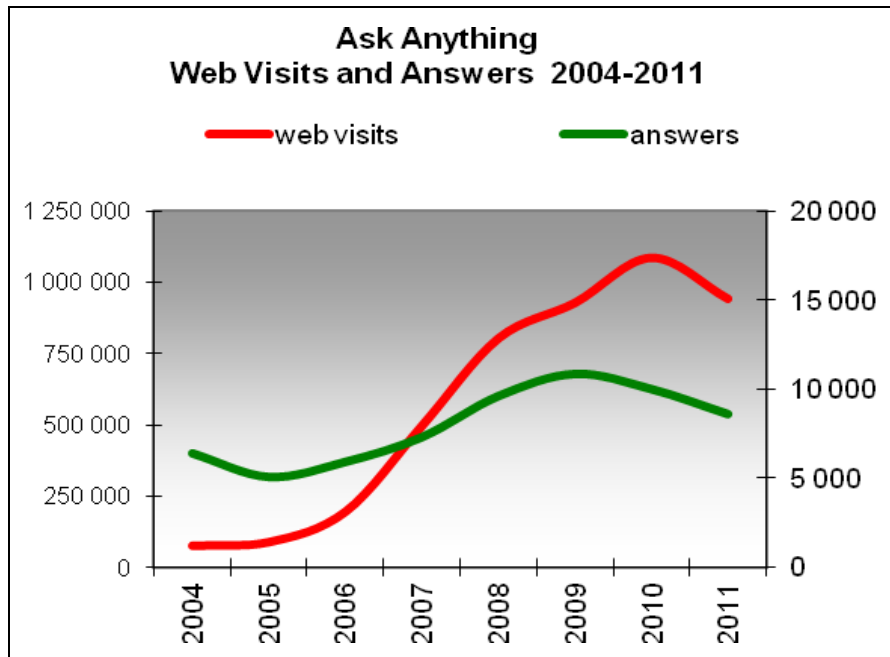
Abstract:

The paper discusses the transformation of library reference service in the context of public libraries: from information repository to knowledge platform. The subject is approached with everyday experiences from the Helsinki City Library’s web reference service, the question and answer (Q&A) -site [Ask Anything](#) which has been operating since 2001. The service, with over a million web visits per year, has an active web community and regularly appears in the programming of two local radio stations. A renewed version of the web service based on open-source software will be released in August 2012.

Background – from project to core service

Ask Anything (formerly known as Information Gas Station) began in 2001. The Helsinki City Library built it with funds from the Access to Learning Award which the library received from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation in the summer of 2000. Initially Ask Anything was planned as a two-year project. However, it has gradually become a part of the library's everyday activities. The service is part of and has contributed to the changes in library work.

Ask Anything provides reference service on the web. You can send your question on any subject and the answer is both sent by e-mail and published on the service. The Helsinki City Library staff, librarians as well as assistant librarians, participates in answering as a part of their everyday work. One person manages the service fulltime. The customer volumes of Ask Anything include an average of 10 000 answered questions per year and a million web visits per year (see graph below).



During the years Ask Anything has collected an internationally unique open archive of reference service answers on the internet. The archive is a popular and wide-ranging information resource consisting of over 70 000 answers. The content is varied from everyday information needs to more specific questions. A typical question for Ask Anything is the recollection of a long lost memory, a piece of fiction, film or music that the user once had but is now lost.

In addition to the web service Ask Anything also has two weekly radio programs. Since 2003 we have had a program called Ask Anything on the Ylen aikainen station of the Finnish Broadcasting Company. In 2008 a second radio co-operation began with Radio Helsinki, a local radio station in Helsinki.

Ask Anything also had a mobile reference service unit, the Information Barrel, that people could visit as it toured the city, for example at malls or at different happenings. One or several staff members followed with the Information Barrel when it was on tour so that people could get acquainted with the service. Our experiences showed that this was not the

most effective way to market the service. Therefore since 2008 the barrel has been “retired”.

In recent years it has become apparent that many of our users are not asking questions but instead reading and commenting on the answers. As a result the service has changed from a mere Q&A site to a platform of information. It has morphed into a place where people exchange information and find lost fragments, an information “Lost and Found”. In the future the role of our users in creating the content is becoming even more relevant. The renewed version of the web service will reflect this and is set to launch in August 2012.

An analysis of our user feedback

Our most recent customer survey was completed in February 2012. The survey was carried out on the internet using multiple choice questions. An invitation to participate was sent to those who had used Ask Anything in January 2012. We received 149 replies. The aim was to collect background information and find out what our users expect from the library reference service in the future.

According to this survey (and also the statistical data collected about the visitors to the site), most of the users came via internet search engines, mainly Google. It seems that Google is the most significant point of contact for the library with information seekers. In order to be visible on the internet library reference service and all other library services need to have a good ranking on Google. In addition to Google Ask Anything is found through friends and other networks. We also have a steady clientele visiting the site daily or weekly.

Most of the respondents had been looking for information on the internet before coming to Ask Anything. The information was mainly sought for two purposes: to solve a practical problem (for example “where could I store my photo files on the web?”) or for a more general desire for information (for example “why is the Sphinx and other Egyptian statues often lacking a nose?”).

One aim of this survey was to find out common problems regarding information retrieval or information seeking on the web. As expected the most common problem named was the large influx of information (“I get too much information and/ or search results”). Navigating in the complex information landscape seems to be the main problem. According to the survey the expectation that our users have of the library is the filtration and interpretation of information. When asked what they expect from the library reference service in the future the users most often mentioned reliable and/ or verified information.

In the highly commercialized internet environment the library offers uncommercial and neutral space. The Q&A -service provided by the library is found reliable by the users. The

library has real people answering and interpreting information. According to our experiences this “human touch” could be the most valued aspect of the library’s web service. The need of informational authority is apparent: users are looking for verified, trustworthy information void of commercial influences.

Ask Anything customer feedback not associated with this survey shows that during the last years there has been a shift in information seeking skills of the users. The need for information (thus affecting the questions posed by the user) is either totally trivial or very specific. It is obvious that a divergence in information seeking skills is growing in Finland. This polarization is a challenge for the public library. On one hand some of the questions received are getting more difficult and require more know-how concerning the subject area. On the other hand, there are the trivial questions and those users who lack in sufficient skills of finding and interpreting relevant information.

Reaching users via different media: radio programming as a new way of presenting library reference service

In addition to the web service Ask Anything has two weekly radio programs. In 2003 we started, in co-operation with the Finnish Broadcasting Company, a weekly radio program called Ask Anything (in Finnish “Kysy mitä vain”). A more recent co-operation effort began in 2008 with Radio Helsinki, a local radio station in Helsinki. On Radio Helsinki we have a ‘short fact’ program called The Secrets of Helsinki (in Finnish “Stadin salaisuudet”) which gives the audience short snippets of info about Helsinki. The material for the questions is picked from the Ask Anything web archive. The questions and answers are turned into radio spots lasting a few minutes. The audience of Radio Helsinki is mainly young people living in Helsinki. As for the first program mentioned above, Ask Anything on Ylen aikainen, the audience profile is totally different and consists of elderly people living in the Helsinki metropolitan area. Many of them might be non-users of library services.

Ask Anything is a weekly on-air program broadcast on the local radio channel Ylen aikainen (duration of the program is app. 10 min.). Radio listeners send questions through the radio's web page or by phoning the editorial office. The questions are conveyed to the library’s radio team, which then picks one question to be answered live on the air. The library’s radio team consists of about eight people, librarians and assistant librarians, and the weekly radio shift is divided among them.

The purpose of the program is to take the library reference service out of the library space and make it visible in a new way. With radio we are able to answer everyday information needs and also tell the listeners about our web service. We are promoting library materials and the expertise of our personnel. We aim at co-operation not marketing; we are librarians, not journalists or radio professionals. Therefore giving out hints on how the

answer was found and making the process of information seeking more visible are important parts of the program.

As an example one program concerned the question of Urho Kekkonen, a former well-known president of Finland, having his own star. The listener had heard an urban legend of this and wanted to know the truth. While searching for information regarding this, we did not find out the truth but the process of information seeking was interesting in itself and the answer was made in the form of a detective story.

What skills are needed from the library staff?

It is essential to combine web reference work with traditional library work. At Helsinki City Library we aim to engage as many library professionals as possible for the work. Our policy is to enhance the professional skills of the whole staff: librarians, assistant librarians etc. Ask Anything has boosted the information retrieval competence and knowledge of digital reference material among the library staff. For librarians working in a small library where reference service is not heavily used, it is especially important to keep up the professional skills by contributing answers on the web reference service.

Regarding the training of the staff, it seems that the main lesson learned from our experiences is that librarians need to move out from the encyclopedic viewpoint. One of the problems we have faced is that librarians are very eager to give out as much information as possible. For the user this is a problem because it takes too long to wait for the answer, and when the answer is received it is many times far too detailed, "a bit too much" as one user has said. Instead of an encyclopedia the average user is looking for a quick and concise answer. So the important thing for us librarians is to learn to extract the collected information better.

The future of Ask Anything

During the years Ask Anything has steadily built a solid reputation. It is obvious that many of our "heavy users", people who visit the site daily or weekly, are mainly reading and commenting on the content instead of asking questions. The entertainment use of the service is growing.

A renewed version of the web service based on open-source software will be released in August 2012. The renewed site will be built with Drupal, an open source content management platform. The aim is to enhance visual aspects of the site and simplify browsing of the content.

With the new version we also strive to have better communication with the users. Some of the questions received will be open to users to answer. Also the organization of the content will be made together by both the library and the users. Users will be able to review the answers given by the library staff. The shift is from a library run service to a platform where people are able to exchange information with the library or directly with other people. One aim is also to make the “heavy users” even more committed to Ask Anything so that they will act as active moderators and content producers.