"Creating Web Sites People Want to Use"

Chat widgets on the library website: Help at the point of need

The online social networking revolution has given users the desire for a very personal experience on the web. Our websites are frequently the first or only contact with users, but even with our best usability studies and universal design they can still be confusing . One way to help our users navigate our electronic (virtual) libraries is to be there ourselves. An instant response is what they want and need on the web. Asynchronous methods like email can fix problems later, but a synchronous conversation will help someone at their point and time of need. Chat, or instant messaging, provides this better method for talking to users. Libraries have been using chat for quite some time: from BBSs in the beginning to enterprise virtual reference software. However, only recently has this live interaction between libraries and users truly been "live."

Through the development of more web-based applications, chat can now run in simple interfaces directly inside web browsers. Small, "replaceable parts" of web pages are called widgets. Chat widgets come in a variety of shapes, sizes, and functionality. How they are used on library websites effects not only the public interface online, but they have far reaching effects on daily work and organizational culture.

What everybody should know about chat widgets

It's easy enough to create a chat widget, most instant messaging services will generate the javascript code based on a few parameters. This creates a window that looks similar to the traditional chat client application. There is an indication that the "librarian is in" or an away message shown. The user can immediately begin typing in the window to send messages from a default guest identity or can specify a nickname.

Since the technology was so easy to use and some librarians already had chat accounts, the chat widget caught on very fast. They were added to personal websites, blogs, and individuals' pages. The biggest early winner was Meebo, which also offered a service that integrated multiple chat accounts into a single web interface. The other current popular widgets are associated with IM services such as AIM and Google Talk or new companies such as Plugoo. The key is that each chat widget is tied in some way to an account with a service. This is important because each service works differently and offers various features.

Some examples

Meebo - Meebo's strength lies in the ability to collect multiple chat accounts with the major instant messaging services into the Meebo web interface. The drawback is that other interfaces (such as client software) cannot be used. The Meebo Rooms service can also be embedded in a widget and has the functionality of a chat room, with members and guests. The rooms also have a video sharing option, which increases the size of the widget, but allows for use of multimedia.
Plugoo - This service allows you to create widgets that work with one account from from any of

a number of different services. Unlike Meebo, it allows you to use the native interface of that single service for the widget. Customizations are versatile yet in the event of multiple IM conversations they are opened into a public room. There are limitations to the free account that are removed in their Premium service.

AIM WIMZI - This widget that is tied to a single AOL Instant Messaging account has the functionality of the other chat widgets. You can also add a welcome message the gives information to users before they start the conversation. Though you can design multiple widgets, WIMZI doesn't indicate which one in particular is being used by the user.

Google Talk - The Chatback option with Google Talk creates a link that opens a guest chat session with the Google account. This only opens a pop up window and customization is limited to editing the link text. The message users see when the window opens is also not very welcoming.

Where do I put it?

So let's start with appearance and placement, where it goes and how you want it to work. You can place and size a widget so it fits on your website so that it is very visible. The space and location used should show that the service is available but that it doesn't distract from the content of the page. This is one reason why many websites link to a separate page or pop up window for their chat widgets. Another reason for this strategy is that many widgets reset the session if the user navigates away from the page. Think about how users will see and use the service; for quick messages and comments this would not be a problem, but for an extended consultation the conversation is important. If you can, set a default greeting in the widget to advise the user to "please stay on this page."

The customizable color of a widget should use eye catching hues, but should draw from the websites color palette to fit with the design of the page. The title of the widget and the account name are the first greeting that the user will see, even before sending a message.

One chat widget

The most elementary type of chat widget is that of an individual in the library. It is very suitable for pages that already contain contact information such as staff directory entries, personal newsletters and blogs, or services with a specific person responsible. The chat widget can be placed alongside current phone number and email information so that alternate modes of communication are offered in the same place. Users can have a very personal experience while chatting with an individual, so this opportunity should be taken to configure identity into the widget messages or chat account. In a small library a single person could be responsible for all chat work so identity can also be that of the institution. From the staffing side, there are a few simple issues that need to be addressed. The most important is how often the individual will be online and how they handle incoming messages, and the sole responsibility falls on one person. Another key issue is that this type of widget does not scale well to larger websites since the single individual needs to be familiar with the information for every page containing the widget. The more portions of the website that supply this service, the more time and expertise is expected from the user.

Another type of use is still a single chat account, but it is shared by several people who work closely together. The user name and password for these account are shared among multiple people, and the account is sometimes used only on a shared computer. These widgets are useful in more pages, since institutional knowledge is shared and can be online more since it is not dependent on an individual. The identity of the chat account is frequently less personal, since different "voices" are speaking to the user with various experience and styles. The widget should be configured to represent the group in name and which pages use it. Not only can web pages for the group as a whole use the widget, but also the individuals and specialized pages can draw on the increased strength of this model.

A close relative of the shared chat account is a shared widget with multiple accounts. These widgets, such as those tied to Meebo Rooms, can be placed on websites and work much like chat rooms where users can begin chatting instantly. Some of the features of single account widgets, such as away messages and personal identity are lost in widget rooms. It is sometimes difficult

for users to tell if anyone is there to answer their question, unless the library accounts in the room have names that indicate they are not simply other users. There is no privacy to the rooms either, since more than one user can enter the same widget simultaneously. There are many advantages, despite these concerns. One is that multiple accounts can staff this service without the need to share a single login or computer, preventing difficulties in overlap of shifts. More than one staff member can be brought in to help the user as well, helping to triage or refer specialized questions to the best person. The personalized account names also give the user a more engaging experience more similar to the one-on-one individual chat session.

Chatting in multiple ways

These "levels" of chat service can be used simultaneously in one website to produce a distributed, multi-tiered service. If individuals have personalized accounts, a single user widget can be set up on all pages where they are the particular contact. In addition on most other pages a shared widget, such as the "room" or a shared account can be used. The benefits are that the service is active for longer periods of time since the staffing time can be distributed or shared. Also staff can share expertise and collaborate to better help users despite any physical distances. At larger institutions, each of these smaller collaborative groups can correspond to a similar location such as a branch library or to a group with a similar user base such as science librarians. In these library systems there may also be a need for "higher level" chat service which can provide service to all the main web pages of the site. The role of this service is to address the information needs of all users, which can focus less on expertise and more on general knowledge and the ability to make referrals.

The smoothness of a referral transition is more difficult for widgets since the user is chatting from one specific page. The "rooms" can most easily be used to bring in another staff specialist without the need to end or restart the question. The alternative is to transition the user to another website where another staff member is online and provide an introduction between them. The more integrated the service is in each web page and into staff practice the easier users will find the interaction. Consistent look and feel of a website by placing these widgets or the link to them in similar places can also increase user familiarity and comfort. Remember that the distinct identity of the chat widget and account can allow you to differentiate between each service point and the expertise or scope the staff have. Away messages or the default message should be chosen carefully to give the user accurate expectations while being welcoming. Since that red away message isn't what users want to see, staffing is very important to providing these services.

OFFLINE or AWAY

How can these services be staffed so users don't see this message? The single person is the least formalized staffing model though there are a number of decisions to make about when to be online. One approach is to set hour when the individual can be consistently available, which has the advantage of reliability but usually results in few total live hours. The peak use of the web pages with the widget can inform the best times to be available, often outside standard working hours. The alternative is to have the service on constantly when working at a computer, putting up away messages when leaving or attention is diverted. Since the user is chatting from an anonymous account it is very difficult to follow up if you miss the conversation. Take advantage of features that allow users to send an email or have away messages encourage them to leave contact information if they want a follow-up. A single staff member can also be on multiple widgets in addition to their individual one if the others are "rooms" or if the chat accounts are aggregated into one interface.

For the single shared account widget there can be only one staff member logged in at a time. These widgets can be staffed with techniques that should be used to best fit the organizational culture. A common example is to tie the staffing of chat to a public service desk, so that whenever there is someone available to help in person they are also available online. The benefits of a set schedule, reliable availability, and *tasks that "jive well"* are weighed against the likelihood of distractions and split attention between the services. Staff training in how to chat quickly and established priorities can go far to set a balance that works within the group. If the use of individual chat accounts is common and can be relied upon, a widget that allows multiple accounts such as "rooms" can be used to allow overlap of staffing, referrals, and more flexibility in staffing time. The pitfalls remain frequent down-time and lack of indication that all staff are away. These methods are best suited to websites where staff can communicate informally often enough to share experiences and communicate staffing changes.

For large institutions the main or global pages on a website often require more reliable services and formal coordination to be effective. A team drawn from different areas in the organization or a group specialized in serving general users are two staffing models that can address a general user's needs. Having a large group with time committed allows the service to have extended hours and continuity though the commitment of staff time is high. If a similar services such as answering email already exists the structure and operation of that team could accommodate chat services more easily. It can be difficult to coordinate communications between multiple groups operating in each paradigm, but the most global can play a key role in communication during live referral and offline planning.

Conclusion

The use of chat widgets can be as simple or confusing as the web site itself, but it helps to make choices that fit the web design and the organizational culture. Too often change is driven from outside, which can make technology changes more challenging. Libraries are already institutions grounded in helping their users, and chat widgets can be another bridge of communication. Assessment in different organizations will show a diversity of frequency and depth of interaction with users via chat, and in an era of web based social interaction the results could be powerful. Web pages aren't the only place chat widgets have found a use in libraries. A great example of service at the point of need is a chat widget appearing after an unsuccessful library catalog search. In websites and web based interfaces where there is opportunity for point of need contact with users, the chat widget can be a powerful communication tool.

John J Meier is a Science Librarian at the Pennsylvania State University