

Dalston, Teresa and Michael Pullin, eds. *Virtual Reference on a Budget: Case Studies*. Columbus, OH: Linworth Publishing, 2008. \$39.95 (ISBN: 1586832875)

*Virtual Reference on a Budget: Case Studies* discusses virtual reference (VR) services offered by numerous libraries. Instant messenger (IM) services receive the most attention in this book; proprietary chat and E-mail reference are also covered. Five of the six chapters discuss implementation of VR in various settings. The sixth chapter provides detailed, practical advice on advertisement of chat reference, as well as fairly comprehensive advice on training staff to perform chat. My general impression is that the book provides enthusiastic inspiration for starting or improving VR. It is *not* a practical “how-to” guide. Most chapters provide a bewildering array of software options, and sparse details on setting them up.

The authors of this book do have a strong grasp on patron groups’ demographic profiles and general reference needs. Young adults and K-12 students are avid users of IM for both social and educational purposes. The cases in this book cover projects serving middle school, high school, and college students through their institutional libraries, and populations mainly falling within a similar age range at public libraries. Deaf students in mainstream and specialized K-12 and college programs also receive a chapter’s worth of attention. The authors of all these chapters demonstrate familiarity with patrons’ educational backgrounds and financial capabilities.

Several chapters in this book list free IM software that can be used to provide reliable VR service. They note programs associated with a single provider (such as AIM and Yahoo! Messenger), and free aggregators (such as Gaim and Trillian) that can communicate with patrons using multiple programs. Librarians who want help choosing IM software may want to read Chapter 4: “Virtual Reference Service in Lakeview High School.” Unlike most of the other chapters, this one sticks with a few popular choices of programs. Readers should note that Jybe co-browsing software, touted in several chapters, has been unavailable since 2007.

Librarians opening a new VR service at any type of library may benefit from reading Chapter 5’s appendices, which provide transcripts of 104 reference questions asked at the University of North Texas via E-mail or chat. The scope of the questions covers basic library information, fact finding, more in-depth reference queries, and a few interesting oddballs.

Overall, I recommend this book to librarians searching for inspiration rather than models. It is most appropriate for those who have already used IM for either social or educational purposes, as the information provided on IM basics is often still complex. I believe that librarians who are moderately tech-savvy, or who have access to technical support, can glean useful options on general types of software, training, and advertising from *Virtual Reference on a Budget*. Those searching for a primary source of guidance will find more success using one of the step-by-step VR manuals already on the market.

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