



SOMERSET COUNTY LIBRARY SYSTEM OF NEW JERSEY

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Background:

Beginning the week of March 23rd, 2020, 35 qualified staff members were recruited to offer reference services via SCLSNJ's two extant virtual reference platforms: Google Mail and LibraryH3lp. Public Services (PS) and the Marketing and Public Relations department collaboratively rebranded these offerings as *Ask a Librarian* through the Library's website, social media channels, and press outlets. Patrons could pose reference queries via email, text, or chat. Staff worked two-hour shifts individually or in tandem, and were available to address patron concerns **64 hours a week**. From March 24 to July 4 2020, *Ask a Librarian* fielded **approximately 2,200 reference requests**. SCLSNJ introduced its novel *Ask an Expert* service at the beginning of April to provide patrons with advanced reference requests the opportunity to schedule virtual appointments with library staff. Patrons booked these face-to-face reference transactions through Acuity, an online scheduling platform and met with staff via Google Meet, which supports both video conferencing and conventional phone calls. 25 librarians were brought into the initiative. From April 6th to July 4th 2020, **107 appointments lasting 60 - 90 minutes were conducted**, including **57 sessions with English Language Learners** (primarily Spanish and Mandarin speakers).

Summary:

Founded on a framework of responsiveness and adaptability to ever-changing patron needs and system services, the *Ask a Librarian* and *Ask an Expert* initiatives also established friendly, compassionate, and reliable customer service standards. Reference transactions typically involved library procedures, digital materials, services, readers' advisory, support for job seekers, and many other subjects. Pre-planned responses ensured patrons received consistent answers and patron-facing videos offered usage tutorials for digital library materials. Reference transactions were reviewed on a daily basis providing staff with personalized feedback, a reference accuracy sheet, mandatory and optional training sessions, and weekly work team check-ins.

Goals Relative to Strategic Priorities, and Core Services:

Despite uncertain circumstances, virtual reference allowed the library system to deliver top-tier traditional reference services while ensuring both staff and patron safety and upholding strategic priorities. This included making personalized connections between patrons and materials, promoting and supporting lifelong learning, addressing the needs of shifting demographics, supporting Somerset County's workforce development, and providing technology access and expertise.

Impact:

Customer feedback attests not only to the quality of rendered library services, but the essential role SCLSNJ's virtual reference staff played in the civic lives of patrons during closure:

- "SCLSNJ works very very hard to satisfy my reading habit, you are all doing such an amazing job adapting to all these changes."
- "A million thank yous to the people who designed and are working on the hands free delivery. I just got an email that one of my many holds can be picked up at the MJL. I am euphoric with joy."
- "Whoever is manning that email address is awesome. They wrote me back in minutes."
- "Thank you so very much!! Reading has saved me during this time."
- "I truly appreciate your quick reply and assistance! Pretty much losing my mind in these difficult times and the escape of a good book is a lifesaver."