



ADVISOR REVIEWS—STANDARD REVIEW

Mosio's Text A Librarian

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Composite Score:

★★

Reviewed by: Joseph Murphy

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Pricing

Mosio's beta Text A Librarian costs libraries a minimum of \$1,398 per year including a \$199 start up fee and a yearly subscription fee of \$1,199. For this price, 1,000 free outgoing messages per month are included. Additional "questionariums" are available at \$69.95 per month and additional outgoing messages can be purchased at a cost of \$39.95 per month for 500 additional messages and \$69.95 per month for 1,000 additional messages. Additional Admin/Moderators can be purchased for \$4.95 each per month and a dedicated domain is available for \$19.95 per year. [See third paragraph under Product Description for a description of a questionarium.]

An unlimited plan is also available for \$2,598 (one time setup fee of \$199 and yearly subscription fee of \$2,399). The unlimited plan includes unlimited outgoing messages, 20 moderators, a dedicated domain, one questionarium (unlimited additional questionariums can be purchased for \$149.95 per month), and additional moderators for \$4.95 per month each.

Product Description

Mosio launched its beta Text A Librarian <<http://www.textalibarian.com/>> in September 2008. Text A Librarian is a Web-based interface that allows institutions to answer questions submitted by text message with an online bulletin board-like Web page.

Mosio has offered a public product for one year that allows users to submit questions that are answered by fellow registered public Mosio users. The major difference between Mosio's public product and Text A Librarian is that "questionariums" can be kept private and answers are provided only by select librarians instead of the by the public.

Patrons send question to Mosio's generic five digit short code, 28444. They must also include the library's customized user name in the body of the message before their question. Librarians receive and respond to questions from a private Web page resembling an online bulletin board called a "questionarium," or micro-board. Librarians do not see the originating phone number. Questions come anonymously and are assigned a random user ID. Mosio converts answers to SMS and sends them back to the patron's mobile device. Included in the answer is the user name of the responding library or librarian. See a demo at <<http://demo.mosio.com/questionarium.php>>.

The staff interface is a nondynamic Web page, so there is not an intuitive alert for new questions. The product does offer four methods for librarians to be alerted to incoming questions: manually refreshing the Web page to check if new questions have been submitted, receiving an e-mail alert, receiving an instant message alert, or receiving a

text message alert. Once alerted that a new question has come in, the librarian must return to and refresh the Web page then enter an answer. Answers can be sent back through SMS only.

The answer field is limited to 280 characters (not 240 as the demo Web site incorrectly states), the equivalent of two standard text messages. A character counter helps librarians to keep track of the length of their answers. This is important because most mobile devices cannot receive text messages longer than about 140 characters or they are received as two messages, which may incur additional cost to the patron. Up to four responses can be sent for every submitted question.

Questions and their answers appear together as threads on the staff Web page. Additional answers can be added to the thread at a later time with an upper limit of four separate messages in response to one question. Question/answer threads are pushed down as new questions arrive. Old threads are added to an ever growing list and remain accessible to librarians as a multiple page, unorganized scrolling archive. At this time there is no method for extracting or exporting old threads or for generating statistics.

As of October 2008, Text A Librarian was not accessible to people with Verizon Wireless and T-Mobile cell phone plans, two of the largest cell phone service carriers. By December 2008 Verizon had been added, and T-Mobile is reportedly to be added as well.

No special software is needed to run this service and the bulletin board-like Web page appears functional on all major Web browsers. However, an e-mail account, IM screen name, and/or SMS enabled mobile device is needed if librarians opt to receive alerts for new messages.

Critical Evaluation

Mosio's beta Text A Librarian product does not live up to its claim of being "an easy to use text messaging solution that enables libraries to set up cost-effective SMS reference services" <<http://www.textalibarian.com/>>. This product is not cost effective for libraries, does not compare well with existing alternatives, is not able to integrate with existing library services, is not easy to use, does not facilitate feasible staffing models, is unable to adapt to future services and trends, and is not optimal for patrons. It is a good beta attempt but is not yet viable for libraries.

Text A Librarian is of use only to libraries that do not get cell service in their libraries, are not willing to use a mobile device to receive and send text messages, do not already have and do not intend to create IM accounts for IM reference, or are not able or willing to pay for and monitor a service through e-mail/SMS conversion software.



Mosio’s Text A Librarian Review Scores Composite: ★★

The maximum number of stars in each category is 5.

Content: N/A

This is a staff interface and SMS to web converter, not a content provider.

Searchability/User Interface: ★

Text A Librarian’s relatively good patron interface would be more user friendly if the library username was not necessary. The interface for service providers is very poor and causes more work than is necessary. The many negative aspects of the Web interface far eclipse the few positives.

Pricing Options: ★★

This product is more expensive for libraries than several of the alternatives.

Contract Options: ★★★

There is nothing of special note to say about contract provisions.

Mosio’s product is more expensive than the free options for receiving text messages with a library’s Instant Message account or with a cell phone such as Apple’s iPhone including monthly service charges and the purchase of the device. Those alternative services add additional service benefits for libraries not addressed by Mosio.

The user experience with this product is decent but not optimal. The short code is easy for patrons to remember and for librarians to market. However, the additional requirement for patrons to need to know, remember, and enter the library specific username before the question is one step too many and represents a barrier to this service.

There is no internal option for storing, converting, or exporting archives into useful file types. Old threads are kept in a chronological list of threads lacking an organized, browseable, or sortable format. Representatives have indicated that a search feature and some meta-data options are in the pipeline.

Alert limitations cause extra work for librarians and negatively affect response time. The tab or window does not blink, make a noise, or provide any indication when a new question arrives. The inability of the page to automatically refresh forces librarians to regularly refresh it manually. Since librarians cannot be expected to repeatedly refresh the Web page, response times will be slower, defeating a major strength of text messaging reference and decreasing the perceived value of this service.

Other methods for alerting staff to incoming messages also create additional work. Responses cannot be sent back directly through the optional e-mail or instant message alerts. After receiving notifications, librarians must perform the extra steps of moving back to and refreshing the Web page, entering, and sending a response. This creates at least three steps for librarians where using any one of the other alternatives to this product requires only one step. It does not “seamlessly [connect] SMS/text messages (sic) with your existing email and IM systems” as Mosio claims <<http://www.textalibarian.com/>>.

Mosio representatives say there is now an option for replying to questions directly from an alert sent to a mobile device, begging the question of why would a library use this product to answer reference ques-

tions if they can be received and replied to directly from a cheaper and simpler to manage mobile device?

It is visually clear how to identify, navigate to, and answer unanswered questions. However, there appears to be no way of knowing which questions have or have not been answered unless the page has been refreshed. This process does not take into account questions possibly in the process of being addressed by other staff, so there is no guarantee of not duplicating answers.

The character count in the answer field is helpful, but it should be a character countdown instead so that librarians know how many characters they have left. The customizable buddy icon is also nice, although it serves little real purpose since the interface is private and only librarians will see it. The customizable username is a potentially useful benefit if responses are sent from a central admin account and not from individual librarian accounts. If individual librarians answer with their accounts, the username as it appears in the replies is not the chosen library user name. This is neither consistent nor sensible to patrons.

Each question/answer thread includes a permalink option and several popular social bookmarking links. Both are pointless for this service since there is no reason to add a social bookmark to a private Web page.

This product’s limitation of not being compatible with T-Mobile (Verizon Wireless had been added by early December) excludes all patrons with service plans on one of the largest cell phone carriers. Mosio representatives have indicated that T-Mobile will probably be added in the near future. This immense limitation blocks this public

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service from a large percentage of our users (a majority in some parts of the country). It should be noted that Mosio's service has also recently become accessible to AT&T.

Mosio does not yet offer much internal Help documentation for service providers. The only visible contact/help method in the demo is a link to a Web form. It would be strengthened if Mosio included a customizable link or internal document or cheat sheet of common text message abbreviations and shorthand.

That answers cannot support hyperlinks is a significant problem considering the increasing popularity of cell phones with mobile and full Web browsers. Mosio does not currently offer the option to convert Web addresses to tiny URLs as Twitter has successfully done.

The significant limitation of being able to send only four separate messages in response to one question is an unreasonable and crippling restriction on a reference service. It is not uncommon for a basic reference transaction to take more than four question/answers. No alternative product poses such a restriction. Responses requiring more than 140 characters will spill over into two messages, leaving even fewer messages for additional responses. It is unreasonable to hope that all questions can be answered in 140 characters or less.

With this product, answering librarians do not use the same technology as the patron. This removes the pressure on librarians to use the same language conventions, abbreviations, and shorthand, possibly affecting the reference interaction and the patron's perception of this service. Librarians will have to be careful not to let this potential disconnect in communication result in a failure to use the communication and cultural norms of this medium. Librarians will also have to be careful to make sure that this lack of impetus to ignore proper grammar does not negatively affect response time.

This product does not mesh well (or at all) with existing reference or other library services. It is an insular technology that must remain a wholly distinct service. This is not a problem faced by the other available technologies and products for SMS reference: e-mail/SMS conversion software can make use of an existing e-mail account, IM mash-ups can feed into existing IM ref screen names, and SMS-en-

abled mobile devices can be used for reference in social networks and can interact with and enhance all reference services.

Mosio's Text a Librarian is a promising but unsatisfactory beta product for libraries unable or unwilling to pursue more viable alternatives. Its inability to integrate with and enhance existing services and adapt to the shifting roles of modern libraries may render it obsolete from the beginning. Mosio should be applauded for being open to feedback, but even if Mosio is able to correct all of the issues outlined above, Text A Librarian may still not be a feasible product for libraries because of its high cost, and its lack of flexibility for current and future services. Mosio has the potential to improve given time, and become the useful product that it is meant to be. In the meantime, Mosio might do better for SMS reference by creating or expanding improved IM or e-mail/SMS mash-up products for libraries and consortia or working with cell service companies to create better service models.

Contract Provisions and Authentication

There is nothing of special note to say about contract provisions.

Mosio offers no built in methods for authenticating patrons. Libraries would be responsible for developing internal policies for authenticating users as necessary. This could be done by requesting that patrons provide identifying information such as university e-mail or ID, etc. However, this could take up too many of the few (four) messages that can be sent back to the patron. The other option would be to restrict the short code and user name to authenticated users by posting it on an IP protected site. Restricting this info only to valid patron groups would be nearly impossible due to the fact that Mosio uses one universal short code and that library screen names are publicly available. Security for the staff interface is a basic password protected login.

About the Author

Joe Murphy is Physics/General Science Librarian and Instruction Coordinator at Yale University's Kline Science Library. He graduated from the L. I. S. Program at the University of Hawaii. ■



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