

Morris County (NJ) Library://www.mclib.info

Sara Weissman, manager of the library electronic reference service, talked about a 2004-05 analysis that arose out of the frustration of slow growth in e-ref over 2004.

In the last quarter of 2004 MCL put into place a heavy duty web analyzer and a business card, which is being picked up at 1,000/month.

2003:2004 e-ref only grew by < 1 Q/day : **how much should we be doing?**

Context:

2003 NJ = 7.8 million questions from 8.6 million people = **.91 Q/person**

2003 county = 465,700 from 483,150 people = **.96 Q/person** (7.5 visits/person)

(37 library range is .15-1.3/person—what's a ref Q?— **median is .56/person**)

without exception, highest rates from downtown, walkable libraries

6% of NJ Q from 5.9% of NJ population

2004 State librarian to legislature: 5.2% increase in (all) ref from 2003 (+404,000)

2003 NJ chat ref = .65% of all ref (yr 2) MCL 2004 e-ref = 1.7% (yr 8)

Pew = 1:45,174 HH mini-Pew = 1:2,819 HH (redo survey) Daily Internet Use

Weissman looked at the January 2005 Pew Daily Internet Use report and applied it to the Morris County population. Did local use mirror reported national patterns? Four returns would have equaled the Pew sampling rate. MCL's return was 1 in 2800 household, but was statistically insignificant. The survey was probably administered too closely on the heels of the library's Service Survey 2004 (a population can be surveyed too often) and will have to be re-administered.

Pew January rate = 26,260 adults per day online seeking an answer in Morris

is equal to monthly count of web site visits

Activities reported locally: 1) family/friends 2) hobbieshomework less than 40%

Place: 1) home 2) work 14% HH not everyone on the 'Net

49% still don't know library offers remote databases. Despite rigorous public education re: remote services, library is picking up only 1% per year (from 49-51% know about remote, 2003-2004).

What does web analysis say? (185,000+ visits)

Monthly cybergate = monthly building visits

Majority Google rather than bookmark (8% "morris county library" ea day)

No surfing 1-5AM; surfing is a work week activity (reducing evening coverage)

Purpose driven: realty, school ratings, remote databases are most used MCL pages
2-2.5 pages/visit Page flips are 5-30 seconds [not reading? printing?]

1:100-150 hit ref page, 1:250-280 leave a question (4 bookmarked ref page:1 Q)

Some patrons seem to bookmark e-ref page just for reference phone # and hours

Four major international corporations are regular remote page users, one with 170+ visits per month. Does this contribute to erosion of special libraries.

Boston Law firm and NJ BOE Googling legal matters

98% on Windows, 98% Java enabled, 60% at 1024 x 768

Q analysis

Service satisfaction and word of mouth bring returns (child refers parent)
Cyclical need: bursts of activity (a patron submits much for a week or two, then disappears for a month or more, then returns.)
Latest preference is initiating call, return by e-mail (their time table)
Standard: electronic delivery has gone from 3:1 to 1.4:1

Patron interaction

Still surprised service is available ("I thought you were just librarians ...in...ahh..libraries?!")
Want to do it myself! ("spent 45 minutes on this at home ..")
Technological fatigue ("Look this up for me? I don't want to get involved with my computer right now.")
Coping mechanisms (time limits for families, "my brother-in-law will do it".
Patrons have found designated surfers.)
"I don't know where my library is?" (Patron's Boro is 2.6 sq miles)

So you've become the provider of last resort, not of first choice?

question posed by a businessman with extensive experience in start-up operations.

12-2PM:

one US cabinet level dept, doing an incredibly general search
two NJ govt departments (there IS a state library, is there not?) for Morris info
three universities ...two in other states, one right around the corner
high school in the next county

foodtimeline.org which was part of MCL web (has been spun off into it's own web 2005) has 3x the traffic and questions of general reference. In May, 2/3 of food questions were answered from archive/FAQ. One school district visited 90 pages in 101 minutes.

What are the patrons telling us?

They still don't know what librarians/libraries can do for them.
They'd rather do it themselves, thanks to Google
They're busy and may not want to operate on our schedules. (Dinner in NJ is 6-8.30)
Surfing matches life pattern: school, adult worker ...
[Extended stay hotel in Spartanburg SC surfing "Whippany library" ..
goes into children's/summer reading program ..Mom on the road?]
They're not surfing as much or at the hours we've imagined. (MCL has reduced evening coverage from two librarians off site, to one, second not being needed.)
They rocket through cyberspace, not really reading as they go. (5-30 sec./web page)
For many tech is more annoying than fulfilling.
Office bosses do not have our enthusiasm for the not known, in their staff.
[Business employees may not want to demonstrate that they don't know,
so are doing general surfing to learn, rather than talking to librarians.]

How to continue a service?

reduce costs (MCL's is a no added cost operation...free ISP, no software, done in framework of existing library staffing)

reduce tech barriers

dissolve demarcations (do not nail patron to the computer, on yr schedule)

standardize front end, as: askwi, askme, askco, askma

AskMass and AskColorado have the right idea. ALA could do a national PR campaign, roll out cyber-reference across 50 states if each state's front end was "askpostalinitials"

.info recommended as end code, information having to do with libraries/librarians. Only problems might be? askmo (3 Stooges?!), askmd (not! a medical service)

Any state could stack anything they wanted behind their portal—chat, e-mail, IM—but front-ends would be standardized.

I'll find you even if I move from place to place.

beware marketing miasma — we develop names for services that may leave patrons more baffled than informed as to what we do.

How did you hear about the service?

through a business client, they stated that your staff was most informative and helpful, hopefully i will have the same experience.

A classmate sent the link via e-mail.

um, I, um, just knew that Morris County Library reference department

was nice and smart and on-line! [??? too precious? to be real?]

you guys rock!

Weissman concluded:

✍ **Be patient! and don't create something you can't sustain.**

MCL .e-ref doubled in 4yrs, doubled again in next 3 ...if had been costly, would have been shut down after year 2. **aka, don't paint yourself into a corner!**

✍ **It's about the practice, not the process**

Concentrate on the patron—the elderly woman who needs to know why her adult child is battering her, for example. The formats we use matter less than the quality of our reference work.

Postscript: in Q and A, audience members reported e-ref service numbers from 61/yr to 350/month (King County, WA). More sharing of information might be in order? skw