

TEXT-TASTIC



Q. Which company answers 100,000 questions a month? A. The Cambridge-based '82ASK'. The founders talk to RACHEL DIVALL and answer all the questions she can throw at them

82ASK is the brainchild of former city slickers Sarah McVittie and Thomas Roberts. The two gave up their city jobs three years ago to found the service, which aims to provide "immediate access to any information, at any time from any place". Users can text in any question from anywhere in the world and, if all goes to plan, will receive an answer within minutes.

I texted the service to ask the best way was to set up an interview with founders Sarah and Thomas, and an hour later got a reply apologising for the delay and giving me an email address. The next day I found myself in 82ASK's Cambridge offices, learning about 'textperts', how many dimples there are in a golf ball, and why the company has been forced to change its policy about questions with sexual undertones.

Thomas describes coming up with the idea as "one of

those pub moments". He and Sarah were both financial analysts at UBS and had noticed that they were often asked by bosses to come up with answers to demanding questions at the last minute. They say the service is not designed to rival search engines like Google, but rather to provide "information on the move". Thomas says a notable recent success was the businessman who texted from China after his flight to Beijing was unexpectedly diverted, asking for the numbers of the three best hotels in the city he had landed in. 82ASK were able to reply in a matter of minutes and he wrote to thank them on his return.

Broadly speaking, the questions 82ASK receive fall into three categories: questions from people wanting answers that will settle arguments or help with pub quizzes, people using the service as an alternative Yellow Pages, and

people at work who want answers to business queries. Originally the company refused to answer any questions with a sexual undertone, however they received an unexpectedly high number of questions from teenagers who used the service as a source of anonymous advice. It was decided it would be wrong not to provide advice on subjects such as sexual health, but Thomas says "it is very difficult because obviously from a text we've got no way of telling how old the person is." Questions where the subject matter is illegal or inappropriate are not given answers, and in these cases neither are the questioners charged.

Posing a question costs the price of a normal text message and the answer is £1, reverse-billed to your phone. The company is protected by its terms and conditions, which ensure they won't be liable if advice they send proves to be

incorrect. Apparently even the most difficult questions rarely take longer than a couple of hours, and most questions are answered in a matter of minutes, making the service an ideal aid to pub quizzes - research carried out for the company revealed that at one point, 83 per cent of questions were arriving between 8 and 10 pm on Mondays and Tuesdays.

Rid Hollands, 82ASK's Business Development Manager, said one of the most difficult questions he can remember was an enquiry about the number of bricks there were in the average detached house. 82ASK sent a reply immediately saying they were working on an answer, contacted some brick experts, and two days later replied with the figure.

When a question arrives it is dealt with by a computer, which categorises it and tries to match it to a previously

answered query. The majority of messages, however, can't be answered in this way and are passed on to a group of 'textperts'. There are currently 150 trained 'textperts' who work from home via the Internet. Some have very broad general knowledge, but others have more specific areas of expertise. Each 'textpert' has an assigned mentor who reviews their performance every month - those who have done well are given the first choice for the next month's shifts. The company currently has the British Quiz Champion on their books.

Last month the top categories for questions were Arts & Entertainment, Science & Nature, and Sport. Football is currently the most popular individual subject, accounting for five per cent of all enquiries. 82ASK have recently finalised a deal giving them access to the entire back cata-

logue of the Guinness Book of Records. The company have increased by more than 25% each month over the past three years and are currently trialling a subscription service where members pay £3 a week for an unlimited number of questions.

Whilst finishing off this article at some ungodly hour at Varsity HQ, I texted the service to inquire what flavour of pizza they thought I was eating (pepperoni, Italian base). Scarily quickly the correct reply arrived in my inbox, but sadly nobody seemed to know why I was eating it. It was completely disgusting.

82ASK are currently receiving more than 20 applications a day to be a textpert, but Thomas says Cambridge students are in with a good shot, and that the working hours seem to really suit the PhD timetable. Email jobs@re5ult.com to apply.

Shame exams are finished: Varsity trials the service, posing Tripos questions

LAW

Q: Legal positivists claim that the rule of law does not partake of any inheent moral significance. Are they correct in so claiming?

A: This is contentious. 1 branch argues distinction between principles and rules. Others argue every legal rule is ethically relevant, since they affect freedom. Response Time: 4 minutes

PHILOSOPHY

Q: Will my acting morally make my life better for me?

A: If you have morals then your life will probably be more comfortable if you live by them. If you have no morals you could find yourself in trouble. Response Time: 4 minutes

HISTORY

Q: Why were there so many rebellions against the French Crown in the 17th century?

A: Causes of French revolution: a poor economic situation, a resentment of royal absolutism, an aspiration for liberty and republicanism and other reasons. Response Time: 4 minutes

ENGLISH

Q: In Shakespeare's Rome, women are symbolically central but socially peripheral. Do you agree?

A: This is one valid interpretation: Shakespeare read Livy, Plutarch and Ovid and recreated a Rome (and Elizabeth England) in which women were key ciphers but socially restricted. Response Time: 6 minutes

HPS

Q: What is the difference, if any, between the history of technology and the history of science?

A: Science is the reasoned investigation or study of nature aimed at making discoveries. Technology is the use of knowledge so comes after science. Response Time: 4 minutes

Great ways to spend a quid: The most bizarre questions 82ASK received

Q. Who is the loveliest of them all?

A. According to askmen.com Adriana Lima (Brazilian supermodel) is most desirable woman in the world. According to FHM sexiest woman in world is Kelly Brook.

Q. When will I next know the love of a woman?

A. National av. is sex 110 times a year. So statistically, you are fairly likely to have sex within the next few days. (obv. doesn't work like that in prac)

Q. Which game starts with a squidge off?

Tiddlywinks starts with a Squidge off. All players shoot one wink from their baseline towards the pot. The player landing closest to the pot wins

Q. How many golf balls are on the moon?

A. Apollo 14 (1971): Shepard, the first golfer on the Moon, took 3 balls. He left a ball behind for future golfers

Q. If u tied buttered toast to the back of a cat and dropped it from a height, what would happen?

A. The cat would land on its feet. Cats can twist in midair to ensure that they land feet down. Toast only has mythical power to land butter-side down.

Q. How many maltesers can u fit in the albert hall?

A. Vol. of space occ. by 1 malteser approx. 0.12 cubic in. A-Hall, oval, 200ft length, 160ft breadth, 140ft high, cubic ft = 3,518,584 so about 50.6bn m's

Q. What is the funniest joke?

A. 2 hunters in wood, 1 collapses. 999 call: 'My friend is dead! What can I do?' Reply: 'Let's make sure he's dead'. A gun is heard. Guy says 'OK, now what?'