LibAnswers Usability: Rethinking Online Reference

**Background**

- LibAnswers was launched as the platform for UNC Chapel Hill Health Sciences Library’s Ask a Librarian services July 1, 2010. The UNC-CH HSL serves schools of dentistry, nursing, medicine, pharmacy, public health and a large teaching hospital.
- LibAnswers is a third-party application that serves as a presentation and management tool for email, chat and in-person reference services.
- LibAnswers’ Ask Us system tries to match a user’s query with previously answered questions. If no match is found, the user can click the Ask Us button to send email.
- Library staff can make the answer to a question public or private. They can also create public question / answer pairs in staff mode.

**Study Objectives**

- The objective of this study was to determine strengths and weaknesses of the library’s LibAnswers Ask a Librarian public interface in order to improve the users’ experiences.

**Study Methods**

- Analyzed LibAnswers data for queries / questions submitted and usage.
- Analyzed Google Analytics data for patterns of user interaction.
- Conducted a usability lab study to determine what works and what needs improvement with the HSL’s LibAnswers implementation. Ten participants were asked to think-aloud while completing tasks designed to lead the participant to seek help.

**Conclusions**

- Usability participants used a variety of methods to seek assistance, although they didn’t explore the LibAnswers knowledge base without direction from the moderator. Analysis of LibAnswers and Google Analytics data confirms that users will find stored answers and that stored answers have a wider audience than the library’s direct user community.
- Limitations include little undirected exploration of the stored questions during the usability study and lack of ongoing data about user interactions with elements on the Ask a Librarian home page.
- LibAnswers is a effective tool that allows users to get help through self-service and allows the library to leverage the work of answering one question into service for many.

Minority of interactions resulted in a match with a stored question / answer.

**Key Findings & Action Items**

- Action: Expand the scope of the question / answer knowledgebase to increase possible matches. Add stored questions / answers to HSL site search to provide an additional means of discovery.
- Action: Retain Chat Now and Email Form links.
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**Links to Chat Now and Email Form easily findable and frequently used.

**Answer and question buried in visual clutter.

**Actions:**
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- Disconnect between form labels and instructions.
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