

Instant Messaging in Public Libraries

The following inquiry was posted to Libnet by Sue Lathrop, Director of Clear Creek County Library District regarding instant messaging in public libraries.

One of our library branches allows instant messaging, and the other does not. The one that does allow it has a lot of problems related to computer use (particularly getting patrons to leave when their time is up, as well as computer performance problems), and the one that does not allow it has only an occasional problem. We are thinking of disabling IM at both libraries.

Can you please email me whether or not you allow instant messaging and your policies and/or ways of handling it?

The following responses were given:

We never have allowed instant messaging here because it interfered with the other software that we needed on our public PCs.

*Cathy Bosley, Director
Fort Morgan Public Library
cbosley@fmlibrary.org*

I know this is an ongoing problem at many libraries. However, we allow IM's, MySpace, RuneScape, and most other social networking sites and software and have very few problems. We have a limit of 1 hour and the staff is firm about making sure they get off the computer promptly, especially when we have a waiting list. Keeping noise levels around the computers down is also important for our own nerves as well as other patron's peace of mind. Sometimes you have to be extra firm, but after awhile they get the idea and most of the problems go away. Also the idea that their privileges can be restricted or taken away due to bad behavior also helps to make them realize the importance of obeying the rules. Strict, consistent enforcement of the rules by staff is crucial. They can't play favorites with anyone or you end up with more problems than you had before.

One idea we had for our younger teens was a "Kids Klub". The basic idea was to allow them to do things around the library to earn extra points towards extra computer time. Things like assisting patrons or cleaning up the children's area, and basic good behavior. They could lose points for bad behavior, and various other offenses. They had a bake sale this summer in conjunction with our book sale and raised \$80 which paid for a pizza party for them and new headphones for the library's computers.

Allowing patrons to utilize these programs and websites is just a part of every day customer service. My feeling is that if we give them access to the internet, we shouldn't limit or restrict that access unless it violates the law or puts a serious drain on the libraries available resources (i.e. Bandwidth, seating at computers, etc.) I know I had my soapbox out, sorry about that. I should also add that the increased attendance in computer users has directly or indirectly lead to an increase in our circ stats. Anyway, that's my take on the subject. I hope it was helpful.

*John Thomas
Assistant Director/
Network Administrator
Spanish Peaks Library District*

One thing you might consider is using www.meebo.com which is web based access to 6 different IM programs. The advantage would be that you could remove all IM software from your computer and have patrons just log onto their accounts via Meebo. Currently, Meebo can handle AIM, Yahoo!, MSN, Google Talk, ICQ and Jabber. While this will not address the issue of getting them off the computer, I think it would help with computer performance because of the reduction of all those pesky IM programs. Patrons would have to set up a Meebo account but it is free and only took me a couple of minutes.

*Ross Callendar
Regional Consultant, Grand Junction
Colorado Library Consortium (CLiC)*

We allow it. Our public PCs are all a year old and seem to have sufficient resources to handle having all the IM programs open at the same time. We have a 30-minute limit on Internet use when there's a waiting list (no limit otherwise. Users who have been booted off can get back on the waiting list, although we won't kick someone else off for them. They simply have to wait for the next freely available one.)

The point being that this has been working well. Most people get it. Occasionally we have to advise people that they should be prepared to close quickly at any point after 30 minutes. And occasionally someone will be chatting rudely in, say, an enormous pink font, and I must tell them to be discreet or leave.

*Jeffrey Donlan
Salida Library*