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Marketing Virtual Reference Services: The AskColorado Experience

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It was really cool being online with a live librarian, better than searching the internet alone.

thanks for helping me i love this site because you get to talk to real people about your question and they can help you find tons of sources and answers to it

Thank you for being there 24/7. It's 9:15 Sunday night, the paper is due tomorrow morning and I had nowhere else to turn. Thank you for saving my grade!

Awesome service! First time I used it, but certainly worth it. Is this gov't sponsored? If it is, it's certainly something I like to see my tax \$\$ going to.

These statements represent just a few of the comments made by users of AskColorado, a statewide 24/7 virtual reference service provided collaboratively by Colorado librarians. Although only in its tenth month of service, AskColorado has already attracted a strong base of repeat customers, answered 20,200 questions, and gained a coveted spot on the Colorado state government Web site.

The success of the service can be attributed directly to an aggressive marketing campaign targeted at key audiences throughout the state. This article will describe the AskColorado marketing communications strategy, the branding concepts used, the actual marketing of the service, and the results.

Project Background

AskColorado was formed through a process involving open discussion forums that included librarians from throughout the state. Over the course of several months, a number of different options were discussed for providing virtual reference service, but a Colorado-based collaborative effort made up of staff from all types of libraries emerged as the clear choice. This process of decision making was key in building support among libraries in the state and gaining their participation in providing and marketing the service.

The Colorado Library Advisory Board (CoLAB) approved LSTA funding for AskColorado, and set several specific requirements that influenced how the marketing of the project took place, and what evaluation targets for success were established. Four key points CoLAB made were 1) the service must be available to all residents of the state, not just the patrons of participating libraries, 2) significant use by rural as well as urban residents must be demonstrated, 3) K12 students and educators should be targeted as well as the general population and the higher education community, and 4) the service must move toward self-sustainability rather than relying on LSTA funding in future years.

These key points meant that AskColorado had two significant marketing challenges. The first was to ensure that Coloradans of all ages from both rural and urban areas heard about the service and used it. The second was to market the idea of a collaborative virtual reference service to decision makers throughout the state, so that libraries would share the service costs in future years and legislators would deem the service so valuable that some state funding would be provided as well.

When the grant funding was released, the Marketing Committee already had a draft of the Marketing Communications Plan to work with (see Figure 1) and a general marketing strategy that involved several key points:

- Effectively brand the service so it becomes widely recognized as a quality service offered by Colorado libraries 24/7.
- Leverage the collective marketing power of all Colorado libraries.
- Leverage the State Library's placement in the state's Department of Education to reach K12 students and educators.
- Use multiple marketing channels so that current library users as well as Internet savvy non-users are reached.



AskColorado Marketing Communications Strategy and Plan

<p>Situation</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The purpose of AskColorado is to provide an online reference service to residents of Colorado, 24/7 via online chat. • AskColorado is scheduled for release on September 2, 2003. • AskColorado must gain momentum toward self-sustainability.
<p>Marketing Objectives</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify the brand characteristics necessary to communicate a consistent message. • Create multiple campaigns to support the introduction, release, and on-going use of AskColorado.
<p>Project Objectives</p>	<p>Qualitative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Within the first year of the service, provide services that are perceived as “valuable” or “beneficial” to users as measured by online surveys. <p>Quantitative:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 75 percent of library card holders from all participating libraries will have received information about AskColorado. • AskColorado will receive over 10,000 questions between September 2, 2003 and August 31, 2004. • Between September 2, 2003 and August 31, 2004, 20 percent of questions received by AskColorado will come from users in rural parts of the state. • During the first year of service, 85 percent of AskColorado users will express satisfaction with the answers they received.
<p>Purpose</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Initially, to create excitement or buzz about AskColorado. • Ultimately, to establish a consistent user base among Colorado residents and libraries, who are regular return users.
<p>Target Audiences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Target the following audiences with our marketing messages: • Patrons—who will be essential in determining the value of the service. • Library Management—who will need to understand the benefits AskColorado can provide to their patrons and staff. • Library Reference Staff—who will be using AskColorado to provide service to their patrons. • Local Decision Makers—who determine the levels of funding for local libraries. • State Legislators and State Employees—who influence funding at the state level. • K12 Students and Educators—who will need to understand the value of services that libraries can provide to students

Figure 1

O R E G O N L I B R A R Y A S S O C I A T I O N

Current Market Position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some awareness of the project within library community (per informal communications with various groups).
Communications Strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use multiple channels, including print, television, radio, live presentations, e-mail, information on library Web sites, and giveaways. • Make effective use of AskColorado’s branding (name, logo, taglines).
Key Message (Key benefits)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AskColorado provides information and assistance 24/7—anytime you need it. • AskColorado is staffed by Colorado librarians, who provide quality service. • Together through AskColorado, Colorado libraries provide a valuable service to residents of all ages.
Statement of Benefit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Patrons—“AskColorado provides the information I need at any time of the day or night.” • Patrons—“My local library is an active part of the statewide group that provides this service.” • Library Management—“This service helps my library provide virtual reference service more cost effectively than we could as an individual library” • Library Reference Staff—“I am part of a whole group of staff from many different libraries that is providing services to my local patrons and residents throughout the state.” • Local Decision Makers—“AskColorado is a worthwhile service to our residents, which our library helps provide.” • State Legislators and State Employees—“Libraries around the state are an important part of providing information to Colorado residents and potential residents and visitors” • K12 Students and Educators—“Through AskColorado, libraries are providing services that help K12 students.”
Campaigns	<p>CAMPAIGN 1: SERVICE INTRODUCTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set campaign launch approximately one month after service launch • Promotional materials distributed to libraries • Sample press releases and marketing materials available for download by libraries • State Board of Education (SBE) Media Event to kick off service • Presentations at Department of Education sponsored events (e.g. Superintendents and Principals meetings, English Language Learners staff conference, etc.) • Press releases to all SBE contacts (approximately 377) • Local libraries customize generic press release for local media • AskColorado added as option in toolbar of Colorado Virtual Library

Figure 1 (Continued)

Branding

Probably the most critical part of implementing any marketing communications plan is the branding process, i.e. selection of the service name, the tagline, and the creation of the logo. The Marketing Committee undertook this piece first.

AskColorado has been selected as the name for several reasons:

- 1) The word “ask” indicated that this was a service people could use to ask questions.
- 2) The word “Colorado” was included to indicate it was a statewide service to all Coloradans and to evoke the idea that “Colorado” was offering the service and answering the questions.
- 3) The name was short, catchy, and memorable.
- 4) The domain “askcolorado.org” was available and “AskColorado” was still trademarkable.

One of the challenges in selecting a short, catchy name is that it is almost impossible to include all of the desired characteristics. Two elements that the Committee had hoped to include were missing: the idea of an online interactive service and the concept that it was available 24/7. A tagline was developed to add the 24/7 concept: “AskColorado—Anytime!” The online chat concept was tougher to achieve, but was added through a marketing phrase that also linked the service name with libraries: “Chat with an information professional from Colorado’s libraries.” This phrase was used to grab the attention of the Internet savvy individual and convey the online aspect.

A professional graphic artist created the eye-catching logo. The logo includes a variation of Colorado’s state flag. The blue and white stripes from the flag are used as a slightly skewed rectangle background,

with the dot on the bottom of the question mark playing off of the traditional flag’s yellow C surrounding a red circle. Mountains complete the Colorado picture. Again, this evokes the statewide nature of the service, and the fact that libraries throughout the state are providing it.

Target Markets and Marketing Channels

Now that the branding had been established, the Marketing Committee’s next step was to determine who should be targeted and how they could be reached. The residents of Colorado were broken down into several target markets. This included current library users, non-library users who are Web savvy Internet users, and K12 students and educators. Several different approaches were needed in order to reach all of these markets.

Current library users were reached by marketing through their libraries. Each participating library was required to add the AskColorado logo and link to their library Web site, and all other libraries were encouraged to do so as well. In addition, many of the participating libraries included information on the service in their print and online newsletters and customized the press releases we provided for their local newspapers. Since the initial set of giveaway items (e.g. bookmarks, refrigerator magnets, etc.) was funded by the grant and available at no charge, libraries could request them as needed and felt free to distribute them widely.

The Colorado Department of Education was the primary marketing tool used to reach both non-library users who are Web savvy and K12 students and educators. The State Board of Education, which oversees the Colorado Department of Education (CDE), agreed to do a media event to help launch the service. Over 370 press releases were distributed on the CDE letterhead to announce the event. By using CDE’s name recognition, this resulted in coverage by three television



stations and articles in several newspapers that are distributed statewide.

The press release for the media event paid off later by generating an invitation in December for an interview on a locally produced Colorado Public Radio program called “Colorado Matters.” The program is aired on 12 stations statewide, and the interview was archived online, providing later listening opportunities.

It was also useful to do live presentations at meetings sponsored by CDE staff, such as the English Language Learners Conference and meetings involving school superintendents and principals. State Library staff, as part of CDE, had access to the calendars announcing these meetings and was able to secure a place on the agenda and/or the ability to distribute marketing materials at them.

The State Library was able to take advantage of its position as a central communications hub for all types of libraries in the state. A monthly mailing to all public, academic, institutional libraries, and district level school media coordinators is prepared by the State Library. Twice a year, this monthly mailing includes all school buildings as well. AskColorado staff timed the initial marketing campaign to coincide with the fall mailing to all libraries and school buildings. Marketing kits were created and distributed in the State Library’s mailing. These kits included sample press releases for different audiences, sample marketing giveaways, instructions for downloading the logo and link, and a form for ordering marketing giveaways funded through the grant. All of this information was added to the project Web site so that libraries could adapt materials for their own use.

Promotions to the library community included activities at the annual Colorado Association of Libraries conference. The State Library purchased four-color ads in the inside and outside back covers of the conference program promoting the service, an AskColorado bookmark was inserted in

every conference attendee’s packet, and AskColorado participants demonstrated both the staff and patron side of the service during a conference session and at the State Library exhibit booth. All virtual reference desk staff and any interested libraries were invited to a discussion session. A list of participating libraries is included whenever space allows it, e.g. on the Web site and on the back page conference program ad. Gifts, such as mugs and lapel pins, were given to the library staff and directors at institutions that are providing the service.

State library staff often are invited to speak at various meetings around the state, and were able to include AskColorado presentations at numerous regional library system membership meetings and institutes.

The sample press release in various forms appeared in numerous local newspapers and campus student newsletters around the state. A number of professional organizations added notices to their publications or added a link to the service on their Web sites, such as the Colorado Business Council and the Colorado Association of School Executives. Individual libraries took creative advantage of local events to promote AskColorado, such as the annual Apple Days Festival in Penrose where the librarian passed out AskColorado giveaways.

Budget

The total marketing budget was modest given our wide audience. The graphic design work for the logo and the Web site cost \$1,515. Around \$13,400 was spent on giveaways including bookmarks and business cards in English and Spanish, refrigerator magnets, stickers, temporary tattoos, mugs and lapel pins. CAL conference program ads ran \$550. All told, a total of \$16,300 was spent on marketing.

This money was leveraged, however, through the use of “opportunistic” marketing—seizing any opportunity to piggyback onto other marketing efforts for free. This included an @yourlibrary advocacy campaign sponsored by the Colorado Association of



Libraries in which AskColorado was included as one of several services promoted to the public. This same @yourlibrary campaign was leveraged a second time when the State Library took advantage of being a unit of state government by buying an ad promoting libraries and library services—including AskColorado—on the back of all state employees' pay vouchers. Another opportunity included an insert focused on K12 education in the *Rocky Mountain News* and *Denver Post* that was paid for by the Department of Education. Although AskColorado was given only one paragraph in a 20+ page insert, it included a description of the service, the logo, and the URL for accessing the service, and reached hundreds of thousands of readers throughout the state.

Results

Was the AskColorado marketing campaign successful? The results say it all. The target for the first 12 months of service was 10,000 questions. After just ten months, AskColorado has already answered over 20,200 questions. Over 30 percent of these questions have consistently come from rural areas, far exceeding our set target of 20 percent. Although a specific target wasn't set for K12, their usage averages around 55 percent of AskColorado's total use, a significant amount by anyone's standards. But best of all, the state's Office of Innovation and Technology—one of the decision makers in the funding process for state government technology—was so impressed with the service that they contacted the state's Webmaster to request that AskColorado be included on the state government portal. (www.colorado.gov)

Future Marketing Efforts

Marketing any service is a continuous process. At this time, the renewal of AskColorado participating libraries' commitment to the service is in process and some changes are being made to ensure

continued and expanded participation. For example, separate academic, general public and K12 queues will be established in fall 2004 to help pre-sort questions so that librarians answer questions for the constituencies with whom they feel most comfortable. A new online homework help service, provided by the same service provider used for virtual reference software (tutor.com), is being added so that young users who need more than just a quick answer to a question can be helped more thoroughly, thus reducing the waiting time for other users. This new service will be released in mid-August 2004 and promoted as part of the AskColorado service. This will give us new opportunities to promote AskColorado to K12 students, educators and parents.

As a letter of invitation goes out to each participating library or potential partner, the project Steering Committee includes samples of comments that end


**Oregon Authors
Bibliography Ad
to go here**



users have made about the service; statistics by county, and statistics by type of question. In addition, there is information about how AskColorado benefits the library and library staff directly in ways such as providing a cost effective way to provide virtual reference service, training for their staff in a cutting edge service, and providing service to their patrons beyond the library's regular service hours. This information helps library directors make better-informed decisions as to whether or not to participate in AskColorado.

The most extensive marketing push to end users for fall 2004, however, is a campaign specifically to reach Spanish speakers. During July 2004, ads promoting library services to Spanish speakers will be appearing in a number of different print sources. The campaign also includes live interviews on Univision (a Spanish language television service) and Spanish radio stations. In addition, a number of libraries have hired outreach librarians specializing in services to Spanish speakers. Working with these contacts will allow us to reach deeper into the community.

With these more extensive marketing efforts, AskColorado hopes to report a year from now that we've doubled everything—usage by the public, participation by libraries, and funding by state government. AskColorado a year from now and find out!

To access the AskColorado service, go to www.askcolorado.org. Information for library staff interested in AskColorado can be found at www.aclin.org/reference. Information on implementation, contact Sharon Morris, AskColorado Coordinator, morris_s@cde.state.co.us. 

Useful Virtual Reference Marketing Resources

Virtual Reference Services: Marketing Guidelines. King County Library System and University of Washington. Available at <http://www.secstate.wa.gov/library/>

libraries/projects/virtualRef/textdocs/MarketingGuidelines.pdf

10 Tips for Marketing Virtual Reference Services. Presentation by Linda Wallace and Peggy Barber of Library Communication Strategies. Available at <http://www.librarycomm.com>

On Marketing Virtual Reference Services. Sponsored by LSSI at the ALA Annual Conference—June 15, 2002. Available as a printable PDF file from the Library Media and PR Web site at <http://ssdesign.com/librarypr/content/p070802a.shtml>

AskColorado Marketing Resources. Available at <http://www.aclin.org/reference/marketing/index.html>

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