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The Future is Here: Library Services for Mobile Devices

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The Future Is Here

Library Services for Mobile Devic

By Sally Wilson

What does your library website look like on a cell phone? What library services do your patrons want to access on a mobile device? The first question is easily answered. Unless your patron is using an iPhone or iPod Touch, your library website as viewed on their phone will have little resemblance to the carefully crafted site that displays on a laptop or desktop computer. The answer to the second question will depend very much on the types of users that frequent your library.

To get a better idea about experience and expectations of the users of our library regarding mobile devices, the Ryerson Library and Archives performed a brief survey of our students in November of 2008. The 800-plus responses to the survey told us that while only 20 percent of our users currently have smart phones (phones that provide internet access), within three years the majority of our users will have either an internet-enabled phone or a wifi-enabled device such as an iPod Touch. A number of libraries and library vendors have already started adapting existing services and creating new ones to take advantage of this development.

While users with full internet access on their phones are still in the minority, there are services that are well suited to the 85 percent of our respondents who use text messaging. Several library system vendors offer products which enable libraries to send circulation notices via text message. Denton Public Library in Texas offers this service on an opt-in basis. Another service that is fairly easy to implement is the ability to text message the title, call number, and location information of a particular book from the catalogue to a cell phone. This information can then be viewed later on the phone while the user is in the stacks looking for the item. Several libraries, including Ryerson, have implemented this feature, but the University of Bath in England has gone one step further. In their catalogue they insert QR Codes (two-dimensional barcodes) in the display of each bibliographic record. Users with phones that have a camera and free barcode decoder software can take a picture of the barcode, which the software then translates into title, barcode, and location information that can be displayed on the phone.

Our survey respondents also indicated that they would like to be able to do quick lookups on our catalogue and access their borrower record (fines, holds, etc.) on their mobile devices. There are a couple of options for providing these services. Your ILS vendor may currently have a mobile version of your catalogue available, or have announced plans to produce an iPhone-optimized version of their catalogue, such as Sirsi/Dynix and Innovative. The other route is to develop your own mobile catalogue. This has been successfully done by the District of Columbia Public Library, which created an iPhone version of their catalogue. The DCPL iPhone catalogue application (which allows you to search their catalogue) is available from the iTunes apps store, and the software for creating your own version is available under a Creative Commons license.

Many phones have built-in global positioning systems (GPS), a highly coveted feature for our survey respondents. A GPS feature allows users to navigate to locations and, if activated, allows others to find them. OCLC's WorldCat mobile application for iPhones makes use of this feature when identifying

local libraries. Libraries with multiple branches might want to capitalize on the GPS function to create custom maps to branch locations.

Other services that make life easier for your users can also port well to mobile devices. Our users overwhelmingly indicated that they would like to be able to book study rooms on the go. This is not surprising as our regular study room booking service is heavily used – there were more than 17,000 bookings in the fall term. We implemented mobile booking recently and, in the fall of 2009, expect to see this become one of our more popular mobile services.

Even if you don't have the budget or the staff to implement a wide range of mobile services, there are some actions that you can take now. A mobile website of a few pages can be created quite easily. Most existing mobile library sites have a similar set of links to quick information – hours, news, mobile catalogue, workshops/programs, and contact information. Phone numbers are particularly relevant on mobile pages, as they can be made into links that when clicked automatically place the call.

These are just a few examples of library services for mobile devices. The increasing pervasiveness of mobile devices with internet access promises an exciting time for libraries as we adapt and extend existing services to these devices and explore opportunities for innovative new services.

Sally Wilson is Web Services Librarian at the Ryerson University Library. She obtained her master's degree in Library and Information Science from the University of Toronto.

Mobile Library Services: Survey Results

Ryerson University Library
Mobile Device Survey Results
ryerson.ca/library/msurvey/

Examples of Library Mobile Services

District of Columbia Public Library iPhone software
dclibrarylabs.org/projects/iphone/

Denton Public Library
library.cityofdenton.com

University of Bath QR Code Example
library.bath.ac.uk/uhtbin/bath/UB-LIBS/ckey/1916692

Further Reading

On the Move with the Mobile Web: Libraries and Mobile Technologies

By Ellyssa Kroski

alatechsource.org/ltr/on-the-move-with-the-mobile-web-libraries-and-mobile-technologies