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Technology in Practice. A Library in Your Pocket

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A Library in Your Pocket

Building a web presence for mobile users

by Meredith Farkas

I n Vermont, it was easy to ignore the mobile computing craze until 2009. Before that, AT&T didn't have a presence here, so we couldn't purchase iPhones in the state. That all changed last year, and now, barely a day goes by that I don't see someone checking e-mail, texting, or browsing the web on their iPhone. With the growth of the Android phone market, which uses a Google-based operating system, there are even more options for mobile computing that appeal to mainstream consumers.

Mobile devices are becoming difficult for libraries to ignore. In 2009, one-third of all Americans accessed the web through a cell phone or smartphone and 4.1 billion text messages were sent daily. The statistics are even higher in academia, with more than half of all undergraduates owning a mobile device that can access the internet and 94% sending and receiving text messages. In 2008, the Pew Internet and American Life Project estimated that by 2020, people will primarily connect to the internet through mobile devices.

Why we must mobilize

While mobile device ownership is a major trend in American society, few libraries and educational institutions have developed resources and services for mobile users. According to Educause, over 50% of schools had done nothing as of 2009 to adapt their web-based services for handheld devices. This is start-ing to change as schools and libraries begin creating ver-sions of their websites for mobile users and designing services for mobile devices.

The first thing libraries that are looking to provide content and services for mobile users should do is assess their population, since each community is unique. What percentage of your patrons use mobile devices to access the web or send texts? What devices are most common? What do they use those devices for, primarily? Most web statistical software will tell you how many people access your website using mobile devices, though this may not reflect how many more would if it was optimized for mobile use.

Once you better understand your population, you can figure out what content and services to mobilize that will create the greatest impact for your users. There are many different approaches to take. The mobile website at the University of Minnesota Libraries was optimized for iPhone users since they represent the majority of smartphone users in their community. Oregon State University Library created two versions of its mobile site, one optimized for smartphones and one for web-enabled cell phones, which have smaller screens. It's easy to create an algorithm that will detect from what type of device a user is accessing a

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website and redirect the patron to the appropriate version for that device.

Other libraries have created mobile applications that allow users to search the catalog and selected databases, place holds, contact the library, check hours and more from their smartphone. The District of Columbia Public Library and the University of Houston both have created impressive library iPhone apps. DCPL has even made its source code available for others to modify!

In addition to creating a mobile website or application, there are many other resources and services libraries can mobilize for their users, including reference services, instructional content, and the catalog. Some newer and upcoming features of mobile devices also hold great promise for creating interesting location-based library services. I'll cover all of these in more depth in future columns.

With the mainstreaming of mobile devices, libraries can no longer ignore this important trend. By mobilizing our library resources and services, we make ourselves accessible to patrons wherever they are, from a device that fits in their pocket. ∎

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