



REPORT TO THE LIBRARY BOARD

MEETING DATE: NOVEMBER 26, 2009

Session:	Public Session
Subject:	askON Virtual Reference Service Update
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Purpose of Report:	For Receipt and Information Only <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Recommendation

It is recommended that this report be received.

Issue / Opportunity

The purpose of this report is to provide an update to the Library Board on the askON Virtual Library Service.

Background & Review

An earlier report to the Board (March 19, 2008) described LPL's role and participation in the development and implementation of Knowledge Ontario's virtual reference service, askON. The service went live on January 7, 2008. LPL was one of 10 Ontario libraries to participate in the pilot.

The service has grown considerably in terms of participating libraries and traffic since that time. In September 2009, more than 20 libraries from Northern and Southern Ontario joined the service, bringing the total number of public libraries to 37. It should be noted that some of the northern libraries are not able to contribute staffing for the service; only one or two anchor libraries in each northern district are able to do so.

Overall, the participation of additional libraries has meant a larger staffing pool and therefore a reduction in time commitment by individual libraries. For example, during the earlier phase, LPL staffed askON an average of 11 hours per week. LPL is presently committed to staffing 7 hours per week. Service hours have been adjusted to best meet the needs of askON patrons.

There continue to be 3 separate service queues:

- 1) Service in French - 10 participating public libraries, providing 33 hours of service en francais. The service capacity is still in development;
- 2) Academic – 21 participating colleges and universities, providing 62 hours of service per week. There is a very high service load; new service delivery ideas are being explored;
- 3) Public – 37 participating public libraries, providing 45 hours of service per week. This service is not yet at capacity.

LPL's askON staff participated in three training courses this fall to enhance their virtual reference skills: Quikstart (for new/er askON staff), LivePerson essentials and Portal essentials. These courses were developed by Ask Ontario and completed by staff at their workstations.

A marketing campaign aimed at Ontario secondary school students was launched in the Spring of 2009. The second wave of this campaign is scheduled for the late Fall. The goal is to raise awareness of the askON service among both teachers and students. As all users must access the service via their local public library website, local libraries are also promoted. These initiatives compliment LPL's recent work in enhancing its engagement with local high school teachers and students. LPL also promotes askON in all its locations with posters, table tents, magnets and sticky notes.

Service Metrics:

The following chart provides some comparative figures for 2008, 2009. Although the number of hours of service provided has increased only modestly from January 2008, the number of Public Library Queue chats completed has continued to increase substantially. For example, 1516 chats were completed during the period January to September 2008, while the number of chats more than doubled during the same period in 2009. During 2009, 8.25% of all Public Library Queue chats originated from the LPL website. This would indicate that Londoners are using the service.

2008

	Jan-Mar/08	April-June/08	July-Sept/08	Oct-Dec/08	YTD Totals
Public Library Service Hours	472	450	320	492	1734
Total Hours Staffed by LPL	131	127	97	100	455
Total Public Queue Chats Completed	593	541	382	781	2297
Total Public Queue Chats Completed by LPL Staff	97	76	42	58	273
Public Chats from LPL Website	177	70	39	107	393

2009

	Jan-Mar/09	April-June/09	July-Sept/09	Oct-Dec/09	YTD Totals
Public Library Service Hours	504	448	329		1281
Total Hours Staffed by LPL	100	90	53		243
Total Public Queue Chats Completed	1432	1541	797		3770
Total Public Queue Chats Completed by LPL Staff	106	127	44		277
Public Chats from LPL Website	104	132	75		311

Value of Service:

- During September 2009, 100% of askON patrons being served by LPL staff said that the service was good or excellent. One young student commented, "I've always had trouble doing searches on the Internet and finding good resources. askON helps me so much. The service has proved itself to be valued by those who seek information in this manner;
- Londoners continue to benefit from the service with minimal cost to LPL;
- LPL continues to play an important role in supporting this service throughout the province; and
- Staff continue to express enthusiasm for the service and appreciate the opportunity to develop these new skills.

Next Steps for askON Service:

During the winter of 2009, a co-op student hired by Ask Ontario produced a report titled, *Delivering the Voice of Virtual Reference*. The report investigated the potential advantages that Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) and text messaging reference services (Short Message Service or SMS) might offer to Ask Ontario's current and future partners. askON is now developing a pilot project to further explore these possibilities.

Ask Ontario continues to plan for service improvements and expansion throughout the Province.