



Homework help is a click away

QandANJ.org

by Beth Cackowski

What if there were a free service out there to help your students with any question? What if that service were available 24 hours a day, seven days a week and most holidays? What if that same service were available in real time, so students get the help they need within minutes? What if those people who are online right now, ready to help, had master's degrees in gathering and disseminating information?

QandANJ.org is a free online service that is collaboratively staffed by more than 300 librarians from over 50 participating libraries. This 24/7 service allows customers to chat live with a librarian for help with homework, research projects and citations, or questions ranging from business to career planning to trivia. Fifty percent of all usage is from K-12 students. *QandANJ.org* grew out of a desire to create a highly marketable library service; it has developed into a unique, statewide virtual reference service, helping more than 3,500 satisfied customers a month.

QandANJ is supported by the N.J. State Library, managed by the South Jersey Regional Library Cooperative, staffed by member libraries in the N.J. Library Network, and funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, an independent federal agency whose mission is to create strong libraries and museums that connect people to information and ideas.

The service is only closed on Memorial Day, Independence Day, Labor Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.

Origins of QandANJ.org

In 2000, representatives of many libraries and library cooperatives got together to discuss the future of the institution. The Internet was changing the world, and librarians saw more people turning to sites such as Google for answers. But Internet users were getting lost in a vast sea of information that was getting larger by the day. Students were gathering information from any website they could find with nary a thought towards whether the info was unbiased and/or authentic. Even though libraries had always been in the question answering business, they realized that they needed to be where the people were—on the Web. And so *QandANJ.org* was born.

Over 300,000 questions have been answered on *QandANJ.org* since its launch in 2001. We know the service is well loved because we have received thousands of customer comments of praise and thanks.

What's not to love? The service provides immediacy and a real-time connection to a person who is there to help. On top of that, our customers don't have to leave their houses, their offices, or the computer stations they have staked out at the library. As librarians, we love offering help online because it increases the visibility of libraries, especially all of the Web-based services that libraries offer.

How does it work?

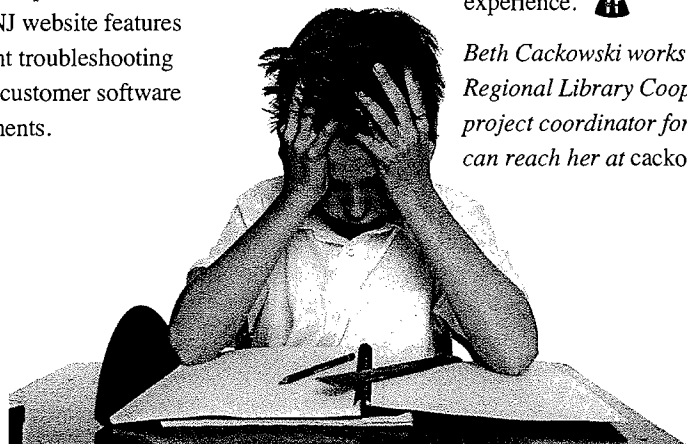
When students visit *QandANJ.org*, and they click "Connect to a Librarian," they are prompted to fill out a brief form asking for a screen name, their zip code and their question. Once the librarian picks up the question, the student and librarian work together to find age-appropriate, quality resources on the Web. The websites are "pushed" to the student and appear on the student's screen so he or she can follow along. The student can then use those resources to assist in completing an assignment or research paper. Since there are often several links "pushed," there is an option for the student to enter an e-mail address to receive a copy of the session transcript, including all of the links to the resources that were recommended during the session.

QandANJ.org is designed to provide fast answers to students' questions, using information found on the Internet, and in proprietary databases funded by libraries. In most cases, *QandANJ.org* librarians will provide an answer online in 15 minutes or less. If a question involves lengthy research, we'll get you started and/or provide a referral.

We receive questions on every subject from history to health to hippos. The service has helped people find jobs, government forms online, and recipes for sweet potato muffins. Got a question about anything? Get a live answer on *QandANJ.org*.

QandANJ.org does not turn away any question, but we do authenticate users to make sure that they're in New Jersey. The site is programmed to recognize all IP addresses of computers located in the state. If a customer is accessing the service from out-of-state, the site will prompt the user to enter a barcode number from a New Jersey library card.

When New Jersey librarians are not available, staffing is also provided by out-of-state librarians as part of the QuestionPoint 24/7 staffing cooperative. In addition, the QandANJ website features important troubleshooting tips and customer software requirements.




Getting the word out

In 2007 *QandANJ.org* became one of the first library services to advertise on cable TV. Our television commercial debuted across New Jersey during the MTV Video Music Awards. The commercial showed two teens ordering questions through a drive-thru and reminded viewers "Now your library is open late night too." The following year, we aired a second commercial that showed a college student pretending to be a "knowledge guru" with the help of *QandANJ.org*.

For the past two years, *QandANJ.org* has also sponsored two contests for students to make YouTube videos promoting the service. Winners received prizes such as an MP3 player, a Nintendo Wii™, and a Flip™ Video Camera. The contests were very popular and students really got into making their own commercials.

This year, *QandANJ.org* is sponsoring a pilot project for some library customers to text their questions via their mobile devices. Six of the *QandANJ.org* member libraries that provide online support for the service are participating in the pilot to see how their patrons respond to using text as a communication tool. Check your local library to see if it is part of the *QandANJ.org* text reference pilot.

Have your class "visit" QandANJ.org

Group or "class visits" to *QandANJ.org* can be a fun way to let your students experience the service. These visits must be scheduled in advance using the form on the *QandANJ.org* homepage at www.qandanj.org/schools. We need to know the number of students, grade level, and topics that the students are researching a few days in advance to ensure that the students and teachers have a great experience. 



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