If your library has no plans for mobile outreach, keep reading—you’ll find ideas to make your library a true 21st-century information hub.

The 2009 “Horizon Report” called mobile technologies “an opportunity for higher education to reach its constituents in new and compelling ways.” The report implied that academic libraries would find them to be the ideal tools for bringing reluctant researchers to the library, mainly for their convenience. It’s not hard to see why—in 2008, mobile phones were in the hands of more than 4 billion users, a 61% penetration rate worldwide. That same year, mobile users sent and received 2.3 million text messages. By 2012, the mobile phone is expected to outsell the personal computer. The leaders in mobile communication are, not surprisingly, adults in the 18 to 29 age group, the traditional college-age student. Academic libraries are not blind to this—a 2009 Library Journal survey found that 65% of academic libraries either already offer or plan to offer mobile services. If your library is in that 35% with no plans for mobile outreach,
All the Knowledge of the World in My Hand: Mobile Technologies

Mobile phones. When one thinks of mobile technologies, the first device that comes to mind has to be the cell phone or the smartphone. Beginners to the smartphone in the library may want to consider a mobile-based website, a stripped-down design that reads well on small screens. These sites do not require too much web design knowledge (remember that well-designed mobile sites do not have complicated code or scripting languages) and can be designed in-house. Librarians can also consider the smartphone app, either as a stand-alone app (University of Notre Dame’s Hesburgh Libraries) or as part of a university app (Duke University). Companies such as Boopsie, the designer of the American Library Association’s conference apps, stand ready to make an app that can do anything for your users—from searching the catalog to patron account information to basic library information. Many library resource providers, such as Westlaw, EBSCO, ScienceDirect, and RefWorks, have mobile apps or mobile sites that you can offer to your more wired students.

The smartphone is not the only phone portal to mobile outreach. Librarians who notice more traditional cell phones on campus should consider text reference for their mobile outreach programs. With Google Voice, AIM Hack services (five- or six-digit numbers popular for mobile phone donations), and library-based options such as MyInfoQuest and Mosio’s Text a Librarian, you can set up a text reference service that can help you handle ready reference questions (or even more complicated questions) quickly and easily.

MP3 players. Mobile devices should not be limited to phones. Are you seeing library users with distinctive white wires extending from their ears? Chances are they are using an iPod or other MP3 player—mobile devices you can use in your library for audio and or video tours. With them, students can explore the library at their convenience, concentrating on the parts of the collection most relevant to their needs.

E-readers. Despite being available for decades, the general public has only become aware of e-readers in the last 5 years, primarily due to the popularity of Amazon’s Kindle and Barnes & Noble’s Nook. The latest generation takes content delivery to new levels, allowing for wireless browsing, purchasing, and delivery of content to these devices. There are still limitations, such as monochrome screens, difficulty with various file formats, and restrictive content licensing, but despite these drawbacks, users will bring e-readers to the library and will want to use them for their studies.

One area of digital content that academic libraries have already had a major presence in has been electronic reserves. This can be an easy place to start supporting e-readers on campus. Offering electronic reserves in a variety of formats improves the usability of the reserves system. The primary challenge that exists in this area is that unless the electronic reserve content is in a layout that can easily be converted to an e-reader format, it can be difficult to make it clearly readable. As conversion software improves and more content is born digitally, more libraries will support e-readers for reserves.

Tablets. Tablets such as the iPad are still primarily a consumer item today and are outside the price range many feel is acceptable for a gadget. As more enter the market, prices will drop, and they will become more commonplace. Tablet PCs will be used to consume media as more of it is digitized and made available online for download and streaming. This means that activities such as searching databases, downloading articles, and pursuing the catalog will likely be done through tablets, either through apps or...
tablet-formatted websites. The overall utility of tablets also makes them an ideal device for accessing a variety of documents, including ebooks. Their ability to play audiovisual materials and their web connectivity could signal a new form of academic text that is both immersive and interactive. As many tablets currently on the market are based on revised versions of smartphone operating systems, they will have the same capabilities as smartphones and will run many of the same apps.

Tablets can also provide on-the-spot reference services. Pilot programs in various libraries have shown that the tablet provides convenience in accessing the library’s resources while away from the reference desk and is a novelty that draws students’ attention. The design of the recent generation of tablets—lighter weights, slimmer profiles, and multi-touch interfaces that eliminate the need for peripherals—makes roving reference even easier. However, the lack of Flash web technology on many tablets does provide a barrier to accessing some websites, especially video sites.

**Electronic textbooks.** One of the next great digital frontiers being tackled is that of academic texts. Earlier attempts at electronic textbooks generally had mixed results, often due to lack of content in electronic format or discomfort with reading from a screen. Changes are on the horizon that suggest that these issues may have been corrected. E-readers and tablets have new features that allow students to highlight and add annotations to the text, just as they would with paper texts. They give students the capability to link to additional information.

**Final Thoughts**

There is no “one size fits all” mobile program, and what works in one university might not work for the community college down the street. As long as you remember the focal point of mobile services—convenience—and take a long look at which devices your library users seem almost welded to, your mobile program will get students to look up from their gadgets to see the library in a new light—and then look back down to try out all the new services they’ve discovered there.

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