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Online service puts answers at your fingertips

A former rival of librarians, the Web helps them point and click people in the right direction.

By Elisa Ung
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Forget rifling through encyclopedias at 2 a.m. A New Jersey library cooperative is taking your friendly neighborhood librarian to today's real research hub - the Internet.

In a free service that began in the fall, professional librarians in New Jersey answer research questions live on the Internet at www.QandANJ.org. This week, the help became available 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Patrons can type in an inquiry - such as "Who was New Jersey's first governor?" or "Can a 20-year-old American citizen rent a car in Canada?" - and a librarian will research the answer or provide informational Web sites.

The site is the latest out to prove that the Internet has not rendered libraries useless.

Southern California libraries started a similar Web site in 2000. Cleveland and the Chicago suburbs also have similar sites. And Pennsylvania libraries are trying to get their own together by midsummer, using the Free Library of Philadelphia as one of the research providers.

"Librarians are truly concerned. This is the kind of work we've always done. If we don't move quickly, it's going to be taken away from us by profit-making organizations," said Claudia Sumler, director of the Camden County Library System.

The back-and-forth online chatting is important to help narrow a patron's search, librarians say. At reference desks, people who request a map of Delaware may really want to find their old high school. People who ask for a phone book may just want a divorce lawyer.

"Answering questions is a traditional business that libraries have been in," said Karen Hyman, executive director of the South Jersey Regional Library Cooperative, which is administering the site. "We're just taking it to where the people are."

Twenty-six libraries in New Jersey split day and evening hours

answering questions. Overnight duties are provided by LSSI, a library service provider based in Maryland.

The program, funded by a $132,000 federal grant, is aimed at New Jersey residents but really works on the honor system, asking patrons to enter a zip code.

Librarians say the Web has not kept people away from libraries, but merely provided background, making research questions more pointed.

And to those who might ask whether the service is just a shortcut for lazy students, Susan McGlamery, head of Southern California's 24/7 Reference Project, insisted that the opposite was true.

"It's an excellent teaching tool," she said, noting that librarians can guide students to credible research sites. "More and more people were using the Internet for information anyway, so why not provide quality assistance instead of letting people flounder around for hours on Yahoo?"

Take "Jeff," who this week asked the service for "Web pages about cancer treatments."

Rosemary Scalese, a librarian at the Camden County Library in Voorhees, asked him to be more specific.

Jeff typed: "I know someone that's getting a stem-cell transplant for cancer. I just wanted to find something out about it."

He quickly added: "Hopefully something easy to understand."

Scalese did a Google search and sent Jeff, through the software, a Web page for the Cure for Lymphoma Foundation.

"I got it," Jeff typed. "It looks good - not too 'medical.' "

That was a routine request, but Scalese has encountered some weird inquiries. One user was searching for the right kind of paint and lighting for his birdhouse. (Scalese found him a Web site about exotic birds.) Another wanted to know if anyone had given birth inside the Capitol in Washington. (That required a call to the Capitol historian, who said no.)

"I think that libraries are trying to be as proactive as possible to meet the needs of customers," Sumler said. "And these are the customers."

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