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Embedding an IM Widget in Research Databases: Helping Users at their Point-of-Need

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Introduction

The rapid growth of internet users has made libraries eager to introduce online services for this new community, in addition to their traditional reference services. Virtual reference service has become a convenient and easily accessible option for the online community, particularly with increasing amounts of libraries resources now available electronically as well (Lou, 2007).

Virtual reference began in many libraries as email reference service (Janes, 2002) with a move to live chat reference as technology advanced. These live reference services were offered through chat software developed in-house or by vendors. Due to the high cost of purchasing and maintaining these software programs, many libraries have turned to an alternative way of offering real-time online assistance, instant messaging (Hvass & Myer, 2008).

Instant messaging continues to be popular among teenagers and college students. A 2004 report on how Americans use instant messaging (IM) states that “more than four in ten online Americans instant message” (Shiu et al, 2004). There are many IM applications on the web, including Yahoo, AIM, MSN, and Google Talk. The downside of having all of these IM application available is that it can confuse libraries with respect to which applications their patrons are most likely to use. One application which helps solve this puzzle is Meebo. Meebo is a web-based instant messaging application which supports multiple IM services. It supports Yahoo! Messenger, .NET Messenger Service, Google Talk, AIM, ICQ, MySpaceIM, Facebook Chat, and Jabber. Meebo also has widget (MeeboMe!) which can be embedded in a webpage. This allows anyone to chat or send a message to the owner of the website without having to have an account with an IM service.

Virtual Reference at Miami University

Miami began offering email reference in 1998. In 2001, an in-house chat software (RAKIM – <http://rakim.sourceforge.net>) was developed, and the library started offering live reference assistance. After the successful implementation of this service, Miami in 2006 expanded its virtual reference service by introducing instant messaging services.

We started by offering service to users of AIM, Yahoo and MSN through the Meebo application. The libraries set up accounts with these four services and made the library's account id available on the library's webpages. Users then had to add the library's account id to their IM buddy lists to enable them to contact the library for help. After some publicity on Blackboard, display screen in the library and through fliers we had increased traffic using the service, boosting our reference statistics within the first month of implementation.

Meebo then released the MeeboMe! widget. This allowed patrons to contact librarians online in real-time and receive help quickly and easily. They didn't have to worry about creating an IM account or bother about buddy lists. Miami Libraries took advantage of this new opportunity, and embedded the MeeboMe widget in the libraries' homepage. This subsequently led to another rise in traffic. Based on this, Miami began exploring other ways of taking services to the users, including linking the MeeboMe! widget in some of our research databases, particularly those from EbscoHost.

The EbscoHost databases are some of Miami's most heavily-used research databases. Introducing Meebo into Ebsco is a way to offer help where the user is researching. Users don't have to go to another page to seek help, making it convenient and quick. Another plus is that the widget opens up in a pop-up window, so users can see the search screen and the chat window at the same time. Having a link to MeeboMe! in a research database can also help reduce the element of hesitation on the part of a user, as they no longer need to navigate to another page to find help when they need it.

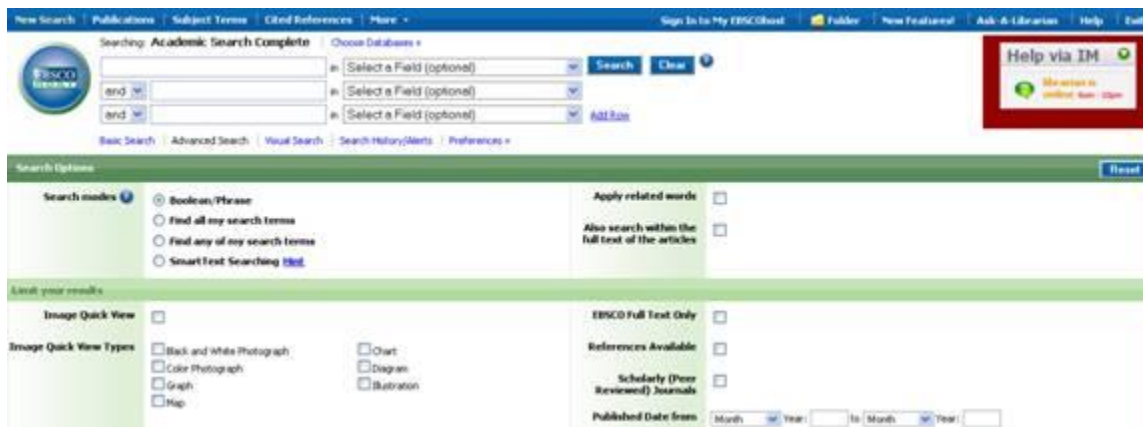
Since we introduced this service in October 2008, we have seen increased traffic of more than 50%. Anecdotally, when we ask users where they were accessing Meebo, they often answer 'through Ebsco.' They also often expressed happiness for the fact that they could easily and conveniently contact a librarian in these research databases.

How It is Done

In order to do this, there has to be access to the administrative module of a research database. In most of these administrative modules there is a place for branding, where an institution can add a logo or text to the research databases and link it to a webpage.

Unlike most research databases EbscoHost provides two ways of branding research databases. One involves entering a URL to an image on a server in a given textbox and typing in another URL of a page this image will link to, in another textbox provided. The other way is setting up versions of branding in HTML or plain text. The latter is what Miami used to add the MeeboMe! icon.

The first step was to design a logo for IM. The logo needed to be colorful and eye-catching—to make it prominent on the research database's interface. The IM logo can also be designed to incorporate the library's logo. Once we designed our IM icon, it was uploaded onto our server. The image below shows how the icon is displayed on the interface when a user launches EBSCO research database. The IM logo displays on the interface only at the times that librarians are logged in to help users.



The second step is setting up a MeeboMe widget. This can be done online at the Meebo site (<http://www.meebo.com>). It requires creating an html file separately and embedding the widget. The size of the widget and other information pertaining to the IM service can also be included in this file. A style sheet can be added if desired. Below is an example of the html file with the MeeboMe! widget URL in the embed-tag.

meebowid.html file

```
<html>
<head>
<title>TITLE HERE</title>
```

```

</head>
<body>

<center>
<embed src="MEEBO WIDGET URL HERE" type="application/x-shockwave-flash"
wmode="transparent" width="300" height="300"></embed>
</center>

<p >ANY CUSTOM MESSAGE CAN BE PUT HERE </p>
</body>
</html>

```

The next step is developing a script in PHP, Javascript, and HTML to control the hours the IM logo will be displayed on the interface. It will also pop up the MeeboMe! widget in a particular position on the screen, for the user to contact a librarian for help.

Code: ebscomeebo.php file

```

<?php

// This is an array which contains the service hours for a whole week. The day of the
week form the sub arrays. The numbers are the hours of operation

$times_to_show_meebo =
array (
    "Sun" => array (13,14,15,16... end time), "Mon" => array (9,10, 11... end time),
    "Tue" => array (9, 10, 11... end time), "Wed" => array (9, 10, 11... end time), "Thu"
=> array (9,10,11... end time), "Fri" => array (9, 10, 11,... end time), "Sat" => array
(13, 14, 15, 16,... end time));

// Getting the current time and using it to get the day and hour

$current = time();
$day = date("D", $current);
$hour = date("G", $current);

// Check to see if the current hour is in the day's array
if ( @in_array( $hour, $times_to_show_meebo[$day])) {

?>

```

```

<body style="background:#990000">

// This is the script which positions the Meebo chat window on a specified position on
the screen

<script language="JavaScript">

function popWindow(fname) {

    leftPos = screen.width-320

    topPos = 0

    newWindow = window.open(fname, "newWin", "width=320, left="+leftPos+",
top="+topPos+", resizable=yes, scrollbars=yes")

    newWindow.focus()
}
</script>

// Linking the image you designed to the MeeboMe! Widget

<center>
<a href="javascript:popWindow('MEEBOWID.HTML')"></a>
</center>
</body>

<?php
}
?>

```

When a user clicks on the icon, it launches the Meebo chat interface on the right side of the EBSCO interface.



The last step is to embed the icon and link it to the above script file (ebscomeebo.php) with an iframe tag in the Ebsco administrative module. It helps the IM icon in the Ebsco database interface live within the web pages. The IM image remains a constant presence on the screen, no matter where the user navigates or scrolls to. The frame's content is pulled from a PHP script, which displays the icon and links it to the MeeboMe! widget.



Conclusion

IM widgets have become a cheap and easy way to deliver virtual reference service. By implementing the MeeboMe widget in Miami University's Ebscohost research databases, it has dramatically increased the number of access points to our librarians, and has made it easier and more convenient for users to seek help. Miami University Library users say they are delighted to see IM service available directly in the EbscoHost research databases they are searching. In the near future, we are going to extend this project to other research databases, so as to further increase accessibility to librarians and thus serve more users at their points of need.

Notes

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