

Amanda Goodman

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Meebo vs. Trillian in Digital Reference Services

Introduction

In the United States, 290 million Americans have gained access to broadband for their internet access (Grotticelli, 2010). With this increased speed has come an expectation of instant responses to reference questions in the library. This paper seeks to look at two different forms of instant messaging services, Meebo and Trillian, to decide which is more appropriate for libraries to deploy as their online chat reference program.

Features

The first thing to know about Meebo and Trillian is that they have fundamental differences in how they are accessed. Meebo is installed on the library's website so that neither the reference library nor the user has to download any software which is "ideal for situations in which downloading applications is discouraged or prohibited" (Shucha, 2007). Trillian has to be downloaded and installed on any computer that is used for digital reference. The user has to have an instant messenger program installed on their computer in order to contact the library. Trillian requires the library and user to have accounts with the same instant messenger provider in order to communicate. For example, if a user has Yahoo Messenger and the library does not have a Yahoo Messenger account, the user cannot contact the library. Trillian is just a way to sign into multiple different instant messaging accounts at the same time from within the same program. Meebo can also work the same way, but if it is embedded in the library's web page as a widget,

any user who visits the page can start a reference interview without ever signing into an instant messaging system. This feature also makes them anonymous while the other method does not.

Each service has a long list of specialized features. Meebo also gives you the option of installing the Meebo Bar on your site. This feature allows users to drag and drop content from the library website into the Meebo Bar so they can share it with their friends on different social networking sites (Meebo, 2010). You can also customize the colors of your Meebo and save chat logs. Trillian has over 450 features which are listed in detail on their website. The schedule events regularly feature which “allows you to fire programmed events at a given time” (Cerulean Studios Trillian, 2010) such as having Trillian close at a particular time each day such as when the reference librarian goes on lunch. Trillian also allows for file transfers between users.

Pricing

Each of these instant messaging services offers a free version. Trillian also offers a pro version for \$15 for Windows operating systems which includes enhanced services. A few of these features are dedicated technical support, changing the colors of Trillian, support for webcam video filters, and XML text log files (Cerulean Studios Trillian, 2010).

Adoption in Libraries

Larger libraries have adopted instant messaging programs to handle their incoming digital reference questions. The website, Library Success: A Best Practices Wiki, is referred to by several blogs about possessing a list of libraries that are using instant messengers for their chat services. However, the page referred to has been remodeled. Instead the largest number that could be located is that Meebo has been adopted in 112 libraries (web2imchat, 2009). In the footnotes, this wiki page references the missing or deleted Library Success page. As for Trillian, it is listed as being used in thirty-six libraries (LibSuccess Wiki, 2006) on a page that purports to

be a 2006 listing of the Library Success page. Further research on the Library Success website reveals a new version and Trillian is only listed only twice as being used in United States' libraries (Library Success, 2010).

Assessment

Each of these programs has strengths which makes it a better fit for a library than the other one may be. Meebo has no download requirement for the user or the reference librarian which eliminates problems of users who do not have permission or understand how to download and install software onto their computer. Users are also granted the privilege of anonymity which may gave them confidence in asking for help since the question cannot be traced back to them. Trillian on the other hand is a fully loaded, tricked out application which comes with loads of features. However, the cost of these features is extra training time for staff (Houghton & Schmidt, 2005). It also relies on users having an instant messenger program already downloaded onto their computer.

Conclusion

From personal observations, I have frequently witnessed Meebo used by classmates in the last year. They simply log into the Meebo website using their Meebo login and are instantly on Facebook, AIM, Yahoo, etc. all at once. I recall a few of my friends trying Trillion back in the first five years of the twenty-first century, I have not heard of it since. Based on these personal experiences and the ease of Meebo requiring no extra burden or steps on the user, I believe Meebo is the better application for digital chat reference service. While having all the bells and whistles of Trillian would be nice, staff training time and simplicity of service are higher priorities in today's instant gratification online environment.

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