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REPORT ON SMS REFERENCE GRANT FOR THE LIBRARIES' FACULTY RESEARCH COMMITTEE

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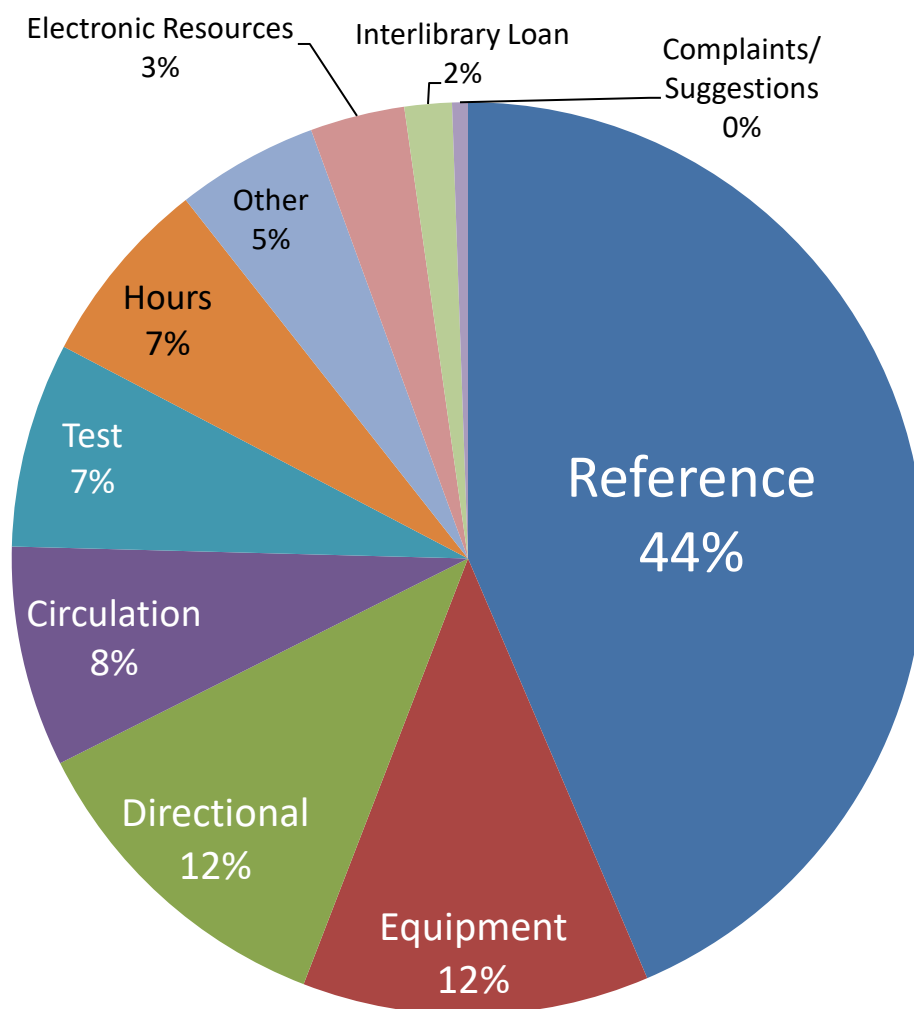
Report on SMS Reference Grant for the Libraries' Faculty Research Committee
Kimberly Vardeman & Ian Barba
June 2012

The money received from the Faculty Research Committee Grant was used to purchase a subscription to Mosio's Text a Librarian service. Beginning in May 2011, we evaluated the Text a Librarian (TaL) service for a period of 12 months, collecting data on TTU Libraries patrons' use of the SMS reference service. We also coordinated with the Communications & Marketing Department to launch a marketing campaign.

Usage

When we began offering the service, we were unsure how patrons might use it. As it turned out, patrons treated Text a Librarian much like any other type of reference service, and asked a variety of types of questions. As Figure 1 shows, genuine reference questions were the most common, but other types of simpler questions were frequent as well, including directional and equipment related. Below Figure 1 are examples of the types of questions received.

Figure 1. Types of Questions Received via Text Message

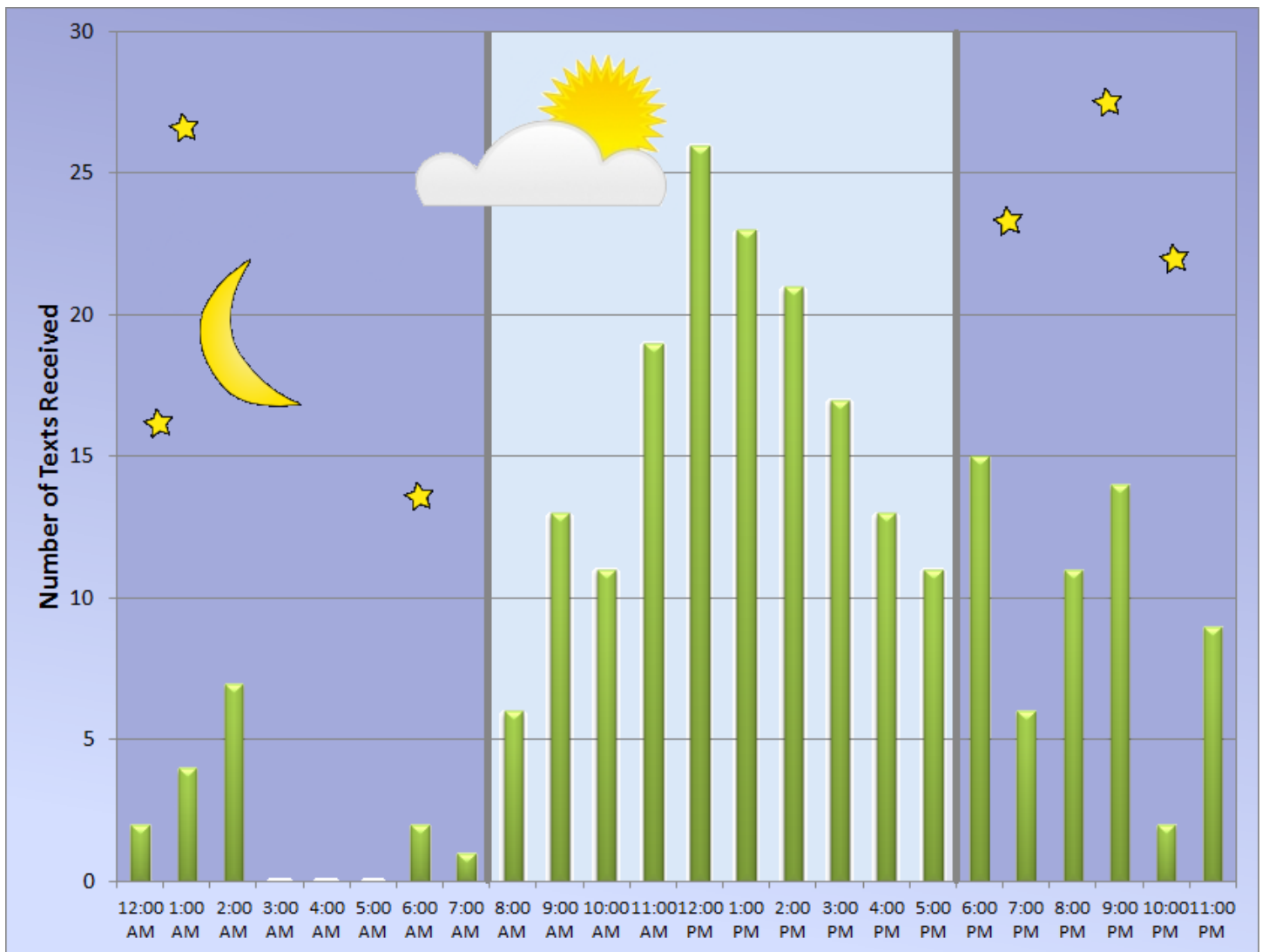


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- Reference/Research – requires the use of library catalog or resources to answer question. Ex: “Where can I find *Freakonomics*?” “I need books on petroleum engineering.”
- Directional – any question that does not require knowledge or use of library systems (catalog, etc.). Ex: “Where do I find government docs?”
- Equipment – questions or problems related to library equipment. Ex: “Why isn’t my paper printing?!?!?!?”
- Circulation – questions about patron accounts. Ex: “Can you renew my books?”
- Interlibrary Loan – questions related to interlibrary loan/ILLiad. Ex: “How do I get a copy of this article that the library doesn’t have?”
- Hours. Ex: “When does the library close?”
- Complaints/Suggestions. Ex: “Why is the library so cold?”
- Electronic Resources. Ex: “I am unable to connect to the EBSCO databases.”
- Compliments/Thank Yous.
- Test.
- Other – nonsensical questions. Ex: “How many licks does it take to get to the center of a tootsie pop?”

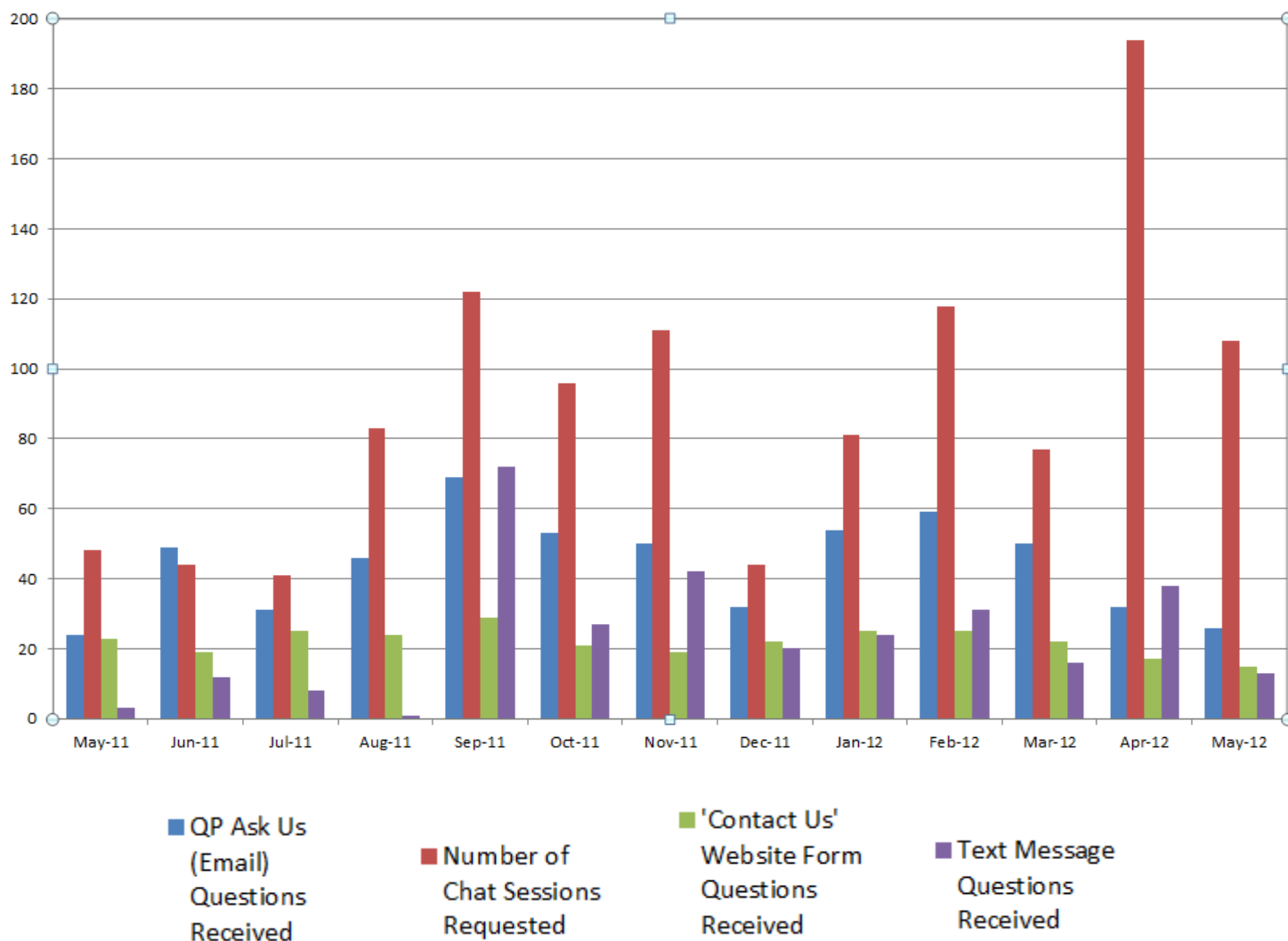
Unexpectedly, we began to see interesting patterns, not only of how patrons were using the service, but when. Most of the texts we received came during the “normal” business hours of 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. (see Figure 2). However, there were several more spikes during the evening, well after normal hours, with the service not utilized only during the late-night/early-morning hours of 3:00 a.m. to 5:00 a.m. As Figure 2 shows, a text reference service has the potential to serve patrons during unusual hours, if only they are fortunate enough (as we were) to have librarians and staff able to answer patrons’ texts during these hours.

Figure 2. Peak Hours for Incoming Text Messages



We also compared the usage of TaL to that of other virtual reference services. The library chat service continues to be the most heavily used medium of virtual reference. In the past year, we received 1,119 chat session requests. By comparison, we received 351 incoming texts via the TaL service. During September 2010 – May 2011, we counted a total of 1,624 e-reference queries. During September 2011 – May 2012, we counted 1,884 e-reference queries. The difference is close to the number of incoming text messages we received during the year. Thus, the text reference service seems to have reached a new user group, because the usage of the other reference services changed only slightly, not enough to indicate that they were affected. Figure 3 shows the comparison of usage among our various tools for virtual reference.

Figure 3. Virtual Reference Statistics, May 2011-May 2012



Marketing

We began offering text reference service in May 2011. This was done without any official announcement, or attempts to market the service. As such, we received very few texts from patrons. Text a Librarian received a more official launch in September, coinciding with the start of the Fall 2011 semester. This was during the height of the marketing push. A number of signs advertising the service were placed in the library, and reference librarians advertised the service during library tours. Further, we benefitted from a story about TaL in the *Daily Treador*. That September we had 72 incoming text messages. That was the most in any one month for the whole year. The marketing campaign had a clear effect in making library patrons more aware of the service. Since that time, use of the service has leveled off to the range of 20 to 40 texts per month. It seems likely that a new marketing campaign could maintain and increase awareness of TaL. For Fall 2012, we hope to see a greater and longer sustained marketing effort, as there is a clear link between success of TaL and patron awareness of the service.

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Results

Our findings were reported via a poster presentation at the Texas Library Association 1001 Great Ideas Program in April 2012. We have plans for further research into individual patron use of the service, with the intent to publish an article on our conclusions.