

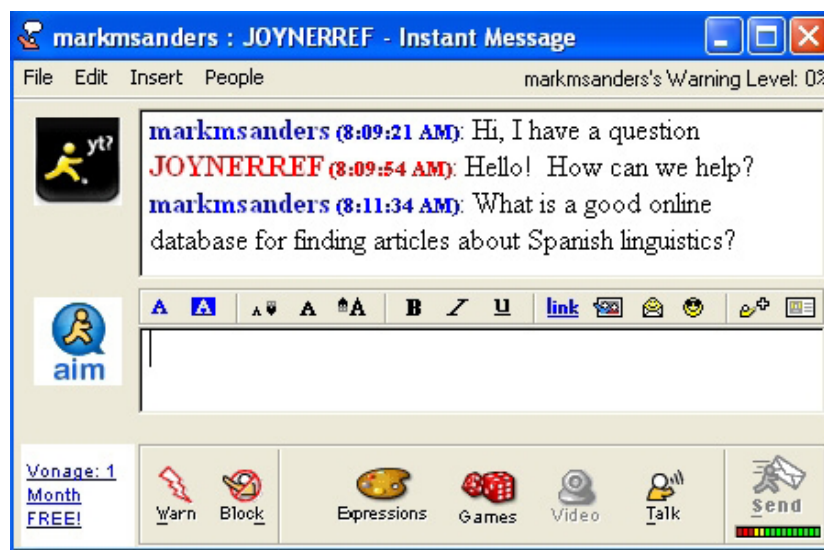
“AIM” for Success with IM

by Mark Sanders

Instant messaging (IM) is a hot topic among libraries today. The past few years have seen a burst of articles in the professional literature describing the technology and the ways in which libraries can incorporate it into their range of services. Conferences at the state and national level often contain at least a few sessions dedicated to overviews and cases studies of IM. Much like e-mail reference a few years prior, the rise of IM can be attributed to its exponential growth in popularity among patrons in both their professional and personal online activities. A recent report by the Pew Internet and American Life Project found that 53 million adults trade IMs and 24% of them swap IMs more frequently than e-mail.¹ This article examines some of the basic issues regarding IM and presents a case study of East Carolina University Joyner Library’s experience implementing and maintaining the service during the 2005/2006 academic year.

Sending an IM is similar to speaking by telephone. The difference is that the two parties communicate with typed text, rather than spoken words. Communication is in real-time and a scrolling transcript of the conversation with space for typing text is visible on both computer screens in a pop-up window (See Figure 1). Phrases such as “sped-up e-mail” or “e-mail on steroids” have been used to describe IM. Users can configure the settings so that a sound is emitted when messages are sent, received, or when other “buddies” come online.

Figure 1: America Online Instant Messenger “AIM”



IM is not as robust as web-based chat. Librarians cannot push pages, co-browse, or easily send scripted answers to commonly asked questions. On the other hand, communication is easier and nearly instantaneous because users simply put in a screen name, type a message, and click “send”. One does not have to fill out a form and wait 5 -10 seconds to connect to a librarian, nor deal with the lag time between sending and receiving messages. IM is also more stable than web-based chat, which is often disrupted with network congestion or other technical problems. And best of all, unlike commercial web-based chat software, all of the most popular IM clients are freely available. A recent article matched up web-based chat and IM in a pseudo, *mano-a-mano* boxing match to determine the superior product in ten different categories including speed, cost, training, and computer requirements.² The winner? IM by a large margin.

Visits to the library websites of the 16 University of North Carolina system universities reveal that less than half currently offer an IM service (See Table 1). The libraries that do offer IM are those with the largest undergraduate populations, who are most likely to be comfortable with using IM.

Table 1: UNC Libraries currently offering IM reference service

<u>Start Date</u>	<u>Institution</u>
February 2006	Appalachian State University
August 2005	East Carolina University
January 2006	North Carolina State University
June 2003	UNC – Chapel Hill
November 2005	UNC – Greensboro
August 2004	UNC – Wilmington

At the beginning of the Fall 2005 semester, East Carolina University's Joyner Library began offering reference service via America Online's Instant Messenger (AIM) using the screen name "JoynerRef" for the Reference Department and "JoynerCirc" for the Circulation Department. AIM was chosen from among other major IM clients such as Yahoo! Messenger and MSN Messenger for a number of reasons. The first was its popularity among undergraduates. AIM is by far the most popular IM client, with over 53 million active users. A recent study at UNC – Chapel Hill's House Undergraduate Library found that students prefer using AIM because its familiarity allows multitasking and lacks formality. "The bottom line is comfort level."³

One drawback is that users of AIM cannot send messages to Yahoo! Messenger or MSN Messenger users and vice versa. But libraries can consider using a multinetwork IM program such as Gaim or Trillian, which can receive and send IMs from multiple networks simultaneously. Joyner Library initially considered using Trillian, but found it too unstable. Gaim has been since discovered and is worth considering not only for its ability to catch IMs from different clients, but also to automatically record transcripts and generate usage statistics.

Marketing the IM service was initially limited to a display bulletin board and talking points at university orientations and classroom instruction sessions. Publicity was purposely limited to avoid overwhelming staff and to permit a gradual gauge of interest among students and faculty. After a few months, it was expanded to include features in student media and other campus publications, screensavers on computers in the information commons area, and a prominent link on the library's webpage. Of course, the best way to get information disseminated on campus is through word-of-mouth, and anecdotal evidence from students strongly suggests that this has been one of the most successful ways of publicizing IM.

Staffing an IM service is one of the biggest challenges and there is no one right answer.⁴ Most reference and circulation departments offer a number of ways to contact librarians. These include in-person and telephone reference, and often extend to e-mail and online chat. Adding IM staffing while at the service desk invariably increases the demand upon librarians' ability to field multiple inquiries and provide quality service. An option for departments with sufficient staff is to monitor IM activity from an office computer. However, this method ties librarians to their desktop for relatively long stretches of time. Both models have their advantages and disadvantages. Like other issues related to IM, best practices can be negotiated to fit a particular institution. The learning curve for IM is almost negligible; a comprehensive instruction session in using any or all of the major IM clients (AIM, Yahoo!, MSN) can be easily completed in an hour.

As is often the case with in-person reference questions, many IMs require only a brief, factual answer. These include, "How late are you open?" and "How do I renew my books?" Others are more in-depth and may require some research. Examples are "Where can I find this article entitled . . .?" and "Do you know the statistics for . . .?" Still others fall into the catch-all category of "random" (e.g. "Want to join me for lunch in West Dining Hall?"). But overall it seems that many patrons, especially undergraduate students, are much more comfortable asking questions by instant message than approaching the reference desk. The relative anonymity of IM removes the intimidation factor of physically approaching or e-mailing a librarian.

Based upon our experience, here is a list of Best Practices for IM

- **Be informal.** Spelling mistakes, abbreviations, and acronyms are all very common in the IM world.

- **Have an answer bank.** For common questions (e.g. how to access and use databases) consider creating a text file of responses that can be cut-and-pasted into the IM window.
- **Save transcripts.** Keeping a record of IM sessions is necessary for assessment, statistics, and quality control.
- **Have fun!** Staff an IM service with librarians who want to do it. Some may be overwhelmed by the service and/or simply do not enjoy it.

Word has spread quickly among the ECU campus community. The IM reference service at East Carolina University has been very popular among patrons since its introduction in late August 2005. By the end of February 2006 we had received more than 850 IMs. It has facilitated learning and access to many resources and services offered by Joyner Library through familiar, user-friendly technology. As one e-resources librarian noted, IM “can make your reference services relevant to a whole new group of users, while serving existing users even better.”⁵ Although IM is often regarded as a technology useful solely for social communication, our experience has proven that IM, like e-mail, has the potential to serve as an educational support tool as well. Like telephone, e-mail, and research consultations, it represents just another method of meeting the information needs of library patrons.

References

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² Sarah Houghton and Aaron Schmidt, “Web-Based Chat VS. Instant Messaging.” *Online 29* (2005): 26-30.

³ Meredith B. Phillips, “The Advantages and Disadvantages of AOL Instant Messenger as a Chat Reference System.” *UNC School of Information and Library Science Master’s Papers Index*. July 2004, <http://ils.unc.edu/MSpapers/2998.pdf> (15 March 2005).

⁴ Marianne Foley, “Instant Messaging Reference in an Academic Library: A Case Study,” *College & Research Libraries 63* (2002): 36-45.

⁵ Aaron Schmidt and Michael Stephens, “IM Me,” *Library Journal 130* (2005): 34-35.