



REPORT TO THE LIBRARY BOARD

MEETING DATE: WEDNESDAY, MARCH 19, 2008

Session:	Public Session
Subject:	<i>askON</i> Virtual Reference Service
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Presented By:	Margaret Wilkinson
Purpose of Report:	For Receipt and Information Only

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 Library's participation in the development, implementation and operation of Ask Ontario's virtual reference service, *askON*. The service went live on January 7, 2008.

The libraries and LPL staff participating in this project are listed at the end of the report.

Background & Review

In early 2007, the Steering Committee of Ask Ontario, a project of Knowledge Ontario, held a series of focus groups across the province to investigate interest in the development and implementation of a real time virtual reference service for Ontario.

Knowledge Ontario (KO) is a collaboration of libraries, cultural heritage organizations and educational institutions. Its focus is on connecting Ontarians with digital content to support their information and learning needs. KO delivers enhanced services to and through the province's publicly funded libraries by supporting equity of access to information, creation of digital content, research and literacy.

Susanna Hubbard Krimmer and Margaret Wilkinson participated in a focus group in Kitchener on May 8, 2007. At that time, LPL expressed interest in the project. By June, various operational task teams were struck. Julie Brandl was appointed to the Service Policy/Guidelines Task Force and Margaret Wilkinson to the Implementation Task Force.

Other task forces included Technology, Marketing, Training, and Evaluation (soon to be established). In total, over 100 individuals representing dozens of library systems across Ontario have volunteered their time and energy to work on these task teams to bring this service to life. The project has only two paid staff, Virginia Roy, Project Manager, and Kathryn Klages, Project Coordinator.

Task force meetings were conducted by conference call with only one all-day meeting of representatives from the various task teams.

By Fall, 2007, the sites for the pilot were identified. LPL was fortunate to be selected.

The Service

askON provides confidential, real time, online research and information service to library customers using chat software. Staff not only find and provide answers to quick questions but assist with more complicated research needs. Information seekers can get links to authoritative sources and get help finding relevant electronic articles and documents. Staff are able to "push" pages to the customer.

There are 3 service queues: Service in French (currently limited to 10 hours per week); the Academic Queue which provides 62 hours of service per week; and the Public Library Queue, providing 40 hours of service to the public per week. Hours of service for the Public Queue are: Monday to Thursday, 1:00 pm – 8:00 pm, and Friday – Sunday, 1:00 pm – 5:00 pm.

Customers access the service via their library website and clicking on the *askON* logo. Although library cards are not required to use the service, a virtual customer will need a valid card in order to access the online databases if they are accessing the service from outside the Library.

askON staff work in a supportive virtual environment. In the Public Queue, two staff are scheduled for each shift (LPL is responsible for staffing 11 hours a week). A "backchat" channel allows staff to consult with one another for especially challenging questions. Staff can "lurk" and observe activity in all queues when they are not themselves engaged in answering a question. The software selected for the project, LivePerson, has both live and training accounts. Staff are able to pair up and experiment using the training account at any time. A portal, created for the pilot, houses policies, schedules, resources for *askON* staff, news, a blog, participating library profiles and links to critical web pages.

The service was launched on January 7, 2008 with the formal launch and celebration scheduled for January 31 at the annual OLA Super Conference. This was officiated by The Honourable Aileen Carroll, Minister of Culture.

Experience To Date

Samples of questions answered:

- I've downloaded an eAudiobook and "allowed" www.netlibrary.com into my accepted browser addresses, but am unable to get my Microsoft Media Player to "play" the book.
- The status term "recently returned to library", when is that book available for borrowing

- Where would I get access to the Eaton's Catalogue in the 1040s. Mother was a child model for the catalogue and would like to get a picture if possible.
- I need to find the number of taxpayers in Ontario. Where would I find this information?
- I can't log onto my account for renewals online, I did however renew them by phone --but would like to access my account on line. Is there a problem with the system, card?
- how do you get rid of bullies
- I need a tragic novel to read for my grade 11 university English class. Can you suggest a good one please?
- I have a math problem to do. I need to know how many bookcases are in the library. I then need to know how many shelves are on the bookcase.

Service Metrics

Traffic in the academic service queue has been heavy and is growing while activity in the public queue remains light. Several of the participating academic institutions had provided similar chat reference services prior to the launch of *askON* and brought those customers to the new *askON* service. None of the public libraries participating in the pilot has offered a chat service before. The service is brand new to these communities.

The following table shows use of the service to date. It is interesting to note the high rate of traffic to the public queue of the service through the LPL website (33%).

Month/Year	Academic, French & Public Queues	Public Library Service Hours	Public Queue Chats Completed	Public Queue Chats Completed by LPL Staff	Public Queue Chats Originating from LPL Website
January/08	1140	148	216	45	63
February/08	1416	157	185	27	68
YTD Totals:	2556	305	401	72	131

Customers are asked to complete a quality assurance survey at the completion of their chat. Some comments from these surveys follow:

- XXXX was fantastic in helping me out! I really appreciate this option for troubleshooting. Whoever came up with the idea is a genius
- Good and prompt. Possibly a little weak on the non-electronic resources. But that would be a weakness of the system, not the individual librarian
- It's awesome!!
- Fair - I received some help but not what I expected. My librarian was nice, but I didn't get a great answer (maybe it was me... I should have used a different resource)
- Excellent service! I will recommend it to my co-workers

To date, little marketing or promotion has accompanied the service. This has been intentional in order to provide staff with the opportunity to develop their skills, become comfortable with the software and gain confidence in their abilities to deliver service in the virtual environment. A major marketing campaign is being planned.

Beyond Phase 1: The Future of *askON*

A new task team will soon be struck to analyze and evaluate the service model in terms of its potential for a permanent and expanded provincial service and to determine a governance model. The team will seek to:

- add participating libraries
- increase hours of service
- increase French language service
- create measures for evaluating ongoing value to libraries, communities and the Province
- continue to improve quality and standards.

The Value of Participation for LPL

- *askON* extends the professional reference services already provided by offering a service using chat technology, the way many people communicate and search for information.
- *askON* enhances the perception of LPL and its staff as innovators.
- *askON* provides an opportunity for LPL staff to develop new skills and work with staff from other library systems.
- Participation in this collaborative project has enabled LPL to offer this new service at minimal cost to LPL.

Participating Libraries and LPL Staff

LPL is one of 10 Ontario public libraries and 7 college and university libraries participating in the pilot of this province-wide collaborative service initiative. The other participants include: Hamilton, Innisful, Kingston Frontenac, Middlesex, North Bay, Stormont Dundas & Glengarry County, Greater Sudbury, Vaughan and Welland Public Libraries; and Algonquin College, George Brown College, Lakehead University, Mohawk College, Ryerson University, Seneca College, and York University.

The LPL *askON* Team includes: Sarah Andrews (*askON* staffer and trainer), Danna Bushfield (*askON* staffer and trainer), David Caloren, Cate Carlyle, Jeff Causier, Ellie Contursi, Lidia Counsell, Rebecca Faber, Jim Gelinias, Norma Gelinias, Linda Ludke, Dana Kirinic, Lisa Manax Skikos, Sarah Marienfeldt, Heather McDonald, Melissa Rapp, Jane Skinner and Margaret Wilkinson (site coordinator). Unofficially, the team also includes the IT Department and the supervisors and staff across the system who support the participation of their fellow staff members in the service.