

# Academic BRASS

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## **Snapchat Reference: Communicating Visually in a Business Environment**

In September of 2017, the Albert D. Cohen Management Library at the University of Manitoba launched an account on the social media platform Snapchat. Unlike traditional social media usage for library accounts, this platform is not intended for library marketing and promotion. Snapchat Reference is an effort to reach students remotely and on an application they are familiar with, in order to conduct reference interviews.

Snapchat is a temporary sharing platform that allows users to send images from their phones to other accounts. The photos can be modified with text, style filters, or emoji's, and, of course, they disappear after being opened. Since launching, Snapchat has included the ability to post twenty-four hour "stories" for everyone to see, as well as a chat feature with the text messages disappearing upon being read. The platform is a popular application among youth and is used by businesses and celebrities alike in order to promote their brands. However, we saw another use for the tool, in that it could be used to reach students in a reference capacity.

Snapchat Reference is a transformative effort to improve the reference experience and make librarians more accessible to their students. While something on this scale would certainly be lost to a larger library, the specialized setting of a business school affords the ability to communicate one-on-one with students in this manner.

With the growing trend toward remote library usage and virtual reference, Snapchat is a good fit for extending reference services. In a business library environment, the databases vary widely and no two reference questions are ever the same. By using Snapchat to communicate and broach the first step of the reference interview, students can send images that clearly identify their needs. As librarians, it is to our benefit that we can see what databases students are using so that we might work to diagnose any issues.

The service sees its highest level of usage in relation to Bloomberg Professional Service. Students will often take pictures to show which function they are on and whether or not the application is working as desired. We can then review the photo and make suggestions, or we can attend to the student in person if further clarification is needed.

To market this service to students, we introduced the campaign using posters around the business school and library, promoted it on other social media accounts, and advocated for its use during in-class instruction. We made it clear to the students that sending a "snap" will trigger the same level of response as an email or phone call. Snapchat does not replace these

methods of communication; it provides an additional outlet. In turn, the library account does not watch the personal “stories” of students and makes a conscious effort not to screenshot their enquiries. By doing this, the library has continued to meet the level of privacy expected by a user of this application.

When evaluating this platform, it may initially seem problematic for a library environment. There is no internal analytics system to keep statistical records of communication with other users. In order to collect accurate statistics, the library performs as-it-happens tracking for each interaction sent or received. This allows us to monitor student usage and engagement with the account. Though this process demands additional work from the librarian, if interactions are noted in the moment, there is minimal effort needed to maintain the statistics.

We have found that it is in the students’ best interests to avoid jumping from platform to platform in order to ask reference questions. When students can communicate using tools that are both readily available and preferred by them, it speeds up the interview process and gives the students an element of comfort and control.

Social media platforms are constantly changing, and Snapchat itself may be replaced by another application; however, the model is transferable. Whether it is on Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter, the message to students is the same; no matter how you contact us, we will help you.