The ones that got away: Minimizing missed chats using an evidence based wait time standard

By: **Sarah Steiner**

Abstract

The study explores the length of time online chat (often dubbed "Ask a Librarian" or virtual reference) academic library patrons will wait before leaving without interacting with a library employee. The study investigators* reviewed 400 randomly selected transcripts from three institutions (Agnes Scott College (ASC), University of Georgia (UGA), and Western Carolina University (WCU)) to correlate wait time with patron engagement. The findings establish the ideal wait time on library chat service points is ninety seconds or fewer. Furthermore, the study indicates establishing a goal time for initial greeting within the first ninety seconds leads to a substantial decrease in the number of "missed" questions. *Study contributors are Sarah Steiner (WCU), Casey Long (ASC), and Amber Prentiss (UGA).

The Ones That Got Away: Minimizing Missed Chats Using an Evidence-Based Wait-Time Standard

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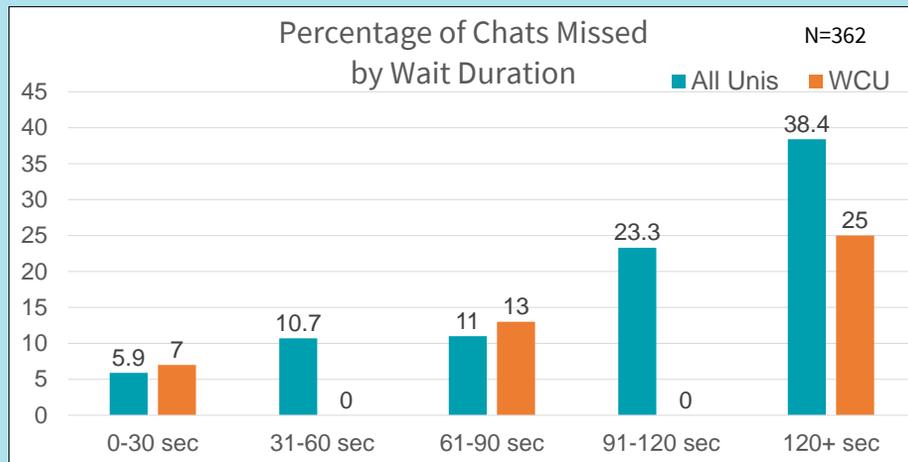[3] University of Georgia, Athens, GA

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Web version available at https://researchguides.wcu.edu/waittimestudy

Summary

Study explored the length of time online chat (AKA "Ask a Librarian" or virtual reference) academic library patrons wait for a greeting before abandoning chat, and explored methods to reduce wait-time and "missed" patrons.

Stage 1: Study investigators reviewed 400 randomly selected transcripts from three institutions (Agnes Scott College, University of Georgia, and Western Carolina University) to correlate wait time with patron engagement. Findings establish the ideal wait time as ninety seconds or fewer.

Stage 2:* Establishment of a goal greeting time (90 seconds or less) and procedures for initial greeting plus annual review of relevant standards led to a substantial and sustained decrease in patron wait time and ultimately, the number of "missed" questions at WCU.

* Stage 2 data analysis assistant: Heather Warriner

Highlights

- 94.1% of chat patrons remain waiting up to 30 seconds
- 89% of chat patrons remain waiting up to 90 seconds
- 61.6% of chat patrons remain waiting over 120 seconds
- 13% of chat transactions assessed (47) failed: 6% received no response, 7% received a response too late
- A 60 second wait-time standard at WCU has led to an average wait time decrease of 31 seconds: from 47 to 16
- With annual training refreshers, the effects of the wait time standard have remained positive over time (2015 to 2018)
- "Hold" language may prove effective for libraries with high traffic or low staff

Problem Scope

Six (6) percent of the total number of chats (556 of 9,383) never received a response from a library employee.
In many additional cases, the librarian response came too late, and no patron interaction occurred beyond the initial query.

Percentage of Chats Missed by Wait Duration

N=362

|	All Unis	WCU
0-30 sec	5.9	7
31-60 sec	10.7	0
61-90 sec	11	13
91-120 sec	23.3	0
120+ sec	38.4	25

Solutions

Solution 1:
Implement a wait-time goal. A 30-second wait-time goal standard is optimal, if feasible for you. Past that, most patrons who remain for 60 seconds (89.3%) remain up to 90 seconds (89%). Remind staffers annually of the standard.

- On chat:
    1. Always use a greeting. Feel free to use your own style (hello, hi, greetings, etc.).
    2. Greet all patrons as quickly as possible, preferably within one minute. Even if you cannot answer the question immediately, greet and acknowledge the patron.

WCU Average Response Time in Seconds, Pre and Post-Standard

2014	2015 pre	2015 post	2016	2017	2018
57	24	18	14	16	16
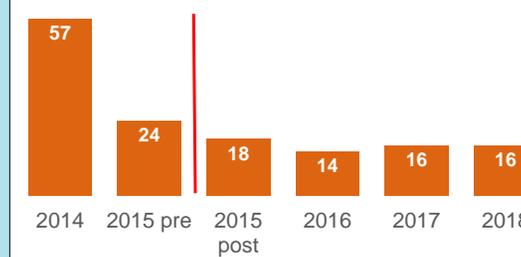
Solution 2:
In conjunction with your goal time, provide "hold" language prompts or "canned" chat text. Empower staffers to use them during busy times.

> Hello, I'll be with you in a moment!

> Hello! I'm helping other people right now, and I will be with you shortly. If you cannot wait please leave your email or phone number and I'll reach out as soon as possible.

Methods

Stage 1: Determine optimal wait time.
The researchers pooled all 9,383 chats received in 2014. Transcripts were divided based on the length of time the patron waited for a greeting.

Time Categories:
0 to 30 seconds: 6,320 chats, 67%
31 to 60 seconds: 1,506 chats, 16%
61 to 90 seconds: 386 chats, 4%
91 to 120 seconds: 202 chats, 2%
over 120 seconds: 413 chats, 5%
No librarian response: 556 chats, 6%

Of these, 400 transcripts, 80 from each category, were randomly selected (https://www.random.org/integers/). Each transcript was reviewed and coded. Of the 400, 362 were usable.

Engagement Categories:
Engagement: Patron and librarian conversed, 297 transcripts, 74%
No engagement/Missed: Librarian responded, but the patron had left the chat, 65 transcripts, 16%
Continuation: A session fragment; not usable, 27 transcripts, 7%
Internal: Chats between library employees; not usable, 10 transcripts, 3%
Special: System messages or spam: 1 transcript, <1%

Stage 2: Determine efficacy of interventions.
The WCU researcher randomly selected 30 transcripts each from 2015, 2016, 2017, and 2018 and assessed the percentage of queries where patrons were successfully engaged and the average wait time.