



The fact finders

By Nicole Manktelow
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Icon

They will answer almost any question you've got. Meet the fact finders - on the phone or behind the screen, they'll help you when you are lost, need to settle a bet, or translate a foreign phrase.

"It's a bizarre job," says Craig Dumas, who has had some unusual gigs. "I used to be a professional actor," he adds, but he now answers questions for Vodafone customers who call the company's information and concierge line 123.

"I answer between 180 and 500 calls a day. In the first week [when he began working at 123], if the phone rang at home I would just scream." Dumas is one of 90 to 110 operators working at any one time at Vodafone's call centre in Tasmania. In total the 123 service has more than 700 staff, making Vodafone the state's largest employer.

Some calls to the centre are more memorable than most, says Dumas. One caller cheerfully announced, "Hi, I'm looking for African Thrush", which had Dumas stumped at first, before figuring out the caller was searching for fencing material. "If I have to put up a fence in Western Australia I will know who to call," says Dumas.

"Then a couple of German tourists landed in Sydney and wanted to know how long it would take to walk to Alice Springs," he says. After some explaining he provided them with airline details. "I also got a call from a guy in New York and he wanted the consulate's number. Turned out he was staying at a hotel I had stayed at so I also helped him by telling him to go across the road to a little deli I knew for a great sandwich."

"We get some late-night calls, too ... I know where every single brothel in Australia is. The only thing we can't do is give them a rating system!" Dumas is blasé now but it wasn't always the case. "We're told about this sort of thing when we're trained. And then you get your first call and go 'aghhh!' - but then you get over it."

Of course, there are some questions that may never be satisfactorily answered: the meaning of life, for example, or the persistence of flared jeans. Little wonder online and phone-based info services concentrate on the practical and trivial.

One caller wanted to know what kind of underwear Queen Victoria wore, says Dumas. "I am indebted to trivia nights. These questions are paying my mortgage."

Textual attraction

A new text-based information service offers answers to mobile customers on any network. Tap out a question on SMS, send it to MojoKnows (0410 665 646) and the company will text back the answer: within 15 minutes if customers are willing to pay \$3, within the hour for \$2 or within 24 hours for \$1.

The service started in September in Germany and April in Australia, founded by Anja and Patrick Dockhorn who migrated to Australia in 2001. They have staff in both countries, which is handy for a 24-hour service.



Since September, **MojoKnows** has answered about 1900 questions, 26 per cent from Australia, but only 7.5 per cent of customers ask for a rush job, says marketing manager Kathrin Pick, who has also answered her share of questions during busy times.

Where does the term Silly Billy come from? "MojoKnows answered: Silly Billy was the nickname of William IV (British King 1830-1837), who was regarded by many as not taking his royal responsibilities seriously enough," says Pick.

That was an easy one, compared with some of the questions people ask. "There are a number of questions that people have been struggling to find answers to," on religion, life the universe and everything, explains Pick. "Nevertheless, there were some more or less ridiculous questions. Here's an example: 'Am I gay if I had sex with another bloke while I was intoxicated?'"

"We do try to answer them as seriously as possible, however," says Pick. "Our answer to that specific question was: 'Being gay means that you are sexually attracted to members of your own sex and that you identify with other gay people or the larger gay community.'"

In order to answer most questions, MojoKnows staff turn mainly to the internet and to a selection of commercial databases. "Our IT team developed a software system that allows everybody to see incoming questions straight away. Our staff are not necessarily librarians, we expect them to have knowledge to extract the correct information from the web," says Pick.

Last month MojoKnows began a mobile language translation service called SMS AutoTranslator. On the internet, it's quicker and cheaper to turn to the online translators such as **Babel Fish** and **Google's translator**, but when out and about a SMS translator could be very handy for travellers without a phrasebook. Most MojoKnows staff speak German, so that particular language is a natural choice. Other languages will eventually be available as well, providing word meanings and phrases for 50 cents per request.

Back to the books

There is no shortage of resources online but finding your way to the best answers can require more than a search engine. **Google Answers**, for example, allows internet users to pay for information from a gaggle of online experts.

However, in the days before the internet was in our homes (remember back then?), there was somewhere else researchers went to find information, and people there who would help us wade through it all, for free.

Libraries are still helping and schemes such as the National Library of Australia's (NLA) **Ask Now** service show how their resources can be extended, using a chat room to connect individuals to the resources of public libraries around the country and the brains trusts working within them.

Ask Now was launched in November and handles about 200 questions a day. "We are having a bit of trouble keeping up with it," says Jackie Keys, a librarian for nine years, who works at the NLA and also on Ask Now as both a manager and an operator.

The average chat session goes for about eight minutes, during which a librarian will direct users to useful web pages, databases or library resources. If necessary, the librarians can use the specially designed chat room environment to surf the web with the user, leading them to the best information. "Yes, I get stumped," says Keys. There are many varied kinds of questions on people's minds. "We'll follow up on email if we can't get the answer on a chat session."

The NLA is now hoping a spin-off service called Copies Direct will be just as popular. It allows internet users to order and receive certain documents online for a fee of \$13.20.

Obviously, as Ask Now users are seated at their own online computers, the chances are they have already done a little searching of their own.

That's why Ask Now tends to get trickier queries, from customers hunting for facts, figures and help with more in-depth research. Some requests are seasonal or to do with current world events, which gives the librarians a chance to prepare in advance. "Soon we'll get the Athens Olympics and we'll have to get all the good sites ready," says Keys.

"We get some school students and we're asked questions on the same topic, or the same question over and over. When it's quite obviously a school student, we try to point them to educational sites. When someone asks for 'any relevant information on Catholic morality from 1788 to 1900' it sounds like an assignment."

The Ask Now service runs for 10 hours a day, Monday to Friday, with three librarians on duty at a time, working in two-hour shifts each. Log on and the librarian you chat with may be located anywhere in the country. All the state and territory libraries around Australia are involved.

"Because it is anonymous people are more comfortable asking a question that might cause them embarrassment," says Keys. The librarians try to be well prepared for a diverse range of topics. "Fortunately, we haven't had too many nasty surprises".

"If someone comes on just to be a nuisance or uses inappropriate language we can terminate the session. It also happens that some younger school students will get on and ask frivolous questions."

Ask anything

Vodafone's Dumas says he's not surprised by what people ask when calling 123, he's heard it all. And he soon learnt that the toughest calls are not the embarrassing or raunchy ones, but those from people in need.

While Vodafone 123 is not an emergency service, it does receive calls for help. "We have policies for emergencies. We can't through connect to 000 [the police, fire and ambulance emergency service] as they would end up sending the ambulance to us," says Dumas. "But I had one man call up because he was trying to find his friend's parents because he and his friend had been in a car accident and his friend had died."

The challenge for operators is to get on with the job. "The next call was someone looking for a BBQ tank," Dumas remembers.

Nuisance callers are usually easy to deal with, says Dumas. "Sometimes I will have 10-year-old kids who have grabbed dad's phone and called to ask for rude things. The solution is to read out the Websters Dictionary definition of the word they've used."

Dumas is not a librarian, but he and his colleagues consider themselves power web searchers. Much of the information they are asked for can be found online, if you know where to look.

And what about the puzzle of Queen Victoria's underwear? "She wore bloomers!" says Dumas emphatically. "I found a museum-style website with a whole page dedicated to Victorian underwear," where he found that particular answer.

Factoid

Will I drown when the air humidity reaches 100 per cent?

MojoKnows answered: No. Air can only absorb moisture to a certain extent, depending on its temperature. The commonly used term of relative humidity indicates the ratio of the actual moisture in the air to the maximum amount of moisture the air could possibly absorb at its current temperature.

Infofile

Some of Craig Dumas' reference sites:

* [Google](#)

* [Ask Jeeves](#)

* To locate the nearest [public toilet](#)

* [NSW Roads and Traffic Authority](#)

* [Finding a street](#)

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