Making Chat Widgets Work for Online Reference

by Linda Bedwell

When our library began using chat widgets on Novanet Live Help instead of virtual reference (VR) software, our patrons had comments such as the following:

"Great idea and service, you can get help from wherever you are!"

"Having a ready-tool available … is very helpful."

"These sites can be hard to navigate and having someone to ask a quick question and getting a real person and a real answer was awesome."

We were gratified to find such positive remarks about our Novanet Live Help online reference service. Not coincidentally, I'm sure, we have experienced a dramatic increase in use since introducing the chat widgets. Could it be that these simple, user-friendly chat widgets (just type your question in and click enter) are all this service needed to appeal to our patrons? Our experience using these chat widgets certainly supports this theory. Our patrons needed our online help all along—they just found the old online reference tools cumbersome to use, or they didn't notice the service icon on the webpages. (You have to admit, a ready-to-use chat box saying "A librarian is online" is much more engaging than a dull icon saying "Live Help.")

So if your library is still using VR software for your online reference service and it is not seeing significant use, don't assume that your service is not valuable—maybe you're just not using the right tools to engage your patrons.

Novanet Live Help (Novanet is a consortium of postsecondary institutions in Nova Scotia, Canada), like many online reference services, was originally supported by licensed VR software. While VR programs offer many librarian-valued features (such as automatic transcript and statistics reporting), they also embed barriers to patron usage (such as slow-responding messaging systems, patron login forms, and required browser settings). We found that by stripping these barriers away and employing ready-to-use chat widgets (boxes that you place in webpages that allow you to communicate with users *in situ*), we made our service more accessible to our patrons. We not only adopted chat widgets for online reference, we also experimented with the placement of these widgets in various online environments. In this article, I'll describe a few experiments we conducted with Meebo Me chat widgets and the consequences (good and bad). Perhaps our experiences will help you to revitalize your online reference service.

GOODBYE VIRTUAL REFERENCE SOFTWARE, HELLO CHAT WIDGETS

In the winter of 2008, after realizing that our low usage and troublesome VR software issues were typical of VR software-based services, Novanet Live Help piloted an instant messaging (IM) and chat widget-based service. We simultaneously staffed four commercial IM accounts (MSN Messenger, AIM, Google Talk, and Yahoo! Messenger) plus a Meebo Me chat widget (positioned in library contact pages) through Pidgin, a multiprotocol IM client that allows you to log in to various IM and chat widget accounts through one common interface. Due to the pilot's success, we decided to retain the IM and chat widget accounts for the following autumn's Live Help season and drop the VR software. The pilot project revealed some interesting results (see Bedwell, Linda; Rodrigues, Denyse; Duggan, Lawrence J.; and Orlov, Stanislav: "IM a Librarian: Extending Virtual Reference Services Through Instant Messaging and Chat Widgets,"

Live Help
a librarian is online

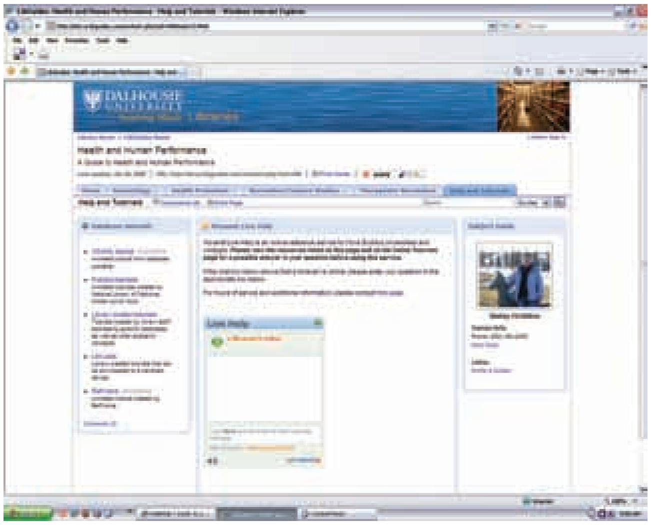
Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library Information Practice and Research, Vol. 3, No. 2 [2008]: pp. 1–17), but the most valuable revelations occurred after the autumn 2008 launch of Live Help.

In September 2008 the Live Help service returned, supported by the Meebo Me chat widget and four IM accounts, and was immediately greeted with more messages than usual—up to nine questions in 1 hour. (Up until this time, Live Help typically clocked less than one question per hour.) Despite this heavy use, however, we noted that none of our patrons were messaging us through the four IM services. We decided to drop our IM accounts, and from mid-September 2008 on, Live Help has been offered solely through the Meebo Me chat widget. The direct availability and user-friendliness of the chat widget appears to negate any need for patrons to use their own IM accounts to contact us.

HERE A WIDGET, THERE A WIDGET

Inserting the Meebo Me widget code on webpages is very simple. Thus, we encouraged institutions across the consortium to place the widget on any webpage where they felt patrons might require assistance. Live Help Meebo Me widgets have been positioned in contact or "Ask for Help" pages and within library subject guides. Several of the institutions use Springshare, LLC's LibGuides system to produce their subject guides. This utility makes it easy to place the widget, as a default, in all contact information sidebars. Librarians can also choose to embed it within subject guide content boxes. Where journal article databases provide an "Ask a Librarian" link, we connected it to the Live Help Meebo Me chat widget.

We also experimented, to varying degrees of success, with placing the Meebo Me chat widget directly within the consortium's shared OPAC (Online Public Access Catalog). If your library can place a chat widget in your OPAC, I highly recommend it—this is an online environment where patrons often require assistance. Unfortunately, in our OPAC environment (ExLibris Aleph), the chat widget would display on all pages (search pages and results pages) rather than just on select pages. This meant that each time an OPAC patron viewed any OPAC page, the Meebo account was "contacted," whether the chat widget was used or not.



This is the Live Help Meebo Me chat widget in the Help tab of a library subject guide (created with LibGuides). The chat widget may be placed in the content sidebar or added to a content box within the LibGuide.

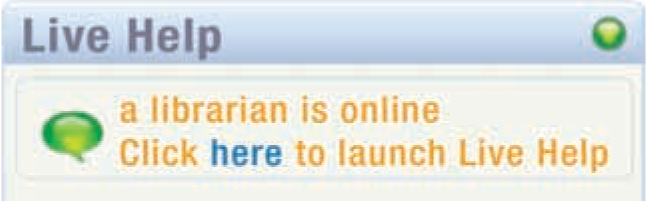
This resulted in too many connections, and the widget crashed almost daily.

Two weeks into a busy autumn semester, we decided to create a solution—a dynamic, online/offline icon that indicates when a librarian is online and, once clicked, opens the widget in an independent window. Our Meebo account can now survive, thanks to the reduced number of connections, and our patrons still have visibility to our service. Although it can be argued that patron visibility to the service is diminished by placing an icon in the OPAC rather than the widget itself, this solution does ensure that our users can chat with Live Help in a separate window while using the original window to perform OPAC searches as directed by the Live Help service provider.

MAJOR INCREASE IN ONLINE REFERENCE SESSIONS

What did the placement of chat widgets and the development of workaround solutions net us? By the time our service shut down at the end of the semester, we had conducted 1,885 sessions. In the autumn of 2007, without chat widgets, we totaled a mere 340 sessions.

Since the autumn of 2007, we have extended hours to meet demand, so we evaluated this difference by the number of questions per hour. In autumn 2007, we clocked 674 hours on the service and therefore received an average of 0.50 questions per hour. In autumn 2008, we clocked 722 hours, averaging 2.61 questions per hour. This represents a significant fivefold increase. With little or no marketing effort over the year, the bulk of this increase can be credited to the chat widgets. The chat widget makes it evident to patrons that someone is online to help them; thus, patrons are more likely to use the service. Even more enjoyable than our increase in numbers is the frequency of positive feedback from our patrons, who often thank us during their online help sessions and tell us how much they appreciate us and the service.

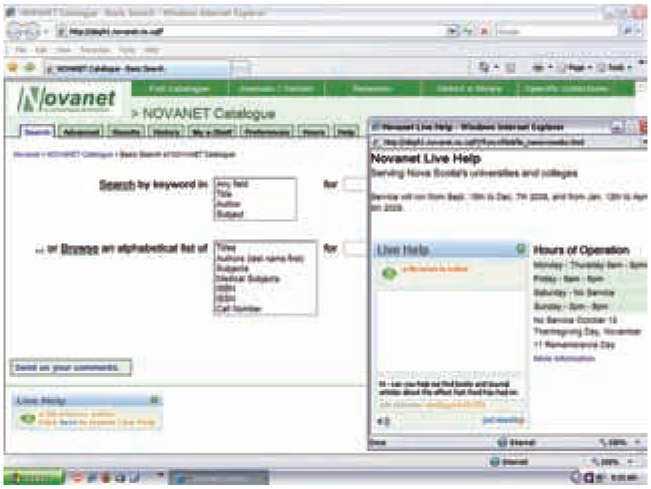


Live Help

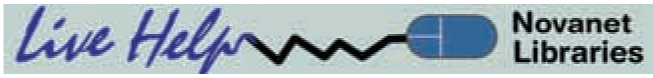
a librarian is online

Click here to launch Live Help

This is the Live Help icon for the Novanet OPAC. Service hours are included in the program code, enabling the icon to indicate the service's online/offline status. Clicking the icon launches the Meebo Me chat widget in a separate window.



This is the search screen of the Novanet OPAC. The Live Help icon is in the lower left corner of the screen. In this screen shot, the icon has been clicked, launching a window to the right containing the Live Help Meebo Me chat widget.



This is the old Live Help icon. Clicking this icon would launch the virtual reference software login form.

Novanet Live Help Usage Statistics Fall 2007 & Fall 2008

	Total Sessions	Total Service Hours	Avg. Sessions/Hour
Fall 2007 (without chat widgets)	340	674	0.50
Fall 2008 (with chat widgets)	1,885	722	2.61

The value of chat widget placement is also evident in our institutional Live Help statistics. A few of the smaller institutions that placed the Live Help chat widget on all their subject guides accounted for a greater portion of Live Help patrons than their portion of the consortium's full-time-equivalent students (FTE). One institution that positioned the Live Help widget in all of its subject guides accounted for 12% of the service's patrons, despite having only 5% of the consortium's FTE. In contrast, an institution accounting for 15% of the consortium's FTE did not place the widget on any of its webpages and only accounted for 9% of total Live Help patrons. This indicates that the more the widget is placed on appropriate webpages, the more patrons are apt to see it and use it when needed.

NOTHING'S EVER PERFECT

At this point in time, our service is not without some technical glitches. Occasionally one of our two Meebo accounts will short-circuit and display an offline widget. From reading blogs and discussion group messages, I know this experience is not uncommon among institutions using Meebo Me chat widgets. This problem is very similar to what happened when we placed our widget directly in our OPAC, so I believe it has to do with there being too many instances of the widget and therefore too many connections to the Meebo account. Logging directly in to the Meebo account through Meebo.com, logging off, and then logging back in again seems to clear any issues and has been our fail-safe trick to getting the widget back online. I have suggested this solution to two other online reference services, and they have reported back that it worked perfectly.

Meebo itself seems to be experiencing some difficulties lately—the Meebo service has been offline at least three times since last September, lasting from our service start time at 9 a.m. Atlantic Daylight Time to roughly 1 p.m. ADT, when the Meebo offices open on the West Coast. Because of this, concerns about continuous free access, and limitations to the number of service provider logins, we are investigating other alternatives, such as LibraryH3lp. The fee-based LibraryH3lp program uses chat widgets and has some of the librarian-valued features of VR services, such as multiple service provider logins, transcript recording, and statistics reports.

Despite some glitches, our experience with chat widgets and the ensuing major increase in online reference use makes me confident that, with services offered through straightforward tools such as chat widgets, libraries will forever remain relevant, valued, and "awesome" in the eyes of our patrons.

SOME TIPS FROM LIVE HELP

Based on what we learned during our launch of Live Help, I'd like to offer the following suggestions:

It is not enough to simply deploy a chat widget in a few webpages to revitalize an online reference service. Strategic and ubiquitous placement of chat widgets is crucial—contact pages, OPACs, computer desktops, online course pages, library news blogs, databases, federated search interfaces—anywhere your patrons could realize they need some library help.

Depending on your chat widget program, you may want to consider creating more than one account. Live Help currently has two Meebo accounts, one for the OPAC chat widget and one for the chat widget that we place in institutional webpages. Doing this can help alleviate technical difficulties associated with heavy use as well as make it easier to accommodate shift changeovers (hand over one account if it's not in use), to double up service providers on shifts (each person staffs a separate account), and to track where your users are most often accessing help.

As with all technology, some patience is required. Glitches may be easily fixed (as with our offline widget issue) or may simply be temporary and have to be waited out.

Don't get too accustomed to a "successful" online reference tool. It is certainly worth having an eye on the horizon to consider other, more beneficial technologies for your online service. Be prepared to try something new.

Finally, if you learn something from your experiments (even ones that flop), do share it with the rest of the library community so all online reference services can benefit and continue with further discoveries and improvements.

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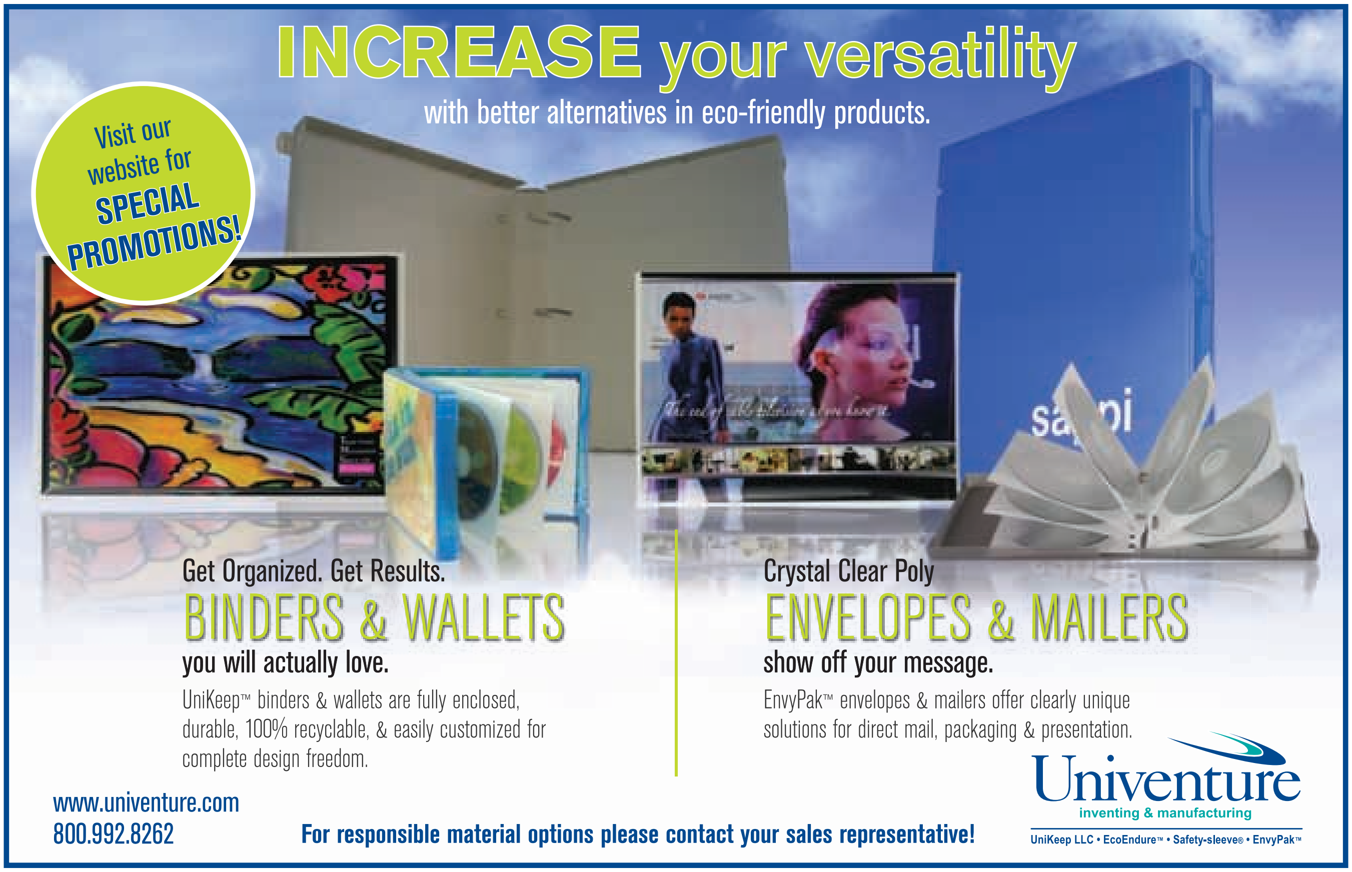
Comments? Email the editor (marydee@xmission.com).



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