AskColorado: A Collaborative Virtual Reference Service
By Kris Johnson, AskColorado/AskAcademic Coordinator, Colorado State Library
Collaborative Virtual Reference: The AskColorado Story

In previous chapters you have learned about a variety of 2.0 technology offerings for providing virtual reference services (VRS) as well as the evolution of VRS at individual institutions. This chapter will focus on cooperative virtual reference, from the perspective of one of the longest-running statewide cooperative services: AskColorado.

“Cooperative reference service is a process through which information assistance is provided by referring the user, or the user’s queries, to staff at another institution according to a system of established procedures. Cooperative Reference is understood to mean any type of cooperation through any modes of communication.” (RUSA 2007)

Offering continuous service since September 2003, AskColorado has been providing virtual reference (VR) or “chat” reference service to Colorado’s digital information seekers during a time of tremendous flux in the library and information technology fields. Started before technologies like Instant Messaging (IM) were popular, and through the shift to social media technologies like Facebook and Twitter and the coinage of Web and Library 2.0 monikers to designate the new information frontier, AskColorado has continued to exist, change, and grow. Colorado is unique in that it is one of only a dozen or so states to ever offer statewide online reference service to patrons via “cooperative reference service.” During this time, other state or province-wide cooperative virtual reference services (VRS) have been formed, later to be dissolved, often with little fanfare, publicity, or documentation. The discontinuation of nine VRS services, including three cooperative services, was profiled by Radford and Kern in 2006.

Today, AskColorado remains one of the oldest statewide VRS in the country, and now comprises two distinct but partnering services via two website portals: AskColorado (www.askcolorado.org) and AskAcademic (www.askacademic.org), the latter which serves academic customers from academic member libraries in Colorado as well as other states. The organization’s full title is now the AskColorado/AskAcademic Virtual Reference Cooperative, but will be referred to in the rest of this chapter simply as ASK.

This chapter will discuss the formation of ASK as well as its selection and use of vendor-based chat reference software. Chat reference software has been used since inception and continues to be used at present, despite the massive changes in technology offerings since 2003, many of which have been profiled in previous chapters of this book. ASK staff and membership have often been questioned by professionals in the library field how the emergence of the Web 2.0 technologies, especially free or nearly free IM programs such as Meebo or LibraryH3lp, have affected the cooperative. In particular, they want to know if a library is using social software or IM to deliver reference, does that mean it doesn’t need a cooperative service like ASK? The fact is, ASK has continued, even as libraries research and experiment with 2.0 technologies to communicate with customers. Why is this, and what factors contribute to the continued longevity and success of the collaborative? What can you learn from ASK to apply as a blueprint for starting your own cooperative service (statewide, or other)? This chapter will address these questions, describing the genesis of AskColorado, lessons learned and changes the service has made over the years, and an explanation of the decision making process related to technology selection.
How it all Began: A Short Story

One of the primary things to consider when starting a VRS is staffing. How many hours can you afford to offer on your new service? Do you have an extensive staff and budget to allow you to provide service all day and into the night (or 24/7)? Early on you will realize that staffing, not technology, will be your greatest expense when offering such a service. Libraries in Colorado realized this very early on, from the beginning in fact. So let’s start at the beginning...

The inception of ASK ties directly into the LITA Vision:

“...exploring and enabling new technologies to empower libraries. LITA members use the promise of technology to deliver dynamic library collections and services.” (LITA, 2011)

Colorado librarians in the early 2000’s quickly became aware of and tied together two relatively new trends: 1) the public’s increasing leanings towards 24/7 service availability, especially online, in all sectors of life, and 2) new library software being introduced to the profession: Live Chat, a technology that libraries could use to “talk” to patrons using computers and the internet using “chat” technology. The librarians could easily relate to the former, being 21st century citizens themselves. Imagine not being able to buy gasoline or shop online at your favorite retailer any time of the day or night! The latter trend, the chat software, although something new, was something that excited them, and which they could see help them link to the first trend in order to provide a new, dynamic service to patrons 24/7. But how to make such a service a reality? Colorado librarians understood and valued the importance of offering service to patrons electronically, in real-time, but without “hours”, i.e. 24/7. They also knew the only way to do this was to collaborate. No library in the state was wealthy enough to offer a 24/7 service alone, and all knew that in the 21st century, to remain relevant in the eyes of the public, the service must always be available, because people today may work round the clock and do not want to think about “open” and “closed” hours.

The end result was that on Sept. 2, 2003, the AskColorado service launched as a 24/7 service available to anyone in the state of Colorado, but with participating libraries staffing no more than ten hours per week for a single library. How did the libraries make this happen?

How it all Began: Specific Details

As in most situations in the library profession, in order to get from idea to implementation, task forces and committee were formed, and meetings were held! Details about the inception of AskColorado can be found in Johnson’s 2010 article “Back to the Future.” The following outlines a rough timeline of events that occurred.

1. **2000-2001**: Chat reference software offered by library vendors
2. **Early 2001**: Colorado librarians express interest in software and virtual reference
3. **Late 2001**: The now defunct Colorado Resource Sharing Board (CLRSIAB, or RSB) charged the Colorado State Library (CSL) with formally investigating the level of interest in virtual reference in Colorado.
4. **Spring 2002**: CSL holds two state-wide library discussion forums, resulting in a groundswell of interest in the topic.
5. April 3, 2002: RSB authorizes the creation of a Collaborative Virtual Reference Committee (CVRC.) This Committee (comprised of librarians around the state from multiple library types and led by the CSL) was charged with continuing to examine the issues related to collaborating on virtual reference on a statewide basis, to investigate different models of virtual reference, and to make recommendations to RSB about which model should be adopted in Colorado and how to proceed with organizing and funding the effort.


7. July 29, 2002: CVRC agrees to start formal process of creating a collaborative and discusses discussing what committees should be formed to support the project the necessary committees needed for implementation, to including: Steering, Needs Assessment, Software, Evaluation, Policies and Procedures, Funding, Marketing and Public Relations, and Quality Control and Training

8. August 2002: RSB recommends CSL apply for Library Service and Technology (LSTA) grant monies to launch the service.


10. November 2002: CVRC conducts needs assessment survey to determine Colorado library e-reference current offerings and potential interest in collaborative service

11. November 2002: CSL and RSB send letter to all library directors in the state explaining the possible new collaborative, the funding model (a combination of federal grants and contributions from joining libraries), and asking that Commitment to Participate letters be returned by December 16, 2002.

12. Late December 2002: Thirty libraries return their Commitment to Participate letters


14. April 16-17, 2003: Vendor software demos - the software selection process is highlighted in more details further in the chapter.

15. May 2003: CSL received LSTA grant.

16. May 2003: CVRC conducts technology survey of participating libraries. The survey was conducted to aid in the software selection.

17. July 2003: Cooperative Coordinator hired, software license signed, and software training conducted.

18. August 2003: Website established, schedules established, and final details for service launch.


Suffice it to say that the end result of a lot of grass-roots efforts by librarians in the state of Colorado resulted in the formation of a cooperative virtual reference library service called AskColorado, with centralized support as well as LSTA (Library Service and Technology) federal grant monies through the Colorado State Library, and staffing and financial contributions coming from libraries across the state joining as member libraries.

The early organizational and funding structure of ASK remains today: The cooperative is analogous to a food co-op, or public radio: it is member and grant supported. Member libraries “join” ASK by signing a Letter of Agreement, and committing to a modest financial donation, based on a sliding scale, via staffing, or both. The Colorado State Library also contributes by continuing to provide federal grant monies, a full-time Coordinator,
and other organizational infrastructure. Today ASK continues to be funded and operates in the same way, most importantly, through its member support and governance. Librarians from member libraries set the policies; members select the software; and members govern. In fact, the original objective established by the cooperative continues today and forms the foundation for the collaborative, state-wide nature of the service:

“Colorado libraries are collaborating to provide a 24/7 online chat reference service that efficiently and effectively meets the information and learning needs of Colorado residents.”

To summarize, the early organizers of ASK knew that sharing costs on a statewide level would translate into savings in management, training, software selection, licensing, implementation, and maintenance, and more, with the availability of the new vendor-based chat software making such a collaborative service possible. Readers may learn from the timeline of events outlined earlier, but what worked for ASK may or may not work for other groups of individuals. The process of establishing a VRS is not as step-by-step oriented as it is when selecting an ILS, or creating a digital asset management system, or planning some other IT-based service. Readers are also encouraged to consult several well-written guides for launching and maintaining VRS, including Kern, 2009; RUSA, 2010 for general virtual reference service, and RUSA, 2007 for services that are collaborative in nature. However, the final section of this chapter will outline lessons learned and advice to others interested in establishing a VRS service, based on ASK experiences over the past eight years.

ASK in 2011

Skip ahead eight years. Currently, fiscal year 2011 – 2012, the ASK cooperative consists of thirty-five public libraries, twenty academic libraries, and twelve special libraries who field referral questions via e-mail. There are approximately 200 librarians trained to staff the service, with librarians from member libraries staff the service twelve hours per day Monday through Friday, 8 am to 8 pm, and eight hours on Saturdays. All other “off-hours” are covered by an after-hours service located in Colorado and run by ASK. Over the years, ASK librarians have handled more than 325,000 sessions with customers.

The ASK organization continues to offer chat reference service just as it did in 2003, but ASK has not remained stagnant, nor is it the same service that it started as in September of 2003. Over the years the organization has undergone a series of changes, including:

- Bringing into the academic queue libraries from outside Colorado
- Rebranding and securing the domain name AskAcademic
- Starting its own after-hours librarian service, and
- Selecting a new chat software from a non-library vendor (to be discussed in details further in this chapter)

As mentioned previously, the ASK organization is member governed. All major decision are made using member library in-put and in many cases voted upon by the librarians that comprise its committees. A full list of all the changes the cooperative has made since inception in 2003 includes:
2003:
- Service launched. Two queues available, General and Spanish.

2004:
- Four queues available: Separated academic queue out of general queue (initially, the academic queue was combined with a general, public queue), and created a fourth queue for K-12
- Offered companion “Live Homework Help” service.

2005:
- Discontinued “Live Homework Help” service.

2006:
- Started “Live Help Queue” for state government.

2007:
- Cooperative continues to grow with new member libraries joining, but no major changes made.

2008:
- Rebranded: New logo, tagline, and web site,
- Closed “Live Help Queue”.
- Added an academic library from Texas (University of North Texas) to academic queue.

2009:
- Selected new software from a non-library vendor.

2010:
- Implemented new software from InstantService, later called ATG Live Chat. Now known as Oracle Live Help on Demand.
- Launched AskAcademic.org domain (www.askacademic.org).
- Expanded and branded the academic queue: 1 more Texas academic library, Austin Community College.
- Discontinued the Spanish service queue.
- Created Staff Intranet using Drupal.
- Started the ASK After-Hours service to staff evenings, nights, and weekends.

2011:
- Created modified widgets (for embedding on libraries’ web pages) allowing easier patron entry to the service.
- Expanded AskAcademic again with addition of two more Texas libraries as well as a campus in Missouri (part of Colorado Technical University).
- Started pilot project answering questions for first “client” – Jones International University.
- Added second “client” library – CSU (Colorado State University)-Global University.

One significant change worth highlighting in detail was the software selection process resulting in a move from a library chat vendor software to a public sector “live help” software from a non-library vendor.

Technology Selection

At their core, VRS are human (not technology) based organizations. This cannot be emphasized enough. Many VR services have started and failed because of a focus primarily on the “glitz”, the technology, to the exclusion of all other considerations. If only one piece of advice could be offered to others seeking to start a VRS, fix a VRS, or start a VR cooperative (statewide or other), it would be this: do not look at the venture as one centered solely on technology, and instead focus on the human aspects first, for example:
1) Why do you want to offer the service?

2) What is your service philosophy?

3) What will your policies and procedures be?

4) Who will staff, and what hours will you be open?

Libraries may learn from ASK’s blueprint for success. In addition, as mentioned previously, several well-written guides for launching and maintaining virtual reference services already exist. The key is to not look at technology as the solution to any perceived problem, or the only factor to consider when determining whether to start a service. There are many factors to consider, and technology is an important one, but it is not the only one.

Having said that, and again focusing on LITA’s vision of using “technologies to deliver dynamic library collections and services” the remainder of this chapter will focus on software technologies selected and used by the ASK cooperative.

The initial chat software selected by the ASK Cooperative was from LSSI (Library Systems and Services, Inc.), later sold to Tutor.com. The cooperative used Tutor.com’s AskALibrarian software, as well as their after-hours librarian service, LibrariansbyRequest, until February, 2010 when it began using software from a non-library vendor, a period of nearly 6 1/2 years. However, during this time, the cooperative actively kept abreast of changes in technologies and evaluated the available options as they changed from year to year.

The initial software selection process in 2003 evaluated chat reference software from four library vendors: Docutek, 24/7, LSSI and OCLC QuestionPoint. From the beginning, major factors in the selection of a software vendor for ASK revolved not only around the technology and what it could and could not do, an exhaustive list of desires was listed in the RFI, but companion services offered from the vendor, including an after-hours staffing service and full-time Spanish virtual reference librarian services. The ability to offer Spanish virtual reference service to ASK customers was a very high priority for the ASK service when forming the cooperative, and remained a high priority over the years, until it was realized that basing the software selection process on this “adjunct” service was hindering the cooperatives’ ability to truly select the best software available, as will be explained later. Starting in 2003 and continuing to the present, the cooperative evaluated and compared chat software vendor offerings in 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007-2008, and 2009-2010.

- In 2004 the cooperative evaluated chat software from these vendors: MCLS 24/7 Reference, Digi-Net Tech Elibrarian, Docutek VIRlplus, OCLC QuestionPoint, RightNow, Desk-top Streaming, and Live Assistance.

- In 2005 the cooperative evaluated: Digi-Net Tech Elibrarian, Live Assistance from LiveAssistance, OnDemand Basic /Enhanced from Convey Systems, QuestionPoint- 24/7 Reference from OCLC, Timpani SB Chat/Timpani SB Contact Center from Live Person, Virtual Reference ToolKit from Tutor.com, and VRlplus from Docutek, a Sirsi Company.

- In 2006 the cooperative evaluated: Docutek VRlPlus, Tutor.com, and QuestionPoint (OCLC).

Each year (2004-2006) the evaluation process was conducted by a Software Selection Subcommittee comprised of librarians from the member libraries. These librarians would test available software, conduct literature reviews, and interview librarians using the various technologies at other libraries across the country. The first year a very detailed list of specifications and features was included in the RFI sent to vendors. Each year the list of specifications and features became shorter and less specific as the group realized sticking to one defined list of criteria was cumbersome and
often not relevant as they found comparing virtual reference software more similar to comparing apples or oranges, vs. comparing Braeburn apples to Gala apples. Quite a bit of time was spent in these endeavors, and a recommendation was then made to the Steering Committee. Each year the Steering Committee chose to select continuing with Tutor.com as the vendor for the cooperative, despite recommendations from the Software Subcommittee that some available technologies were better from a technological standpoint. Again, after-hours service availability and a focus on providing Spanish service were key criteria in the selection process during these years.

In 2007, the Software Selection Subcommittee asked the Steering Committee for guidance in an effort to not expend energies evaluating software options that would continue to be not selected due to the emphasis on services beyond the technology. That year the Steering Committee crafted a document, outlining their priorities, including the statement:

“While the software plays a major role in the selection process, it is not the only component considered. Other considerations include a back-up reference service, a reference service in Spanish, price, and vendor responsiveness/customer service.”

Included in their list of priorities were:

- 24/7 coverage including after hours librarian service
- 24/7 reference service in Spanish

Therefore, in 2007 the Software Selection Subcommittee only seriously evaluated OCLC QuestionPoint and Tutor.com because those vendors included both software as well as back-up/after-hours service and Spanish options. Again, after the 2007-2008 software selection evaluation, the Steering Committee opted to continue with Tutor.com.

The next round of evaluations occurred in 2009-2010. By this time the availability of quick Instant Messaging (IM) options such as Meebo and Library H3lp were rapidly being deployed by libraries, generally not by consortia, but as a service for individual libraries, several ASK member libraries included. ASK member libraries started asking questions about these new technologies and the possibility of using them cooperative-wide. In addition, they started questioning why the Tutor.com software did not seem to be keeping up technically with changes happening in industry as well as the new 2.0 web environment that was the current craze. Tutor.com had been non-responsive to technology feature requests submitted by ASK over the years, leading to some restlessness amongst the members and a stronger desire than in previous years to seriously consider changing software.

Meanwhile, the ASK Coordinator, while responsible for minding the overall health and welfare of the cooperative, day-to-day care and feeding, and overall project management, had also been tracking the technology trends and watching what other libraries and cooperatives were doing, or not doing, as the technologies changed from year to year. Seeing a whole new world of technology passing the cooperative by, the coordinator finally decided it was time to present an ultimatum, of sorts, to the cooperative: Continue to focus on offering Spanish service to the exclusion of all other technology trends and societal considerations (2.0 world), or move Spanish service down the list of priority features in order to open the software selection process up to more contemporary software options. The Cooperative listened, and the Steering Committee agreed that placing an emphasis on offering Spanish service for so many years, with yearly statistics showing dismal usage numbers, had hindered the cooperative’s ability to be flexible technologically.
Therefore, for the 2009-2010 software evaluation process, Spanish service would no longer be a priority and the Software Selection Subcommittee was given the option to evaluate a variety of software vendors otherwise unavailable to the group had Spanish service remained a priority. During this process the subcommittee evaluated software from:

- Altarama
- InstantService
- Library H3lp
- OCLC QuestionPoint
- the Ohio/Oregon cooperative (using the Spark IM platform)
- TextALibrarian, and
- Tutor.com.

The choices were narrowed down to four finalists: VRLPlus, Reftracker, and Refchatter from Altarama Information Systems (a library vendor), InstantService (a non-library vendor), OCLC QuestionPoint (a library vendor/cooperative), and Ohio/Oregon (two statewide cooperatives collaborating to program and host Spark, an IM software from Jive software.) All four options offered features key in a collaborative VRS setting, and which were generally not available from free IM services or 2.0 social media services, including the ability to: create unlimited librarian logins; offer unlimited number of “queues” simultaneously staffed by multiple librarians; having multiple librarians logged-in and online simultaneously; storage of chat transcripts; sophisticated statistical module; and the loading and use of prescripted messages.

In October 2010, the Software Selection Subcommittee chose InstantService as its #1 software choice. InstantService was a private sector company based in Seattle and which was later acquired by Art Technology Group (ATG), which was subsequently acquired by the Oracle Corporation. At that time, the InstantService software was used by only one other statewide virtual reference cooperative: AskALibrarian in Florida. Although this software decision required the cooperative to undergo very significant changes, the subcommittee saw numerous advantages to this option that had the potential to offset the changes in very positive ways:

1. **Cost Savings:** The quoted monthly price was significantly less than the previous vendor, Tutor.com. InstantService was comparable in price to OCLC and Altarama, but much less than choosing the Ohio/Oregon option.

2. **No Contract Lock:** InstantService did not require the cooperative to commit to a one year contract. The cooperative need only give 60-days notice prior to discontinuing service.

3. **Stability:** In all the subcommittee’s testing of software, and discussions with the Florida cooperative, the group believed this software to be much more stable than the offerings from library vendors.

4. **Expanded Compatibility:** InstantService was compatible with multiple operating systems and browsers, on both the librarian and patron side. Library vendor offerings had some restrictions in this area.

5. **Communication Options:** In addition to traditional chat technology, InstantService offered a built-in email feature, as well as one-on-one IM for librarian to librarian use, and a “chat room” in which all librarians logged in at a particular time could communicate to each other.

6. **Referral Integration:** The software offered the possibility of folding in referral library communication with patrons directly into the software instead of the method used,
which incorporated outside e-mail systems, resulting in cumbersome and error-prone tracking of referral volume.

From start to finish, the software selection process took approximately eight months. Other groups may work faster or slower depending on numerous factors. Consortia wishing to implement software selection themselves are encouraged to do the following:

1. Test other services from other libraries and consortia to see what their software looks like from the patron perspective.
2. Contact key individuals at other libraries and consortia and ask them what they like about their current software.
3. Contact software vendors and ask for literature and other “specs” related to their software.
4. Do a literature review. One word of warning however: Software is evolving faster than the library profession’s ability to publish its literature in a timely fashion. Details about software you read in the published literature may, in fact, be drastically out of date and the software could have changed since publication. Just be cautious.
5. Test as many software options as you have resources to do so. If your resources are thin, notice what software is used by the majority of libraries or cooperatives, and just test those. If you have more resources, expand the number of technologies you test. The more you know, the better you’ll be able to make the best decision for your cooperative.
6. Ask for quotes from vendors. Compare the quotes to what you’ve learned in your research and testing. Sometimes your selection will not be based on the lowest quote. As mentioned previously in this article, comparing chat software options can be like comparing apples to oranges.

As mentioned previously, selecting the current software option required the cooperative to undergo several changes, one very significant. Because InstantService was a non-library vendor, they naturally did not offer a 24/7 back-up staffing service like those from Tutor.com or OCLC QuestionPoint. In 2010, ASK contracted for 105 hours per week, or 5460 hours per year, of staffing from Tutor.com. Therefore, selection of InstantService required ASK to develop its own back-up staffing service in order to continue to offer chat service during the hours the member libraries were not staffing the service.

Current Technology Features

ASK has been using the InstantService software since February of 2011. The software has since been acquired by Oracle Corporation, and is presently called Oracle Live Help on Demand. Despite two acquisition processes since implementation, the cooperative has been immensely satisfied with the software. Oracle Live Help on Demand is entirely web-based, both for administrators as well as librarians. The software is hosted by Oracle, which is very good about sending notices about server or software maintenance upgrades. Thus far, the software is stable and rarely results in disconnects from patrons.

Administrator

From an administrative standpoint, the software is perfect for a librarians or administrator with no major programming background or skills. Queues can be created in a
manner of minutes, allowing member libraries to have their own unique chat queues, if needed. The cooperative as a whole manages three main queues (academic, K-12, general) but new queues can be created on-the-fly without consulting the vendor and without any major programming knowledge. The software also contains a robust analytics component. Statistics can be generated in real-time in order to monitor service at any given time of the day. As compared to the previous software from Tutor.com, there is no delay of one to several hours in order to pull transcripts or generate statistics. Statistics are available nearly up to the minute. The same process stands for librarian logins. New logins take 1 -2 minutes to create and become available to a librarian, and settings can be adjusted on a librarian by librarian basis. For example, some academic librarians like to cover our public queues. Access can be easily given to those librarians. Or individual representatives from member libraries can have access to that statistical module. Their logins can be modified to gain this access on a request by request basis.

Librarian

From the librarian standpoint, the ease of use of the software far surpasses the previous software. The software has many of the familiar features present in chat software from library vendors including new patron alerts, the basic chat feature, web page pushing, and the ability to pre-load scripted messages and URLs. In addition, the Oracle Live Help on Demand software offers a spell checker, an IP locator, and ‘tokens’, which allow the software to automatically insert patron data into prescripted messages. One feature the librarians especially like is the ability to upload a photo or avatar of themselves that will display in the patron interface. The librarians feel this features adds a human touch to the interaction and helps to facilitate more friendly and open communication. Another feature is an industry standard color coding system that employs the colors white, yellow, and red to get the librarians’ attention when patron have been waiting 1 – over 5 minutes. The color changes from white to yellow at the 1 minute mark, then from yellow to red once the patron has been waiting for over 5 minutes. Another key feature is the ability to field multiple sessions simultaneously so patrons do not have to reach the 5 minute mark. Librarians can field multiple patrons with ease using a tabbed system in the Agent Console. The administrator can set a limit on how many simultaneous patrons a librarian can accept, anywhere from 1 – 10. Librarians can e-mail a patron while chatting with the patron, can send files as attachments via the chat, and can e-mail transcripts to patrons. As mentioned above, librarians are rarely disconnected from patrons due to software issues. However, they are sometimes faced with a disconnect due to a local issue, either on the librarian or the patron side. When this happens, the software has a nice feature in which the session is not lost or disconnected, but rather re-routed back to the queue it came from, for pick-up by another, or the same, librarian.

Lessons Learned

Librarians in Colorado discussing virtual reference in the early 2000’s could never have predicted the course of the cooperative over the subsequent years. The cooperative is fortunate to have persisted and thrived during this time, but many factors ended up contributing to make this so, and each year has presented challenges to overcome. The following can be considered “lessons learned”
and advice to others wishing to start a collaborative virtual reference service:

1. **Collaborate and Mean It:** The core to survival of any type of library collaborative, is to participate in the collaborative as a full member and to the fullest extent. Do not join a collaborative expecting to be serviced. Provide your service to the collaborative in the form of input, feedback, committee work, advocacy, and more.

2. **Communicate:** If you’re happy with the way things are going, communicate this, internally and externally. If you aren’t happy, let the group know why. ASK has several ways in which members can communicate including committees, e-mail lists, a Staff Intranet, meetings, annual letters to directors asking for feedback and providing kudos to staff, an annual workshop, an more.

3. **Pay Attention:** Read all communications from the collaborative. Do your research. If you can’t find an answer to a question you have, ask someone in the collaborative. Do not make decisions about your participation in a collaborative based on guesses, hearsay, or incorrect information.

4. **Value Training:** To participate in a collaborative VR effort, more training is necessary than starting a service at a single library. There is more information to know about member libraries, the policies of the cooperative, and the chat software. One key to the overall success of a collaborative is proving consistent, high-quality service, and the one way to achieve this is through training and ongoing continuing education. ASK has a basic training requirement for all librarians of four hours, conducted by the coordinator, but most librarians realize after this training that they’ve only touched the surface regarding the knowledge they will need. ASK offers additional training upon request, holds an annual workshop, and communicates best practices via documentation and a Staff Intranet in an effort to supplement the basic training session.

5. **Promote the Service:** Do you want your library’s patrons to use the VR service? Then it will be up to your library to conduct its own PR and marketing to make this a reality. Don’t expect the “collaborative” to drive your patrons to the service just because you “joined” and your name is listed at a website somewhere. Even though your library may not be in charge of all the details of software maintenance, training, etc. it is your library’s job to drive your patron traffic to the service.

6. **Don’t Measure Success Based on Traffic Alone:** Use of your VR service is important, but don’t base all your decisions on the value of the service on metrics alone. Tying into #5 above, other measures of success for VR services can often be intangibles difficult to measures, things like: Improved reference knowledge of your librarians participating in the service which they can apply at your library, the overall image of libraries in the mind of the public, and more.

As mentioned above, the cooperative has faced many challenges over the years. The biggest challenged faced has been unhappiness by select member libraries and a loss of libraries from time to time. Often, libraries have left the cooperative without providing notice of their intentions to leave, or having asked questions about issues they were unhappy with or concerned about. In several situations, libraries have left, citing a detailed list of their dissatisfaction, but only after the fact. While feedback is important and appreciated, unfortunately for the collaborative, in several of the situations the feedback provided related to specific points citing inaccurate information. These libraries only discussed their concerns internally. Had they collaborated, communicated, and paid attention, as advised in the points above, the libraries could have been better able to make a more informed decision, perhaps choosing to continue with the cooperative because of having points clarified or explained.
Some libraries have left the collaborative, not based on dissatisfaction per se, but as mentioned earlier in the chapter, because of the emergence of the Web 2.0 technologies, especially free or nearly free IM programs such as Meebo or LibraryH3lp. Primarily large academic libraries have left and started their own, internal VR services. Apparently this works for them, and they having the funding and staff to provide adequate hours, but it is noted that none of these libraries offer service 24/7 as does ASK. Others academic libraries, like the Auraria Library, have started their own internal service while remaining a member of ASK, valuing the dual roles each service plays in reaching their students (Evans, McHale, and Sobel, 2010). Auraria believes that a library can use social software and maintain an internal IM to deliver reference, but that this does not preclude their participation in ASK.

Finally, for many libraries in the state, ASK is the only service they would consider providing to their patrons. For the most part, Colorado is a rural state. Many of our libraries simply don’t have the funding or the staffing to provide many hours of virtual reference on their own, but they value this service for their rural patrons. For them, ASK is their only option, and as described in the introduction to this chapter, the reason the cooperative was formed in the early years. Further details about the cooperative ethos necessary and exemplified by ASK can be found in Johnson’s 2012 chapter “Collaborative Virtual Reference Really Does Work, But it Takes a Tribe.”

The reason the ASK cooperative continues to exist and thrive today is because the majority of the participating libraries participate like they mean it. They value the service, and they do what they need to do to keep the service running. Cooperatives thrive on mass, and the more libraries that participate, the more stable the cooperative will be.
Reference List


