

Access the Web – IM and SMS for the Circulation Desk

By June L. Power

It's been well documented in a number of articles regarding the contemporary library patron that with the rise in mobile computing and smart phone technology, our patrons are looking for fast and easy service from whichever technological avenue they are using to access our library services. Libraries are responding with increasing numbers of online resources and online means of assistance. One means of communication that is seeing more widespread use in libraries is the use of instant messaging. Many reference desks, and more and more circulation desks, are using instant messaging as a means of communication regarding a number of different library services.

Instead of my usual perusal of a number of web sites on a given topic, in this issue I am instead going to describe the application of a number of free online resources at my library's circulation desk in order to set up instant messaging communications. There are so many great freeware programs out there, I think it is easy to lose sight of how they can be practically applied.

We had for some time been using instant messaging at the reference desk. At first we were using the freeware version of a program called **Trillian** (www.trillian.im), which can connect to multiple IM services and social networks – allowing you to access all simultaneously without the need to run multiple client programs. It also allows for multiple connections with the same service. After a short time with Trillian, we switched to using **Meebo** (<https://www.meebo.com/messenger>), which functions like Trillian but is browser based, so there was no need to download any software. As part of the public services team, I spend quite a bit of time at the reference desk and began using Meebo quite a bit. Seeing how useful it was at the reference desk and how we immediately started to see usage by our patrons, I decided to implement it at the circulation desk as well. It not only provides another avenue of communication for our patrons, but one that they are often using in their daily lives and which meets the needs of a 21st century individual on the go. What follows are the steps I used to set this up – all using free web based programs.

The first step to setting up instant messaging and SMS (text) communications for the circulation desk was to create e-mail accounts with the popular web based email and IM (chat) programs used by our patrons. These included:

Gmail (mail.google.com)

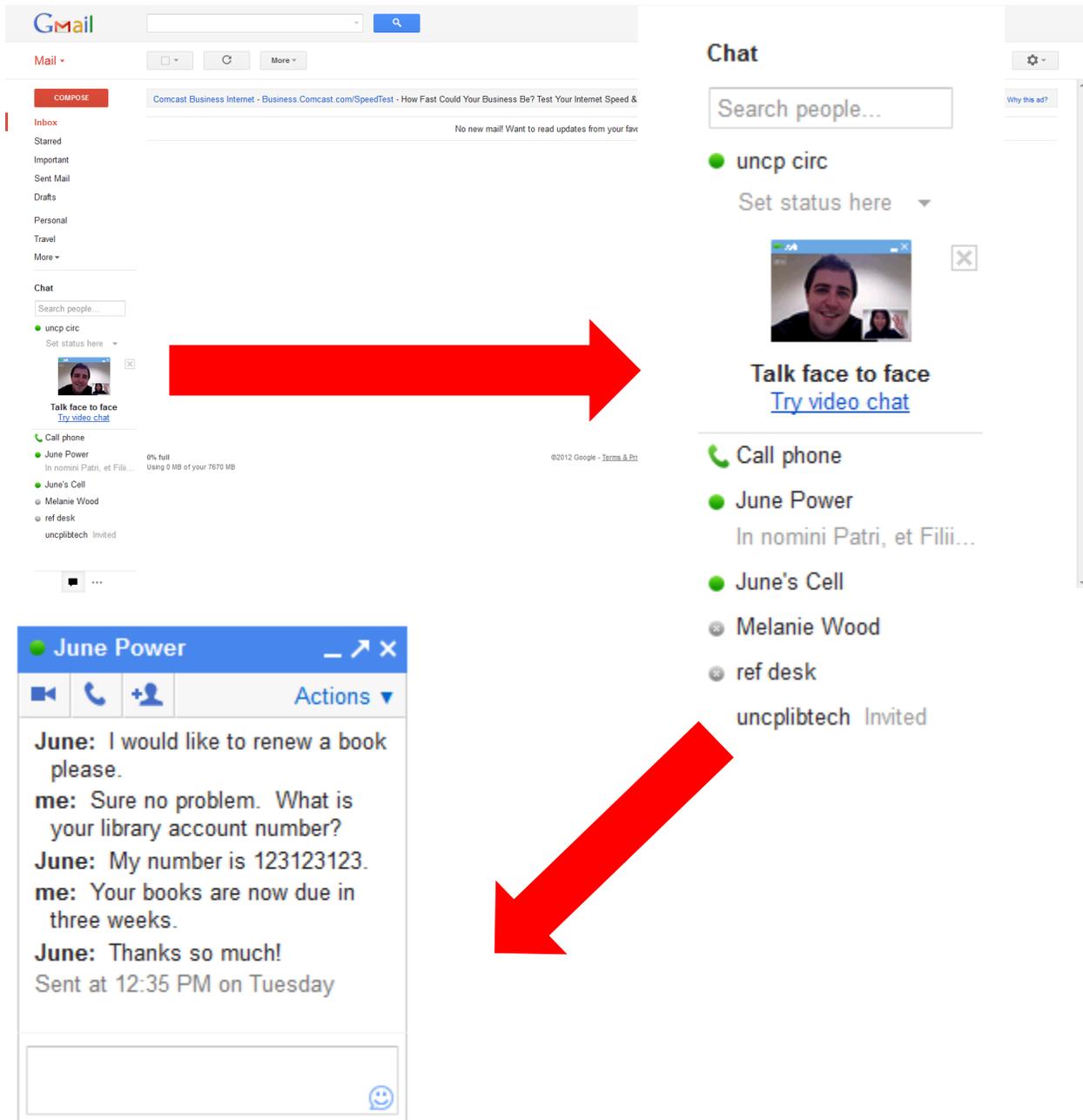
Yahoo (mail.yahoo.com)

Hotmail (www.hotmail.com)

AOL (www.aol.com)

Trying to find a username that works for all of them can be tricky, but luckily **uncpcirc** was unique for all providers. Each provider has an IM interface that allows your patrons

to reach you via instant messaging. The IM interface for Gmail is pictured below, but the other services are similar but with some differences. For example, Yahoo requires you download the messenger program for IM functionality if you use it independently. However, don't worry about downloading the programs that go with the IM providers, as access to these messages will happen through Meebo.



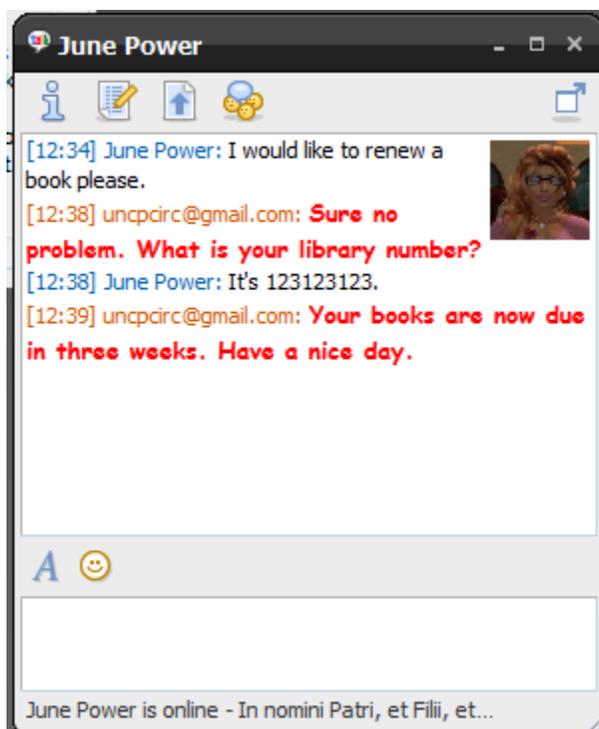
The next step will be to create a free Meebo account and sync these email based IM programs with your Meebo account so that you have a single access point for all IM accounts.



Again, I was lucky and was able to use the **uncpcirc** IM name that I used to create my email accounts. I was also able to customize the interface a bit, though customization functions are highly limited. However, since I was mainly concerned with functionality and not appearance, this didn't bother me too greatly. Once your account is created in Meebo, you can add your IM and social networking accounts by clicking on **Sign on to more accounts**. The circulation desk IM is limited to IM, as social networking messages are directed to the reference desk account.



Once you have synced your IM accounts with Meebo, instant messages will appear in the Meebo screen. They will also be recorded in the original software, so when testing if you have both open you will receive the message in both places. However, once you're set up you need only have Meebo open.



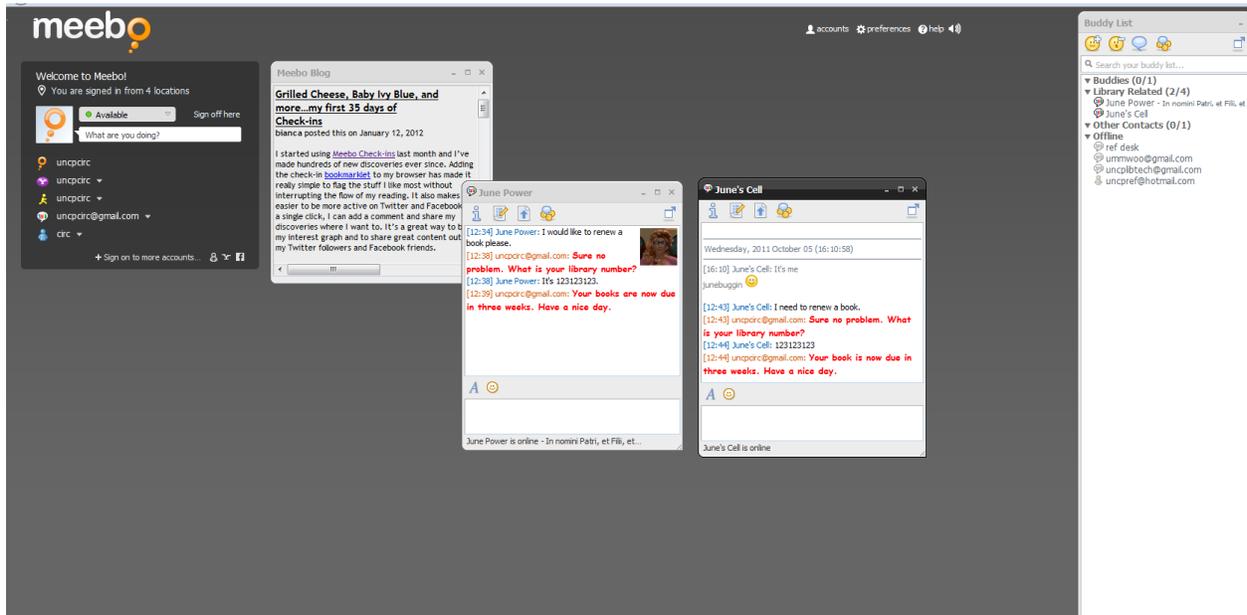
Once you've got Meebo set up to receive your messages, the next step involves making it easy for the front line staff to see and respond to IMs they receive while on duty at the desk. Meebo provides an easy means of doing this with the **Meebo Notifier** (<http://www.meebo.com/notifier/>), which notifies you of incoming messages via your system tray. We have it set to connect to our IM accounts as soon as the computer starts up, so that staff don't have to remember to turn on Meebo. After that, you won't have to do anything to access chat at the circulation desk. Meebo notifier will display a brief pop up in the bottom right corner whenever a message has been received.



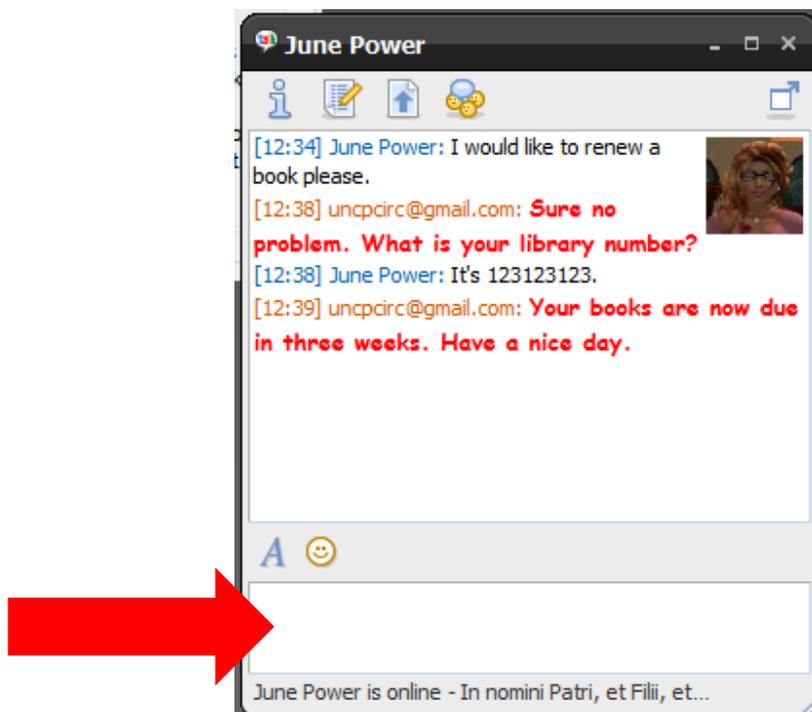
After the pop up, the Meebo icon on the tool bar will change to a full circle from a thought bubble shape and will blink.



Double click on the icon, and a web page will open displaying the message.



Just type a response in the chat box and hit enter.



You can keep the page open as long as you need, and when you close it, the Notifier will remain on and will pop up if another message is received. If you wish to login to the Meebo page directly you may monitor IM that way as well.

While some IM services allow for SMS (text) messaging, others do not. Additionally, not all circulation desks have a phone number capable of receiving SMS messages. To solve this problem I turned to **Google Voice** (www.google.com/voice), a web based Google application that allows for PC-to-phone, PC-to-PC, and video calling between Google Voice and Google Talk's (IM) video chat.

The screenshot shows the Google Voice settings interface. At the top, there is a search bar and the Google Voice logo. Below this, the page is titled 'Voice Settings'. On the left side, there is a navigation menu with options like 'CALL', 'TEXT', 'Inbox', 'Starred', 'Voicemails', 'Texts', 'History', 'More', and 'Contacts'. The main content area is titled 'Voicemail & Text' and includes several settings:

- Voicemail Greeting:** A button to 'Use phone to record a new greeting', a dropdown menu set to 'System Standard', and a 'Play' button. Below this is the text: 'This is the general voicemail greeting callers hear'.
- Recorded Name:** 'Play' and 'Record new' buttons, followed by the text: 'This is the name callers hear when they call you'.
- Voicemail Notifications:** A checkbox for 'Alert me when I have new voicemails' is checked. Below it, a checkbox for 'Email the message to: unpcirc@gmail.com' is checked, with a link to 'Add a new email address'.
- Text Forwarding:** A checkbox for 'Forward text messages to my email: unpcirc@gmail.com' is checked.
- Voicemail PIN:** Fields for 'New PIN' and 'Confirm PIN'.
- Voicemail Transcripts:** A checkbox for 'Transcribe Voicemails' is checked.

At the bottom of the settings area, there are 'Save changes' and 'Cancel' buttons. In the footer, there is a copyright notice: '©2012 Google - Terms - Blog - Google Home - Follow us on: [social media icons]'.

Since we already created a Gmail account for the IM service, setting up the Google Voice account was simple, as it just involves activating the service, which it associates with your already existing Google account. Currently a free local Google Voice number is only available in the U.S. When you activate your account, you will be asked to select a number from the available numbers. This number will allow you not only to make calls, but to receive text messages.

The screenshot shows the Google Voice web interface. At the top, there is a search bar and the Google Voice logo. Below the search bar, there are navigation tabs for 'Voice', 'Actions', and a refresh button. On the left side, there is a sidebar menu with options: 'CALL', 'TEXT', 'Inbox', 'Starred', 'Voicemails', 'Texts', 'History', 'More', 'Contacts', 'Your number: (910) 420-0595', 'Credit: \$0.00', and 'Send feedback'. The main content area displays a text message conversation from a contact named '+19108181980 Add - Fayetteville, NC'. The messages are as follows: '+19108181980: I need to renew a book. 12:43 PM', 'Me: Sure no problem. What is your library number? 12:43 PM', '+19108181980: 123123123 12:44 PM', and 'Me: Your book is now due in three weeks. Have a nice day. 12:44 PM'. Below the messages, there are links for 'Call', 'Text', and 'more'. At the bottom of the main content area, there is a tip: 'Tip: Record incoming calls at any time by pressing "4" on your phone's dialpad. Learn more' and a copyright notice: '©2012 Google - Terms - Blog - Google Home - Follow us on: [social media icons]'.

Once this number is set up, Google Voice's SMS (text) forwarding feature will be used to make the Meebo connection. Click on the settings icon on the Google Voice Screen, click the Voicemail and Text tab and then check the box for text message forwarding. Enter your Gmail account as the account to receive the messages.

Text Forwarding  Forward text messages to my email: unpcirc@gmail.com

This will forward any incoming text messages as email messages to your Gmail account. However, we want to be able to receive these messages as IMs in Meebo, so that we still only have to interact with one interface. To do this requires one more bit of freeware – **GVMax** (www.gvmax.com), which is a service that periodically checks your Google Voice account for new SMS messages and forwards them to your email or your phone. The part that makes it work here is that it will forward your incoming messages to any IM client that supports Google Talk, which for this project is Meebo. Setting up GVMax is very simple. In most cases all you will need to do is provide GVMax with your Google Voice credentials during the sign-up process and it will do the rest.

GVMox
Making the most of google voice

Home | My Account | User Manual | Support | Developers | On the news | Logout

My Account

Google Voice Email Address : unpcirc@gmail.com ⓘ
 Forward Email : 63d1126945651ae97768ddd1ec946270@my.gvmax.com ⓘ
 API key : 63d1126945651ae97768ddd1ec946270 ⓘ

SMS received : 8
 Voicemail received : 0
 Missed calls received : 0
 SMS sent : 3

Active Monitors : [SMS] [VOICEMAIL] ⓘ
 Active Notifiers : [GTALK] ⓘ

MasterCard VISA AMEX BANK

Copyright © 2009/10 GVMox. [Privacy and Security](#)
 Follow GVMox on [Twitter](#) or on my [Blog](#).

By default after signing up you will start to receive. From your account page you will be able to change how GVMox sends you notifications and the type of notifications you get. When a new SMS (text) arrives, you will receive an IM chat message. Since IM in Gmail is routed to Meebo, the SMS message is routed there through Gmail's IM service.

So a text message sent to our Google Voice number,

☐ +19108181980 [Add](#) - Fayetteville, NC

✉ 1/17/12 12:44 PM 112 seconds ago

+19108181980: I need to renew a book. 12:43 PM

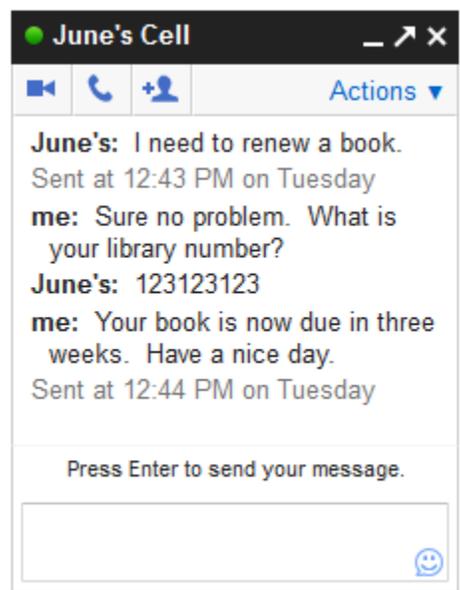
Me: Sure no problem. What is your library number? 12:43 PM

+19108181980: 123123123 12:44 PM

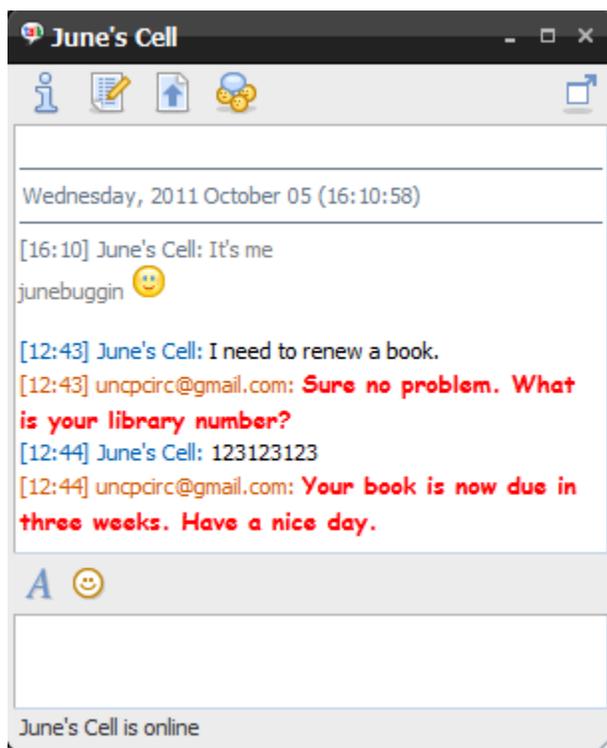
Me: Your book is now due in three weeks. Have a nice day. 12:44 PM

[Call](#) [Text](#) [more](#) ▾

is received in Google IM (GTalk),

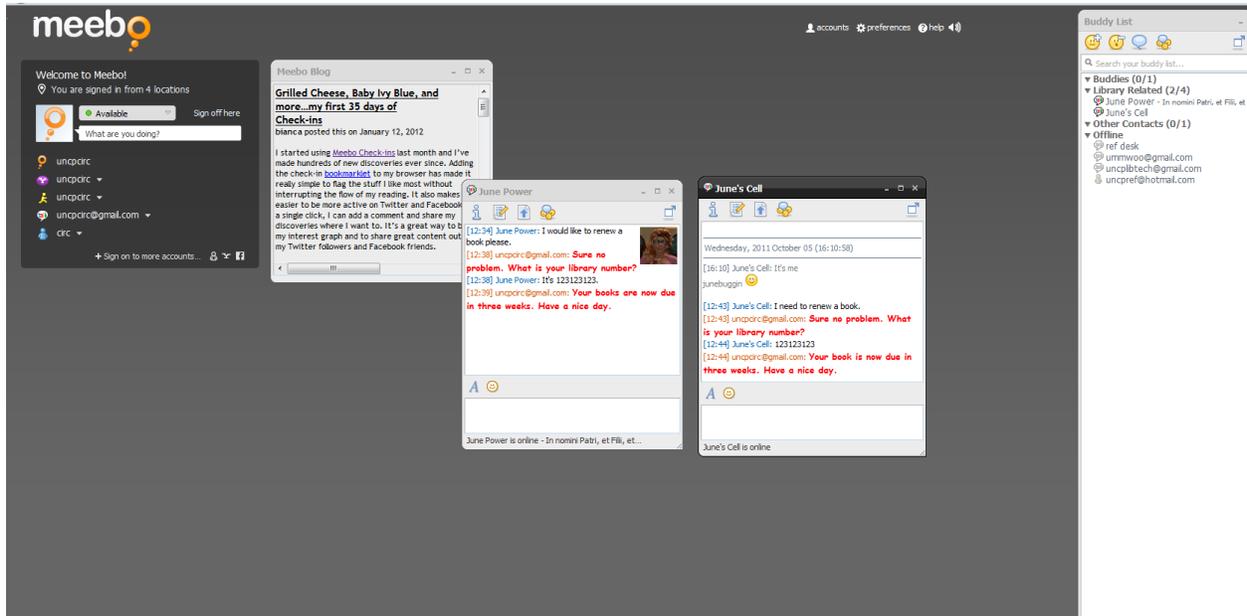


and is then transmitted to Meebo to the circulation desk.

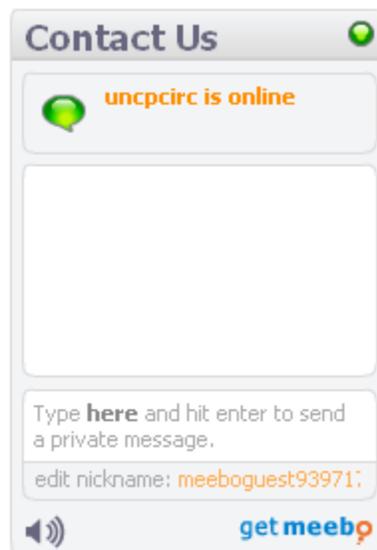


This last step completes the process and you are ready to begin using IM and SMS at the circulation desk. I highly recommend putting together a quick guide for staff, especially if you have many that are unfamiliar with IM or SMS communication. I was able to keep mine to a quick page, including screen shots, and staff have had no

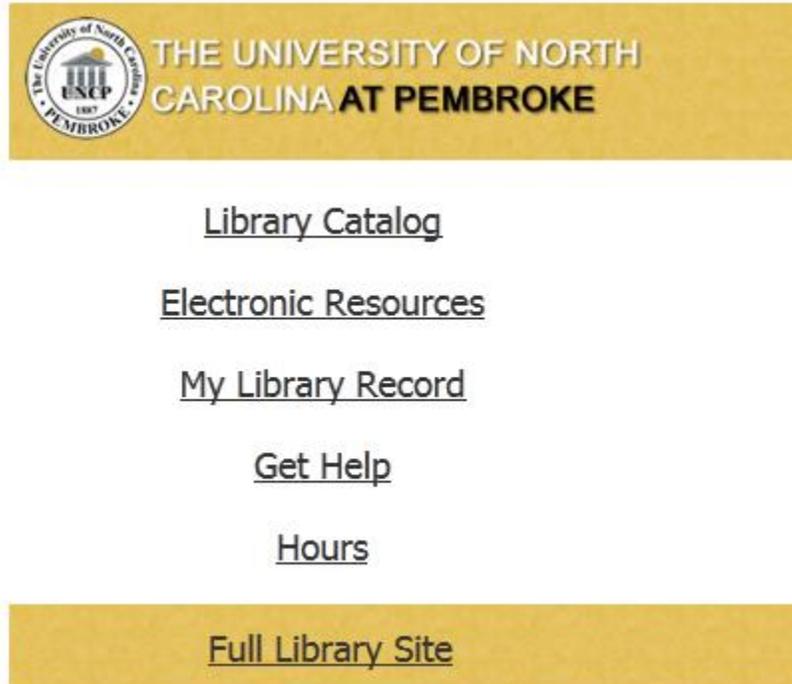
problems using the software so far, and many really enjoy it. I do have Meebo set to keep a record of messages, in case I ever need to review any problems. The set up went so well, I also set up SMS for the reference desk, which up until that point only had the IM service available.



Once staff were familiar with the new software, we began marketing the new service. I included a chat widget from Meebo on our Access Services web page, as well as the text number – patrons can type directly in the box and we will receive the message without them needing to log into a personal IM account. These patrons show up in Meebo chat as meeboguest#####.



We also publicized the service in library and campus publications and email lists. Lastly, the library added a mobile computing page to our web site. This page is formatted especially for mobile device display.



If a patron clicks on the link **Get Help**, the text numbers for the reference and circulation desks displays along with a web form for email assistance.



Help

[Home](#)



Telephone:

910-521-6656



Text:

910-227-9755 (Research Questions)

910-420-0595 (Circulation Questions)



Email:

Date:

Name:

E-mail Address:
(Required)

Status: (Required)

Campus:
(Required)

Answer Needed By (Date):

Your Reference Question: *(Please give a detailed request in order that we may answer your question as quickly as possible.)*

The set up time for this is minimal – it took me less than an afternoon – but the results are long reaching. We now have another avenue of communication open for our patrons, which requires very little on our part to keep up with, but which for them can make a world of difference. All of this was done with user-friendly programs available freely through your web browser.