

How High and How Far?

Exploring Several Ways of Reaching Library Patrons Through Chat Reference

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Abstract

Jackson Library staff have explored several ways of providing chat service using Velaro (a subscription service), free instant messaging (IM) accounts, and a Plugoo widget to facilitate entry into IM chat.

The number of chat questions has risen steadily since the Jackson Library chat service has been offered. After the introduction of web-based chat widgets in summer of 2007, Velaro-based questions decreased dramatically. Based on evaluation of chat services, the Velaro subscription was dropped.

Using a free chat widget is a practical option for providing chat service.

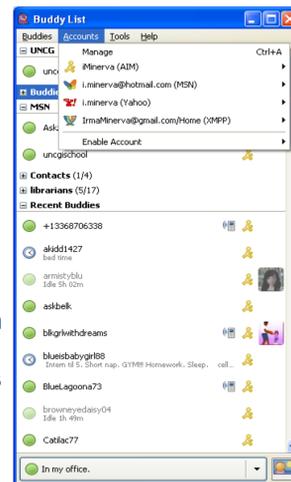
Methods

Velaro

- Users had to click twice to start chatting
- Nice features (co-browsing, pushing pages, surveys)
- Stats, transcripts in centralized Web account
- \$50/month
- Set up: install application on library staff computers
- Monitoring chat: library staff launch application

Instant Messaging (IM)

- Users must create and log into an account
- Stats recorded manually
- Transcripts saved on chatter's computer
- Free
- Set up: Yahoo, AIM, and MSN accounts created
- To ease librarian log-in and chat monitoring, Pidgin (aggregator providing one log-in point for multiple IM accounts) installed on librarian computers

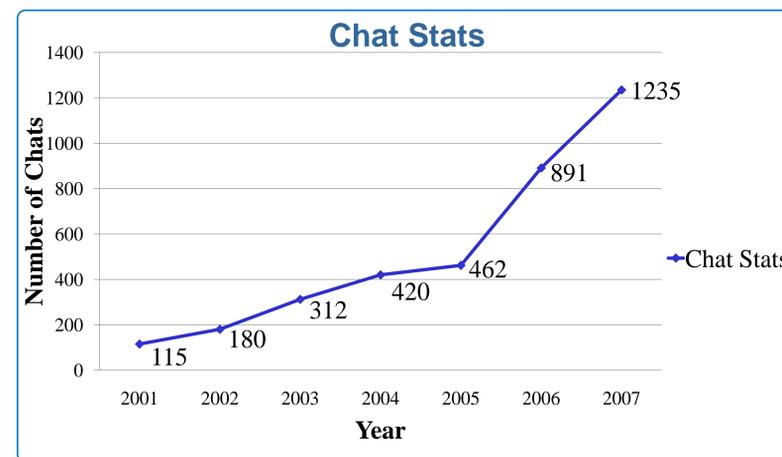


Enhance IM Access Using a Plugoo Widget

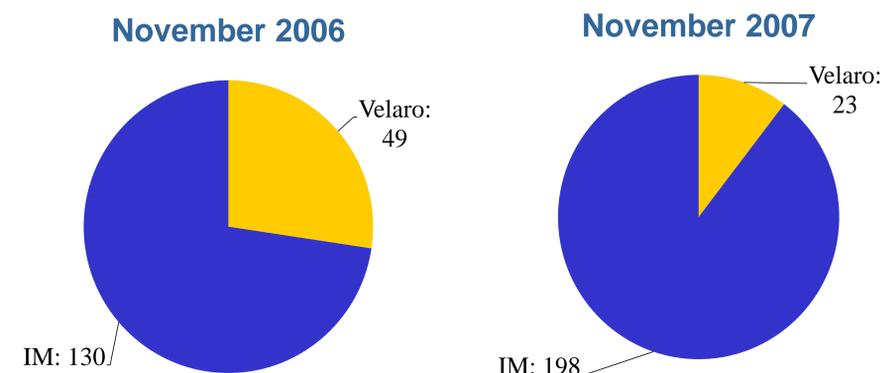
- Users don't need an IM account; they enter chat by typing directly onto widget box
- Library staff receive question via IM
- Free
- Set up: Apply for Plugoo widget embedded into Web page



Results



The sudden jump in chat use is attributed to an active marketing campaign by library Reference staff and prominent placement of the 'Ask Us' chat logo on our website.



After the introduction of a widget to improve patron entry into IM, Velaro questions decreased while IM questions increased.

Conclusion

If library staff possess moderate technology skills, using a widget to improve access to free IM accounts can be a viable method for providing chat service.

Set up:

1. Create IM account(s)
2. If using > 1 IM account (Yahoo, AIM, gTalk) install and configure an account aggregator such as Pidgin
3. Create Plugoo account: <http://www.plugoo.com/faq.php#5>
4. Embed Plugoo code into your Web page

Current & Future

1. Addition of gTalk service, which complements the campus-wide switch to Google-based email.
2. Skype VOIP service was launched Sept. 2008
3. Text-a-Librarian service planned for the future.



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