Influence of Summon™ on reference question complexity and reference service delivery

In the 12 months after implementing the Summon™ web-scale discovery service at our library, overall reference traffic rose by 29%. That was not supposed to happen.

Research questions:
- Is Summon™ simplifying search?
- How are the questions we receive changing?
- How is the time we spend on reference service changing?
- What changes might we now make to service delivery?

Methodology:
- Analyzed random samples of emailed reference questions received 12 months before and 12 months after implementing Summon™
- Using the READ Scale, coded these reference questions into five categories
- Using data from detailed reference question tracking, looked at changes in time spent answering emailed reference questions

Reference statistics tracked internally.
For each response, we track:
- Date and time question was answered
- Number of hours it took to provide a response
- How long it took to prepare the answer
- Medium of the transaction (in person, email, phone, embedded)
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Findings:
- The number of known item searches is falling, although not as much as we had hoped.
- The complexity of reference questions is climbing.
- The single search box is increasing our capacity to re-purpose prior answers, even across subject areas, saving us time.

Outcomes:
- The single search box offers increased capacity to focus on information literacy, rather than database recommendations
- We should investigate opportunities to streamline or delegate responses to simple questions