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Partnerships: "Q and A NJ" Handles Reference 24/7

by Sarah Long

Sometimes the stars just line up and a project that might have been difficult develops smoothly and in the best possible way. Here's a story from New Jersey about just such a project.

It was Fall 2000 and Karen Hyman, director of the South Jersey Regional Library Cooperative, met with directors of 11 member libraries to discuss a new concept: shared reference service via the Internet. Seven of the librarians were from public libraries, two from community colleges, one from a health sciences library and one from an educational center. The more they talked about the concept, the more they liked it. They envisioned the service as a way to make reference service available to all of their patrons 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Patrons would log onto a web site and a reference librarian would be available to help with an Internet search. Because of special software, the librarians could be anywhere and that was the beauty of the concept. For the user, the reference service was live and in real time. But for the participating libraries, the work could be shared among a group of librarians.

The South Jersey librarians met with Steve Coffman, Vice President of Product Development at LSSI, a vendor of software that facilitates shared Internet reference. They realized that their dream of reference service around-the-clock, 24/7, was certainly possible, but they would need a larger, critical mass of libraries and librarians in order to make it happen. The reference staffs of 11 medium-sized libraries were simply not enough to cover the hours. At the same time, they worried that enlarging the group would mean including librarians they didn't know very well. Handing over one's patrons and their questions to others for service requires much confidence and trust. Saving that issue for later consideration, experimenting and training on the LSSI software began. The project was named Q and A NJ. A logo was designed and a publicity campaign devised.

In February 2001, Norma Blake was named New Jersey State Librarian. Upon hearing about the project, she said, "Make it statewide!" LSTA grant funding followed and Marianne Sweet was hired as project coordinator. Karen Hyman approached Connie Paul at the Central Jersey Regional Cooperative to see if there was interest in joining the project. Eight more libraries said, "Yes!" The new group of 19 libraries went live on October 1 with a schedule 1 p.m. to 11 p.m. New Jersey Night Line, based at the East Brunswick Public Library, covered the hours from 9 p.m. to 11 p.m.

But the dream of 24/7 and now the mandate to create a statewide program were still unrealized. In the next phase, an "advance party" of seven libraries from Infolink and Highlands, regional cooperatives in the northern part of the state, joined the group and

critical mass was reached so that the service could be 24/7. Effective January 28, New Jersey librarians staff the service from 9 a.m. to 11 p.m. Monday through Friday and from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon on Saturdays. LSSI covers the remaining hours. Hyman said that the impetus for the 24/7 goal was intensified when she saw the large number of hits to the web site when it was not available. "People expect an Internet service to be 24/7," she said.

Also in this phase, the service became statewide, the first statewide Internet reference project in the nation. Hyman describes State Library support and encouragement for Q and A NJ as integral to the success of the project. "We had a great idea in South Jersey but it was the State Library initiative and LSTA dollars that turned Q and A NJ into a statewide project with national significance."

Hyman notes that this model of starting with those who are interested and expanding gradually, again to those who are interested is a good one, adding that a dramatic innovation such as this demands dramatic change in librarian work styles. She says that a regional cooperative is a good center for implementing such change because cooperatives already have a close, personal relationship with librarians in the field. Hyman expects many more libraries in the state to participate eventually. On the other hand, she notes that a high-level skill set is required to do this work. Specifically, one needs excellent Windows skill. Hyman calls this the "Olympics" of Web based service. She adds that continual practice is essential, so a future problem might be including a large number of librarians, while providing frequent enough practice to keep those skills in top shape. But Hyman is not worried. "Constantly doing the new while still learning the old is a good model for librarians. Keep in motion. Keep trying new things."

Visit [Q and A NJ](#) on the web.

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