In a provocative article on collaboration between Extension and libraries, Randy Heatley and Melanie Gardner (Heatley and Gardner 2003) outline potential areas of collaboration, such as “information/knowledge management”, “user interface/reference services”, and “information literacy.” and describe ways in which such collaborations can be beneficial to our customers. The AgNIC Alliance has been a fertile site for fostering collaborations with many library-extension partnerships represented among the Alliance. eXtension may offer further opportunities. At Ohio State, our collaboration arose out of a series of discussions with the people who manage the extension publications. We incorporated an Ask-A-Librarian service as part of the public search tool of OSU Extension publications on the web. Questions which required subject expertise were referred on to Extension specialists. In this paper we will describe our experience in Ohio and will report on an informal survey of “ask-the-expert” opportunities on Extension sites in other states.

Through traditional reference services of libraries and the outreach services of extension, we share a similar mission: connecting people with information. In general, our customers view us as a source of information and trust us to provide accurate, reliable and impartial information in response to their questions. Increasingly, our customers are finding us electronically. They may search the internet for an answer to their gardening question, but if their search fails, they will avail themselves of the opportunity to “ask-an-expert.” Librarians and Extension specialists may differ in the way they answer questions. Librarians will search for an answer in the published literature and resources of the library and increasingly in electronic information. The answer to a question will be accompanied by a citation to the source of the information. Rarely, will we answer a question from our own knowledge and experience. (In fact, I recall being admonished against that in graduate school. Be able to cite a source, even for the most common knowledge!) Extension specialists, on the other hand, tend to answer questions from their own knowledge and training. They are advisors. They tend to search for answers within their own collections of Extension materials and those of their colleagues. Indeed one study published in the Journal of Extension in 1991 showed that extension educators rarely view the library as a source of information when they are answering a question for a client. (Shih and Evans 1991)
We believe there are advantages to working as partners. Librarians are experts at finding information and organizing it. For most libraries, rarely are there questions that are out of scope. We refer people to possible sources of information if an answer is not readily available. Extension educators have specialized knowledge and are experts at interpreting information for customers. Indeed, they even author information when there is a demand. We will propose a model that incorporates the skills of both professionals.

Slide 3.

Overcoming organizational structures and boundaries can be a challenge to collaborations, especially at a large university. This chart illustrates some of the complexities of our organization. The College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences is organized around the typical land grant model of teaching, research and extension/outreach. There are 3 agriculture-related libraries within OSU and each has a separate reporting line. The Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences Library serves the College on the Columbus campus, including undergrads, graduate students, and faculty in addition to having primary responsibility for Extension faculty around the state and reports to the OSU Libraries. The OARDC Library serves the experiment station faculty, staff and graduate students on a separate campus 90 miles from Columbus and reports to the director of the OARDC. A third library, at the OSU Agricultural Technical Institute, serves an undergraduate population also located in Wooster and reports to the Academic Programs arm of the College. The ATI Library is an integral part of library services to our college, but was not part of this particular collaboration. Finally, the department of Communications and Technology has responsibility for the print and electronic publications of the College as a whole, but primarily for Extension. Each of us has indirect reporting lines in addition to our primary lines of reporting. Fortunately there are people in these “boxes” which allowed us to pursue our collaboration.

We began with discussions among the librarians at FAES and OARDC and staff in Communications and Technology responsible for the OSU Extension website and publications. Our goal was to learn more about each other and to discuss issues that we saw looming in the areas of organization, retrieval and archiving of electronic materials. At the same time, the librarians were gaining more experience in answering questions for patrons electronically through the OSU Libraries general “Ask-A-Librarian” service, which uses QuestionPoint, and through other modes such as OhioLINK’s chat reference.

Slide 4:

Much of our attention in the discussion between the librarians and CommTech was focused on Ohioline, which is the website that provides access to extension and research publications. During one of our discussions we learned that users of Ohioline would occasionally send “reference” questions to the contact the
webmaster link, which was the only type of “contact us” link available on the Ohioline site. The webmaster was a technical staff person who attempted to answer the queries, but felt that he was probably underserving the public. This seemed like a natural opportunity for collaboration, so the librarians volunteered to receive questions from Ohioline.

Slide 5-6:

We took a conservative approach in that the link to ask a question was only available following a search. After a visitor conducted a search on a topic, there was a link at the bottom of the results page reading, “Not finding what you need? Click here to Ask-A-Librarian.” We chose this name over other common names, such as Ask-An-Expert, to indicate, we hoped, that the question would go to a librarian, at least initially. The link opened the user’s preferred email program and the question was sent electronically to a shared email account that was monitored by the librarians. At first, the Communications and Technology people also monitored the questions until they were confident in our ability to handle them. The link was not very well advertised, but people found it. I maintain that only minutes after the link was added, we received our first question. Within the first week, we asked the CommTech web designer to reduce the size of the font to make the link less inviting. We were concerned that we could not keep up with the numbers of questions.

Slide 7:

The data represented by the following charts cover the questions we received from the time we went live in mid-May 2003 through July 2004.

The service started off strong. The demand over the first couple months almost exceeded our capacity to sustain the service. After the first couple months, we reviewed the questions and observed some patterns where we might be able to redirect the questioner to the appropriate resource before they asked the question. A “filter” page was developed to offer suggestions to customers, giving links to possible resources to answer their questions. Once the filter was in place the demand dropped off.

Slide 8:

When someone clicks on the “Ask-A-Librarian” link, they are taken to this intermediate page to offer them some suggestions for locating the information they are seeking. Some tips are offered for some of the types of questions frequently asked. Our clever web designer added a pre-formatted google search for identification sites: the customer enters the insect or plant they are trying to ID. The search button adds the terms “identification or identify” to the search and limits it to .edu domains.
If they still want help, their email program is invoked and the question comes to the librarians’ email.

Slide 9:

We will now review in fairly broad strokes some of the characteristics of the questions we received. Because we allowed people to send us an email without directing them to include any specific information, we had to rely on clues, such as an email address, for their location if they did not tell us.

Because of the ambiguity of location in email addresses originating from ISP such as Yahoo or AOL, for the majority of questions we were unable to determine the origin of the question. This would have been useful data to have.

Slide 10:

Though the user presumably searched Ohioline before sending their question, many of the questions could still be answered with information found in Ohioline—for whatever reason, the customer was unable to find the answer.

Another significant source of answers was from other Extension service websites; similar factsheets included information that specifically addressed the question asked.

In most cases, in addition to references to resources that answer the question, we recommended that customers contact their county extension office and gave links to find their closest office.

Slide 11:

One of our initial assumptions was that the librarians could handle a lot of the questions because of our traditional reference skills. Despite the fairly obvious subject focus of Ohioline, not all the questions received were appropriate for Ohioline/Extension. However, as librarians with general reference experience, we were able to answer or redirect these out of scope questions to the appropriate place. Questions that required greater subject depth or analysis of a particular problem were referred to an extension specialist, or they were consulted and their information incorporated into the answer sent to the customer. Our selection of the specialist to refer the question to was based on our personal knowledge of the individual or already established relationships. For the most part, they were very willing to help.

Slide 12:

David Lankes refers to the concept of “triage” in his research on the digital reference model.(Lankes 2002) Heatley and Gardner also describe a
collaborative scenario in which the librarian receives the questions and handles those that can be fulfilled by referring to a factsheet or supplying the data requested. We have all experienced the question that gets asked by more than one person. Once an answer has been composed it can be forwarded on to subsequent customers. The librarian can also handle those questions that are out of scope for the Extension specialist. Only those questions that require a more extensive answer or the subject expertise of a specialist are referred to the specialist. The obvious benefit of this collaboration through triage and referral is that the question load is shared and the expertise of the extension personnel is put to the best use. And the customer’s need is met.

This slide shows examples of typical questions we received. The first question asked for the state fruit of Ohio. We would classify this as “out-of-scope” for Ohioline, but still a question that is easily managed by a librarian. The middle example is a request for information on growing basil. The customer was referred to an existing factsheet and advised to contact their extension office for further assistance. The example of a question that was referred to an extension specialist was interesting. The question from a watershed resident had to do with whether there would be a problem with rats if streamside vegetation were allowed to grow. This was not a question that a librarian could answer without extensive research. The specialist had specific knowledge to contribute to the answer, but also queried other colleagues. The result was a multipage word document that was sent to the questioner and the potential for developing a factsheet to address this concern in the future.

Slide 13:

What did we learn from this experience that would improve our service? Question management was challenging. Who would answer? If the question was referred, was a followup needed to be sure that it was answered? Who is the most appropriate person for referrals?

Without a FAQ or database of questions, others do not benefit from previously asked questions. Are there opportunities for more factsheets that would answer some questions?

As we were searching for answers to questions, we became familiar with the resources of other states and observed systems and services that we envied or wished to incorporate into our service.

Slide 14:

We were curious about trends and patterns that we could observe about reference services from other state Extension. We were also curious to see if we could identify any other collaboration between the library and extension in answering user questions. We conducted an informal review of the main
Extension website for each state. We surveyed only the traditional, 1862, land grants. In examining each webpage, we looked for options to ask a question. We did not include the typical “contact the webmaster” or “something’s broken” links.

Our survey showed that 39 states had some sort of opportunity to submit a question. The terminology used to describe this option varied from “contact us” to “ask us a question” to “ask-an-expert.”

15 websites offered some sort of what we term as “filtering”; they offered direction to help the customer locate the information themselves.

12 sites had FAQs of which 7 were searchable.

We tried not to venture too far from the main extension website and so did not include in our review the typical Home Horticulture/ Master Gardener websites. These typically have question opportunities and would certainly provide a useful service to their customers. Our goal was to locate general reference services without a particular subject focus.

Slide 15:

In Ohio, our opportunity to ask a question is buried at the end of the search results page. Other states are more aggressive in presenting the option. 23 states have the contact link on all or most pages. We were unable to locate a contact link in the Extension web pages from 11 states.

Slide 16:

Kansas prominently asks on the main extension page: “Need an expert?”

Slide 17:

We tried to determine how the question would be sent. 14 states use a form to submit the question and 10 used simple email. Interestingly, in 4 states even though this contact information was on the web, the user was directed to phone the appropriate extension office. Perhaps this was intended to reduce the number of questions from out-of-state.

Slide 18-19:

Michigan uses a very simple form.

Slide 20:
Connecticut asks the person to categorize his/her question and then boldly gives email links to specific people.

Slide 21:

We mentioned the function of a filter page to help direct users to sources of information. Arizona offers such a service.

Slide 22:

An FAQ can be an effective way to direct users to answers to their questions. Iowa offers a well-regarded FAQ on food-related issues.

Slide 23-25:

Perhaps the most robust question/answer service we found was AnswerLink from Colorado. This site incorporates all the best practices: a searchable FAQ, a form that elicits information from the questioner that will aid in answering the question (users can even attach images of those squashed bugs they want identified) and an option for users to set up a profile to track the responses to their questions. (One problem we encountered was bounced email due to various technical issues. By posting the question on the web for the user to retrieve, these problems are avoided.) It is not surprising that AnswerLink is the prototype for the Ask-An-Expert/FAQ component of eXtension.

Slide 26:
Our experience led us to consider a model for a centralized Ask-An-Expert service that would be include collaboration between librarians and extension educators.

A customer with a question would come to Ohioline either directly or through links on local sites. For example, county extension pages could have a link.

The visitor would have the option to search an FAQ or receive further direction through a filter.

They would complete a form to ask a question. The form would ask for information about geographic location and possibly the customer’s age or intended use of the information.

An information specialist (librarian or extension educator) receives the question and determines the best way to answer it (triage). Some questions would be answered directly; others referred for more specialized response.

The answer would be forwarded to the customer and also stored in the FAQ database.
What are our next steps?

OSU Libraries already uses QuestionPoint to manage the general Ask-A-Librarian service. We are planning to customize a web page on Ohioline to receive questions that would be routed to QP. This would replace the email link currently in use and give us a management tool.

We have already made a presentation at the annual meeting of Ohio Extension which met with positive feedback. We will continue to work with interested individuals as we explore ways to solicit further participation. Initially we chose to work through the CommTech department; we need to engage Extension educators directly.

On the national level, we will monitor the eXtension prototype and review their recommendations. At the March AgNIC meeting participants heard a presentation by David Lankes about collaborative reference which received a very favorable response. Implementing a centralized reference service at the main AgNIC page and on partner pages could help distribute the reference load, could provide broad, shared coverage, encourage new partners with content who lack reference capacity, and could help facilitate referrals and collaboration with our Extension colleagues.

Librarians and Extension educators have complementary skill sets and a common goal.

In a 1987 JOE article by extension specialist Francis Holmes entitled “Don’t Overlook Libraries”: the author summarizes his proposal that Extension look to libraries for assistance in disseminating extension publications by stating “We don’t compete with libraries! They’re our partners, not our opponents.” (Holmes 1987)

We need to encourage these partnerships.

References

