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Trivia hunters ask the texperts

By Simon Atkinson

Business reporter, BBC News, Cambridge

Having just completed his PhD at Cambridge, Tom Ellis knows plenty about DNA.

But thanks to his current line of work, he is also in the enviable - and perhaps slightly disturbing - position of knowing exactly what questions are on the mind of the nation.

Tom is one of a growing band of texperts - people working for companies whose business is answering questions sent to them by text message.

And after BBC News spent a day with Tom and his employers, 82ask, it would be fair to say most of the queries are not of the deep and involved nature that his alma mater would approve of.

Certainly it is difficult to see how his thesis will help him in tackling such taxing teasers as "How long is the longest goldfish?" or "How tall is a smurf?".

Holy ambition

While the number of questions received by the company is a commercial secret, they easily run into the hundreds each hour during the day and early evening.

Month-on-month growth has been close to 30%.

General trivia dominates from Monday to Thursday between 7pm and 10pm, a sign that perhaps not everyone is playing pub quizzes in the spirit they are intended.



Platypus. It looks so cute but why does it have to be poisonous...?

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By 11pm the queries become noticeably more abstract. "How do you go about becoming a nun?" asks one texter. "Why are platypuses poisonous if they look so cute?" says another. And then there is the age old question: "Which is better? Dogs or cats?"



“ There are lots of slightly silly questions which crop up again and again. People must think they're being original, but they're not

”

Tom Ellis
82ask textpert

[Click to read some sample questions](#)

"The animal comparison ones are more common than you'd think," says Tom, as he informs a customer exactly who would win a fight between a pigeon and terrapin.

"There are lots of slightly silly questions which crop up again and again. People must think they're being original, but they're not."

Information desire

Amid the merriment, mirth and occasional bawdiness is a genuine hunt for more practical information, with users texting 82ask (82275) seeking anything from train times and weather forecasts to phone numbers and the location of florists.

Each answer they receive costs £1, expensive for a bit of indulgent trivia-hunting but perhaps better value if it is information needed quickly and reliably.

It was this concept, the desire for information on the go, that prompted Sarah McVittie and Thomas Roberts to quit their jobs with investment bank UBS and found 82ask.



“ People do not want to search through reams of information on their mobile phone...[they] want snippets, nuggets, short sharp facts

”

Sarah McVittie
Co-founder, 82ask

It was a concept based largely on the premise that, while many mobile phones are enabled to cope with internet browsing, the trend has never really taken off.

"We've seen that people do not want to search through reams of information on their mobile phone," says Ms McVittie, the enthusiastic, Mandarin-speaking, motorbike loving co-director in the firm's bright

and airy offices on a Cambridge terraced street.

"What people want is snippets, nuggets, short sharp facts."

Mr Roberts, who oversees technical developments at the firm, agrees.

"If you're in a social environment you just want to send a quick text and not spend time looking for something," he says.

"Rather than it taking five minutes of your time, it can take 30 seconds of your time and then five minutes of ours. We eliminate the need to search and give the content most relevant to customers, freeing you up to do other things."

Beyond Google

Sport, science and entertainment are the most popular question categories, though queries are extremely event sensitive. The World Cup brought a surge in football teasers, while until recently each Friday produced a flurry of "Who has been evicted from Big Brother tonight?" type posers.

In a world of easily accessible information, answering them quickly sounds a fairly simple job.

But a few hours with Tom in his Cambridge flat shows that being a texpert is not about being able to use Google.

Answering trivia seems like an ideal job for someone who wishes they had applied for University Challenge or Fifteen To One.

“ If a question comes in at 11pm saying 'Late bar. Clapham. Now' you tend to think they're in a bit of a rush ”

Tom Ellis
82ask texpert

On Tom's desk is a road atlas, a copy of 'The Economist Book of Figures' and at the foot of the wall-to-wall shelves, back issues of the Guinness Book of Records.

But these are clearly more for personal enjoyment than work, given most of the sources he uses are online, including the databases of football statistics provider Opta - not available to the general public.

When an answer cannot be found (and a Wikipedia entry is never enough for the firm to base an answer on), the question is passed to a shift supervisor who will often make phone calls (via Skype) to track down a solution.

Challenge

Those posing particular questions, especially about health matters, are given contact details for expert advice.

But almost all other questions receive a direct answer - including ones such as "If you know everything, what is my name?" (the answer, by the way, will be along the lines of there being 11,782 John Smiths registered on the UK electoral roll so statistically you are most likely to be called John Smith).

"I do like a challenge," says Tom as he trawls a document on UK fishing exports, buried deep inside the Defra website.

"Most of it is stuff that everyone has access to, but they aren't in a position to look or don't know where to look. It's generally quite easy to get the answer they're after."

Given his work rate, he may be wishing he was paid per question, rather than on an hourly rate.

There are about 120 texperts employed by 82ask, including some in the US, and it is a competitive industry.

Only 1% to 2% of applicants get jobs (many are Oxford and Cambridge postgraduates) and are trained to put themselves in the mindset of the customer.

"If a question comes in at 11pm saying "Late bar. Clapham. Now" you tend to think they're in a bit of a rush so you might try to answer that one ahead of another that appears less urgent," Tom says.

Speedy solutions

It is an attitude that has helped the growth of the firm, largely through word of mouth.

Building the customer base is crucial, and not just because each answer generates an extra quid on the balance sheet.

The more people who use the service, the more efficient it also becomes.

With software recognising key words from questions, texperts are shown similar queries previously posed. It means that those asked regularly can be answered speedily.

"One of the most common questions to come in is about weather, but people ask for it



“ One of the most common

in hundreds of different ways. The system can understand the ways that people ask for it, even if it is in 'text speak'," Mr Roberts says.

questions to come in is about weather but people ask for it in hundreds of different ways

Thomas Roberts
Co-founder, 82ask

"Then it draws the data from a central source and can compose a reply. Texperts cast a glance over answers to ensure they seem correct but it is sent out without human intervention in 19 out of 20 cases."

Advertising potential

For companies like 82ask, and its rival Any Question Answered (AQA) there is the potential for a revenue beyond its core business.

With many of the questions being consumer driven (Where can I get a DAB radio for under £50?; What is the cheapest flight from London to Paris this Saturday?) it is easy to see that advertising is another way for the company to make money.

"We are gathering a lot of data about who is asking what sort of questions and when, which is useful information to a lot of people," Ms McVittie says.

"So advertisers being involved is a definite possibility, but it could never affect the independence of the answer.

"We're talking to customers to see whether they would be happy to have an answer on a certain topic, brought in association with a particular product, if this made for a cheaper service."



Tasty with chips but how many tonnes of cod does the UK export?

Just as Tom bemoans another easy question, a more involved, and slightly perverse one arrives: "Who scored the 428th goal in the history of the Premiership?".

It takes him 20 minutes to work out which season it must have been scored, then which week before listing every goal scored, in order, to deduce it was Ray McKinnon for Nottingham Forest against Manchester City on 3 October 1992.

"That might not have been very cost effective," Tom says afterwards. "But one thing we're taught in training is that it's better to give a considered answer so that they come back and use us again.

"Mind you it's one of those that leaves you wondering why anyone would want to know that."

A smurf, by the way, is three apples tall.

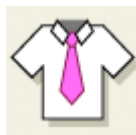
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