

Instant Messaging in Small Academic Libraries

On 5/23/07 Gayle Gunderson, Library Director at Colorado Christian University Library, posted to the Colorado Libnet listserve, the following inquiry regarding Instant Messaging (IM) service:

We're a small academic library with four librarians serving a campus of about 900 undergrads. We also serve some evening and weekend adult students here and at three centers (distance). I'm very curious to hear from others of a similar size/mission who are doing IM reference (we don't and haven't even had that discussion). What is the first step to getting something like this set up? How do you staff something like this?

Thank you!

----- Responses: -----

Although I have no recent experience with IM, I honestly think this is the way to go. Our students use IM all the time and if we were able to implement it I think it would take off like wild-fire. I did test drive a service called meebo -- which you can see on my page at: <http://faculty.adams.edu/~mwalsh/> -- I have it displaying in the "medium size" mode. It can be made smaller or larger when you set up your account at www.meebo.com. At any rate, this is an idea of what it would look like on your library homepage.

Let me know if you'd like to test drive it as a patron and I'll make sure I'm logged-on. The nice thing about meebo is that a patron could use it without having an existing IM account.

Most of the library staff (~40 of us) at my previous library all used Yahoo IM to keep in touch throughout the day. It was very handy.

Hope this helps. -- Mary
Mary Walsh
Alamosa State College

You might consider coming to the 2007 Collaborative VR Symposium here in Denver on July 31 and Aug. 1. There are lots of academic librarians attending and I know many of them offer IM services at their library. This would be a good, hands-on networking opportunity for you. Also, one panel session is devoted to the topic of IM. You might want to check out the agenda at:

<http://www.coloradovirtuallibrary.org/reference/2007VRSymposium/agenda.html>

--Kris--
Kris Johnson
AskColorado Coordinator
Colorado State Library

I'm also at a small library. I'm the only professional librarian here. I use about 13-15 library grad students to staff it and do a little myself. They're all volunteers who do 2-8 hours shifts. If you try the library school at the University of Denver, I bet you'll get some interest. A lot of graduate students really want and need VR experience, and they can work odd hours, and they can do it remotely. That's one way to get more hours covered.

If you have volunteers, you just have to make sure they have permission to access your databases, etc. to help students out.

I set mine up using meebo.com. If you have any questions, just let me know!

Liz Barksdale
Director of Library and Media Services
Western Texas College

Amanda Etches-Johnson recently posted a blog about a workshop she did on this subject at: <http://www.blogwithoutalibrary.net/?p=275> which includes a step-by-step on how they established at her university an IM reference service, including how they did their pilot program, etc. They are a bigger university, I think, but we are working on a proposal to do IM here, and the handout she gave at her workshop is amazing and has been VERY helpful for me: <http://blogwithoutalibrary.net/talk/ei2007/im.pdf>

It may not be the silver bullet for you, but it's pretty good stuff. And I think she's terrific anyway.

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6/21/07 Status report note from Gayle Gunderson = we decided that we're not in a position to pursue this for the library webpage but could possibly do this on individual pages such as a personal faculty members' page.

Here follows some related comments posted on the Digital Reference Listserv to a very similar question posed by Elizabeth Starkey:

I am new to the list & this is sort of related to last week's question concerning virtual reference. I am the only reference librarian in a library serving about 600 students & we'd like to start offering this fall an instant messaging service. I've read various articles in the literature, but was wondering if anyone on the list has experience with Meebo & Trillian & would be willing to offer advice as to which is better/easier to use.

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I'm also at a small academic library, the only professional librarian there, and I started an IM service a few months ago. I tried out Trillian but opted for Meebo because students don't have to download it. I'm using grad students from the library schools in my state to staff the service, and it's also nice that my volunteers don't have to download anything. On my system, Trillian seemed to lose service more often than Meebo too. A main disadvantage of Meebo is that it's harder to keep logs. We set up a message board at www.freepowerboards.com and I have everyone post their logs there. Other people I've talked to who use Meebo have set up an Access database for the purpose of keeping track of logs.

If you have any questions about any of that, just let me know!

Liz Barksdale
Director of Library and Media Services Western Texas College

At the Center for Grad Studies at Baker Online, we use IM, and it has increased our traffic, considering that quick reference questions are more frequent.

As for the choice of software, we have been using GAIM (now called Pidgin) with no problems. We could connect with MSN, Yahoo, AIM, and other users. I have tried Trillian as well as IM2. The interfaces are more aesthetically appealing than GAIM, and IM2 even embeds itself into Internet Explorer 7 toolbars (this is OK if you use IE7 but this browser still has bugs).

I did have problems connecting to either AIM or MSN through Trillian and IM2, which resulted in the programs crashing upon each attempt. GAIM/Pidgin appears to be stable, and is an open-access resource you can use. I should check into Meebo myself.

Library Research Service
Field Initiated Studies
Instant Messaging in Small Academic Libraries
July 2007

I hope that this is helpful to you.

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I have used Trillian for a few years now with no major problems. For our IM service, however, we wanted to be able to expand our reach to as many IM clients (AIM, Yahoo, MSN, GoogleTalk, etc.) as possible. Gaim was our first choice because we didn't know much about meebo AND we loved the idea of using Centralized Logging, making it easier to save and later evaluate our transcripts. (Thanks, Pam Sessoms!) However, we eventually switched to meebo for several reasons: 1) staff liked the idea that there was no software to download in order to use it, 2) we could staff our IM service from home, 3) it was easy to use, especially for staff who were new to IM, 4) the addition of the meebome widget has allowed us to be more visible in the path of the website user (primarily ECU students). We created an online stats form for our IM staff to fill out after each IM shift. That form feeds into an Access database that helps us sort out our statistics. When we added our widget to one place on our website (our Find Articles page listing our databases), our questions more than doubled. We will be putting the widget in more places on our website, particularly as we are in the midst of a website overhaul and recognize the need to make our service even more visible.

Key to the success of any IM service, however, is MARKETING! That was a huge factor for the increase in our numbers, as well.

Please let me know if I can answer any questions for you.

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