

Expert services on the Web

The commercial competition for libraries

by Wayne Bivens-Tatum

Libraries face the challenge of creating a Web presence as much as any institution these days, and most have risen admirably to that challenge. There can't be many academic libraries who don't have Web sites and online catalogs, and lately many libraries have worked to establish a reference presence online, as well, with individual libraries and consortia beginning online reference chat or undertaking 24/7 reference projects. Digital reference librarians offer their services as experts in finding information to the online community, but they face competition from commercial expert services who provide live help from live people.

Pay services

Some of these services charge for their expertise.

- EXP (<http://www.exp.com/>) connects users with credentialed experts in particular fields. For legal advice, you can contact a lawyer for a set fee per minute, pretty high fees by "free Internet" standards, but not bad by lawyer standards. The credentials and fees vary, of course. For \$.17 per minute, you can find out about collectibles from someone whose service description reads, "I collect soda pop memorabilia extensively." For \$.13 per minute, the witch Lunaan Nightwolff will

cast spells for you or give you spells you can cast yourself. For \$.13 per minute, I may as well let someone else cast the spells, provided they aren't too long. As these examples show, expertise is relative. The experts at EXP register themselves and set their own fees, but there are detailed enough profiles that users can choose reasonably among them.

- Webhelp (<http://www.webhelp.com>) used to be free, but as of January 2001, they charge for their personal help. Their name says it all; they help people find Web pages that answer their questions. If the answer to your question isn't on the Web, then you're out of luck with them. Of course, they claim to search the entire Internet, which is quite a trick. Back when they were free, I tested them by asking about a relatively obscure official in the Australian government in the 1950s. The first "answer" to my question was wrong, but after some insistence on my part, the Webhelper went back to work and eventually found some information on the person. I'm not a bad Web searcher myself, and I was a little impressed. But my experience and that of others I've talked to hints that the Webhelpers have the same mindset as many undergraduates: they settle for the first answer, and not necessarily the right answer. Even though you have to pay for Webhelp's

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personal service now, you can search its "knowledgebase" for free and hope to find an answer to a previously asked question similar to the sort of like in Ask Jeeves model.

- Kasamba (<http://www.kasamba.com/>), another pay service, bills itself as, "Your source for expert advice and professional services!" The type of services and experts varies. For \$.66 per minute, you can get advice on "Problem-solving in the areas of water quality, especially in limescale formation, corrosion, and equipment failures" from someone who claims to have 20 years of experience, and lists degrees, employment, and publications. For \$1.25 per minute, you can get help with dream analysis from Purelight. She describes herself: "I have been clairvoyant all my life, and love helping others with my gifts. I use no cards, only my natural abilities to see into your future with clarity, and communicate with angels and guides." Purelight has a five-star rating from users of her services, probably since she dispenses with crutches like cards and communicates directly with angels.

- Inforocket (<http://www.inforocket.com>) works a little differently than some of the pay services. Here you ask a question and experts answer it (perhaps), but you pay only if you receive a good answer. If you rate the answer highly, you pay the price you agreed to, but if you rate the answer poorly, then you don't pay. I'm not sure how it works in practice, but I can think of some basic principles of economics that may cause a disproportionate number of low ratings to good answers.

- At Keen (<http://www.keen.com/web/>), you click on an expert and the expert calls you on the phone. For \$1.00 per minute you can talk to StarChave about "How to Make It Big In The Entertainment Industry" (presumably worth the price). Keen seems to have a lighter selection of topics than some of the services, such as EXP or even Kasamba. My favorite category is Celebrities@Keen, where for a mere dollar you can here a recording of Alyssa Milano (yes, *that* Alyssa Milano) talking about her pets or how she got into the business. You can't find that in Lexis-Nexis.

Free services

Because of the free-information ethic on the Web, the main competition to libraries may come from the free expert services, of which

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there are many: Abuzz, AllExperts, Askanexpert, Askme, Knowpost, and WHQuestion are a few. Even Yahoo has such a service. They vary in format and in quality control.

- Askanexpert (<http://www.askanexpert.com>) seems like one of the best of the free sites. One asks a question of a particular expert, and to become an expert, the folks at Askanexpert want you to present some qualifications. They prefer you to have a Web site about your subject. Many of the experts' links I tried linked me to their Web pages that explained their qualifications and interest in the subject, whether it was music composition, family therapy, or ocean animals. Of the free sites, this is among the most accountable.

- At Allexperts (<http://www.allexperts.com>), as at most of the sites, anyone can register as an expert on anything, and no one can verify their expertise. At this site, one posts a question to a particular expert. I registered myself as an expert and was almost immediately accepted. But you can tell a lot about the experts by their name and the description of their expertise. Legal experts tend to have full names with "Esq." attached, and their descriptions are often complete and coherent. On the other hand, if you want an expert on fantasy novels, you may have to rely upon Zorander, who says, "To the exclusion of almost everything else in life, I am to the Sword of Truth written by the literary god that is Terry Goodkind novels what Nathan is to prophecy." Well, there it is.

- Abuzz (<http://www.abuzz.com/>) is a community of opinionated Web surfers who can ask and answer questions as they will. I signed on as an expert in philosophy and am always getting e-mails "inviting" me to "interactions" about such questions as "What is the meaning of life?" and "What is the event you would most like to travel back in time to witness?" One of the top experts in this field

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is someone calling him- or herself "Count Fathom." "I can wait, I can fast, and I can think," Count Fathom tells us. No doubt.

- Knowpost (<http://www.knowpost.com>) calls itself a community. Rather than contact a particular expert, you post a question to a board, and someone may answer it. There are no expert listings as in some other services. However, in addition to random questions and answers in any particular category, Knowpost experts can offer "HowTos," which cost not money but points to view. "Points are the currency of KnowPost. You are given 25 points when you register at KnowPost and you can earn more points by answering questions and posting HowTos." For three points you can learn how to "Support the lunchmeat revolution," and for two points you can "Experience philanthropy firsthand and make the world a better place." It seems a small price to pay.

- WHQuestion (<http://WHQuestion.com>) claims it is "the ultimate tool for acquiring knowledge on the Internet." With this tool, you post random questions and sometimes get them answered by people browsing through the fresh questions page. They play up the fact that a lot of the answers you can get here are not available on the Web or in books, because they are in people's heads.

- Askme (<http://www.askme.com/>) allows you to post a question to a general topic bulletin board, or target a specific expert and ask that person a question. Like the other sites where you can ask questions of specific experts, the range of expertise varies. However, you can usually tell enough about the experts to determine their competence. I'm registered as an expert in politics (qualification: I read a lot), and every day I get an e-mail directing me to new questions on the politics board. The questions vary widely, including many that look as if they were taken from a political science exam, but often they receive good answers.

Conclusion

The expert services are divided into pay and

free services, and the free services are further divided into sites that require some sort of qualification and those on which anyone can register as an expert. They also range from sites at which you target a specific expert to those where you randomly post a question and randomly receive a response. The qualifications of experts vary, but one can often sift through the chaff to get the wheat, and in my experience, many experts try to answer questions quickly and correctly.

From an academic librarian's perspective, it's hard not to laugh at some of the experts, but these services use the Web to do what it does best—connect people. The free expert services that allow anyone to register take advantage of the knowledge dispersed throughout the online community. Sure, it's hard sometimes to know which expert to turn to, or how to evaluate your information, but the same can be said of traditional library reference service.

We must remember how these services work and how to use them for our benefit. If we are to compete with and criticize them, we need to know what they do and don't do well. We should also try to figure out what librarians can learn from these services. What do we like? What should we imitate? What do we definitely want to avoid? And if we direct library users to them, we should be ready to discuss whether they are pay or free, how they identify their experts, how we can evaluate the experts and their information, and what sorts of questions they may answer.

These sites are sometimes seen as competition for reference librarians, but they need not be. However, we have to know what they do to know what we do better. ■

("Public access . . ." cont. from page 709)

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10. Ibid. ■