

Internet R_x office visits: Just what the Dr. ordered

By Nancy F. Stimson and Nancy Schiller

Offering one-on-one Internet instruction to university faculty

The Science and Engineering Library at the State University of New York at Buffalo recently instituted a program we call "Internet R_x Office Visits." We view the program as an extension of the reference service we provide. We also see it as a highly effective form of faculty outreach that allows us to provide instruction in new and traditional library resources. The Science and Engineering Library has a staff of six full-time librarians and one part-time librarian, and serves a total of about 300 faculty members in the schools of Natural Sciences and Mathematics, and Engineering and Applied Sciences.

Program rationale

Over the summer of 1995, the University at Buffalo Libraries made a big push to develop its World Wide Web pages. As part of that effort, the Science and Engineering Library created its own homepage, which we were eager to share with faculty. We also wanted to ask faculty for feedback about the Internet resources we had assembled and get their ideas about other useful links we might make.

For some time we had been talking about providing faculty with instruction in the use of networked electronic information resources and tools. Initially, we considered holding hands-on group sessions for faculty members in a library classroom equipped with 15 Pentium workstations loaded with Netscape. In the end,

we chose to offer a more personalized service. Our idea was to visit faculty in their offices and work with them one-on-one. We assumed that each faculty member would have different information needs as well as unique hardware and software configurations. In addition, we thought that faculty would feel more comfortable asking questions if they were not in the presence of their peers.

Publicity

We announced the service in October 1995 by sending a flyer to all faculty members in the departments we serve. The flyer offered to show faculty how to search bibliographic databases from their offices, access the university's Campus-Wide Information System and University Libraries' Web pages, search the World Wide Web for information, incorporate Internet resources into their teaching and research, and select and organize resources to create their own Web pages. Less than a week later we began receiving phone calls and e-mail messages from faculty requesting office visits.

Preparing for an office visit

The authors decided to work as a team and go on office visits together. We felt that our different skills and expertise complemented each other's quite well: what one didn't know, the other might, and this has proven to be the case.

Since we can't know in advance what a particular visit will be like—what questions will come up or what technical problems might arise—we have decided it's best to take a relaxed and open approach to these visits. That's not to say we don't prepare for them. We do.

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Before an office visit we try to find out as much as possible about what the faculty member would like us to cover and what specific hardware and software he or she has available. We also ask them about their teaching and research. For example, for an adjunct professor teaching a course on differential equations, we searched the Web in advance of our visit and found a number of sites, including the Boston University Differential Equations Project, with links to articles, discussion lists, laboratory projects, software programs, and exercises related to the teaching of differential equations. In addition, we bring with us on each visit a packet of informational handouts covering everything from how to search our online catalog to how to renew a book electronically to how to connect to OCLC's FirstSearch service. We leave behind those handouts that relate to the topics we cover during our visit.

We keep a log book in which we record our scheduled appointments and which serves as a summary of each visit, both for statistical purposes and so that we can track items we need to follow up on. The log records the name, department, office number, e-mail address, telephone number, research area, and hardware/software set-up of the faculty member, as well as the date, time, and duration of the visit.

Typical visits

About 10 percent of the faculty, representing most of the departments we serve, have responded so far. In addition to individual office visits, we have made three group presentations and have been consulted a number of times over the telephone. The average length of an office visit has been an hour and a half. Respondents' requests fall into several categories: exploring the Web, getting more out of our online catalog (primarily teaching faculty how to perform more sophisticated keyword searches), accessing article databases, and solving software and hardware problems. One faculty member requested that we show her "everything," and we have arranged multiple follow-up visits with her for this purpose.

Based on the requests we have received so far, we have developed a general outline we follow if the person isn't sure what he or she

wants us to cover. We begin by showing them the university's homepage and the faculty/staff directory, then link to their departmental homepage, if one exists. Next we link to the University Libraries' homepage and demonstrate some of the services that are available, particularly our electronic interlibrary loan, book renewal,

reference services, and various book and article catalogs and databases. Then we showcase the Science and Engineering Library's homepage, highlighting the subject-specific Internet resources our librarians

have located and linked to and, in some cases, annotated. Finally, we demonstrate how to search the Web using search engines like Alta Vista and WebCrawler and subject trees such as Yahoo.

Of course, any of this is subject to change on the spot to accommodate specific information requests. For example, we have shown faculty how to upload and download information to and from their e-mail accounts and we also routinely link to specialized Internet resources such as patent files, gene sequencing databases, product catalogs, and material properties databases. We have installed Netscape for several of our faculty and sent others PPP software on disk along with instructions on how to load it. When we encounter hardware difficulties, however, we refer faculty to Academic Computing. In one case, a professor of geology was having a problem with highlighting in Lynx, a text-based browser for the Web. Although there was no problem with the highlighting feature in other software applications, such as WordPerfect, it disappeared in Lynx. We encouraged him to call Academic Computing, which he did. They were able to correct the problem but it was our visit which confirmed for him that he had a problem. As he told us later, "Before you guys came, I thought it was me."

Ideally, we try to relate each visit to some real information need. For example, on one of our visits we showed the professor how to connect to the online catalog from the libraries' Web page in order to search for the proceedings of a particular conference he was interested in. It turned out we didn't own the proceedings, so we showed him how from within

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our online catalog he could access the online catalogs of the other SUNY University Center libraries, one of which had the proceedings. Next, we showed him how to access the inter-library loan form on the libraries' Web page, fill it in, and submit it.

For another professor, our session consisted of helping him formulate a search strategy for use in the CARL UnCover database; then showing him how to connect to CARL through the libraries' Web page, search the database, and print out citations to articles he found of interest. Next we showed him how to access the online catalog from the libraries' Web page and search the catalog for journals. One of the articles he retrieved from CARL was in a journal owned by the Health Sciences Library located on the other campus, so we finished up our session by showing him how to access an intercampus document delivery form on the Libraries' Web page and use it to request that the article be faxed to his office.

Benefits to the library

As a result of the Internet R_x program, we are learning a lot about the faculty we serve and their needs and preferences. For instance, not all faculty have their own computers, let alone Netscape or Mosaic access. For those who don't have access to a graphical browser, we show them how to use Lynx from within their e-mail accounts. Many of the faculty are interested in finding out how to get Netscape set up on their office or home computers and we provide them with instructions on how to FTP and install the program themselves.

We have been pleased to find that the faculty, at least those we have visited, are enthusiastic about accessing library resources and services electronically from their offices (although one professor, a computer scientist, told us he dislikes computers, but even he admitted it is more efficient for him to do as much of his library research as possible from his office). Moreover, faculty want to be able to access these resources and services from a single "point-of-entry" using simple, consistent commands and sophisticated yet intuitive search interfaces.

We also are getting a better idea of the types of electronic services that are of greatest interest to faculty. One of the most popular is the CARL UnCover Reveal service, which allows faculty to regularly receive via e-mail the tables

of contents of current issues of journals they specify. In addition to being able to scan current journals in a timely fashion, the faculty like the "passive" nature of the service—the information comes to them. They need only log onto CARL to set up their profile. After that, they automatically receive the information they've requested in their electronic mailboxes.

In turn, the faculty have taught us a thing or two. During one visit, the professor we were working with asked if it is possible to save as a file the personal information required on the electronic interlibrary loan form on the Libraries' Web page so that he wouldn't have to re-type it each time he made a request. A colleague of his, who was visiting from Hungary at the time, offered a solution to the problem. We went back to the library, experimented with his method, and have since written it up as a simple set of procedures that we regularly bring with us on office visits to share with others.

Finally, our visits give us an opportunity to talk to faculty about library policies and issues in an informal setting, and they have provided us with some very pleasant social occasions as well. After making a presentation to the mathematics faculty, an invitation was extended to stay and join them for their weekly tea!

We have plans to expand the program to involve the other librarians in the Science and Engineering Library, matching their subject specialties with the faculty's research areas, and discussion is under way to team up subject librarians with technical experts in Academic Computing to offer a similar program across the campus. We feel that the success of the program and the good public relations it is generating are a boost for staff morale. In times

faculty we have visited are enthusiastic about accessing library resources and services electronically from their offices

of shrinking budgets, it is nice to be able to offer a service enhancement like this.

Finally, the program is allowing us to experiment with developing and delivering user-centered rather than library-centered services and to demonstrate to the faculty the power and potential of World Wide Web technologies for integrating access to a variety of library and information resources and services. ■