

The ChaCha Diaries

I've got all the answers, in 160 characters or less.

They say there are no stupid questions. But having worked as a ChaCha guide for six months, I'm not so sure. I am one of the 55,000 people around the country who field questions from bar-bettors and slacking students for the mobile answers text service based out of Carmel. ChaCha has more than 1 million users—most of whom probably are not imagining someone like me, a college student who earns 10 cents a question, as their pocket genius. Behold, truth-seekers: Here's my typical evening on the couch, serving up answers.

8:30 p.m.

>>Just got home from class. My roommate and fellow ChaCha guide already has her feet propped up on the table, her computer on her lap, and an open bottle of wine in front of her. I hear that "ding," meaning she has a new question. Looks like I'm staying in tonight. I guess I'll ChaCha, too.

9:00 p.m.

"What happens at the end of Hamlet?"

>>Fifteen questions in 30 minutes. Mostly kids looking for homework answers. What's a theme in *Huck Finn*? I use the special ChaCha search engine and am directed to SparkNotes. Sometimes I read through the "themes" section on the site, but more often than not, I will simply reply "You'd know if you read the book" and cite it with a link to the SparkNotes page. Regardless of the answer I give, I will still get paid.

9:30 p.m.

"What should I do if I like my boyfriend's best friend and he likes me back?"

>>Questions get silly as it gets later. Some ask for directions, some for phone numbers, but mostly they want relationship advice or information about sex. For some reason, a lot of the sex questions come from Utah. Sex questions are so common that there is a whole section of the search engine devoted to answering them in clinical terms.

10:00 p.m.

"What is the square root of an octopus? And why?"

>>Luckily, most people are just looking to "talk" at this hour. The conversational questions are the best because I don't have to look up an answer, and I still get paid. I simply click on the "conversational" link, answer as I wish, and am done.

10:30 p.m.

"What is for lunch tomorrow at school?"

>>We're not magic here—if it isn't online, I don't know the answer.

11:00 p.m.

"Is it better to do a home equity loan or a second mortgage?"

>>Now I'm getting real questions. This isn't nearly as much fun. I made around 15 bucks tonight by basically being a Magic 8-ball. Do I think your girlfriend will take you back? Outlook not so good. Should you buy a new lawnmower? It is decidedly so. Once I have to explain special relativity to someone (which would involve a lot of searching before I even understood it enough to condense it into a 160-character answer), I know it's time for me to go to bed, too. ChaCha for now!

—Marthe Leach



CHANNEL SURFERS Adam Dawkins, Jeff Halbert, and Will Simmons (from left) have been swimming laps since grade school.

Across the Pond

Three friends attempt the English Channel.

Fewer than 2,000 swimmers are believed to have crossed the approximately 21-mile waterway between England and France. Now come three local guys, normally sane.

A doctor, a lawyer, and an engineer should be able to conclude that a day of swimming in 60-degree water is not normal. But Adam Dawkins (a Jasper cardiologist), Jeff Halbert (an attorney at Stewart & Irwin), and Will Simmons (an engineer with Beckman Coulter) figure they have a shot at successfully swimming the English Channel. Never mind the jellyfish, the supertankers, and, yeah, the really freaking cold water. The swimmers will take the plunge next month, crossing the Channel in the required manner: using nothing more than a cap, goggles, an "un-enhanced" suit, and a guide in a boat to direct them through the changing tides and ship traffic.

For temperature acclimation and endurance, the trio puts in six-day weeks in area pools and trains together at 5 a.m. in Morse Reservoir with glow sticks around their necks for safety. As for mental preparation, these guys are wired a little differently. Simmons says his next pursuit might be a 55-mile ultramarathon in South Africa. "Anything for a T-shirt," he says.

—John Schwarz