Casting a Wider Net with Roving Reference

Our wireless future is much on our minds these days, and there have been several outstanding articles and lectures on the subject. A lot of these focus on nuts and bolts: Wireless Fidelity (Wi-Fi) FAQs, 802.11b protocols, laptop and e-book circulation, and rollout checklists. But there’s one angle on wireless that I for one would like to hear a lot more about, and that’s how we can use this new mobility to boost the synergy between our digital collections and our still-relevant print collections. That’s different from thinking about how patrons themselves rove libraries—we librarians also need to do some roving. We need to go to study areas and stacks, and to begin thinking about enlivening reading rooms with wireless reference on the fly.

The urge to go where patrons need us is not new, and neither are technological innovations that boost mobility. To understand how wireless networks take us further than we could go before, it’s sometimes a good idea to assess the low-tech ways of doing similar things. For example, when I first moved to Berkeley, I paid the San Francisco Public Library a visit. The “Old Main” building was beautiful and quirky (and has since been replaced by a new and even more peculiar building of no small fame).

I was browsing the card catalog (read and weep, Nicholson Baker) when I became aware of a reference librarian who was helping a telephone patron. She unplugged the phone from the information desk and carried it directly to the card catalog. She plugged it into a built-in jack above the card drawers, one of several telephone jacks above the range. She then browsed the catalog and refined her search, in consultation with the patron.

In 1977, this seemed really powerful to me. It had a real impact and saved a lot of time. This librarian offered outstanding service through mobile reference, albeit a very basic version. Nonetheless, it was one of those moments where you leave thinking, “Librarians are terrific”—in this case, probably because the professional had literally done the traveling in support of a patron.

Roving Reference: The ‘Wow’ Effect It Has for Users

Effective reference and access counsel hold geographical challenges to this day, if virtual reference and library chat rooms are guides. We still need to take reference where it’s needed the most, as well as emphasize the social interactions that add value to our collections. Wireless networking offers public service providers a compelling opportunity to do just that, enlivening services and extending their reach. Moreover, in a reference transaction, professionals teach through demonstration, performing high-level sleuthing in print and digital media. This is the heart of library pedagogy, and effective reference consistently fosters respect for our overall services.

Here are a few ideas to get us thinking about how we can use wireless networks
to boost public service. First, we can take a hands-on approach to helping people navigate through finding aids like catalogs and Web services—in a wider region within our facilities. An interpersonal touch is still the best ingredient for reference and training. Indeed, the profession has gained a lot of knowledge about online searching, but anyone who’s ever had to design a Web page that attempts to list “all resources available online at a glance” knows just how hard that is. Screens spill over, directories stretch on forever, and links need to be updated.

Our Web pages, as good as they have become, still require interpretation, explanation, and annotation. One of the best moments for that counsel to occur is during the actual search process. Wireless reference can encompass the entire space of the library, allowing us to rove more freely in study areas and even the stacks—with access in hand.

Second, we should go to clients ourselves, instead of counting on them to come to us. Reference service is most likely to occur at desks, but wireless networks will begin to free us from the desks, and that freedom could vastly change how the public perceives librarians—if we dare to step out of our comfort zones. For example, why not visit patrons in the stacks and in offices, get in their faces, charm them, and practice active listening? Some of us do this naturally; others of us need to push ourselves. Now we’re all getting a push, as Wi-Fi spreads in both academic and public libraries.

Wireless reference holds particular promise not only for study halls, but also in the stacks. How many times have you wished you could check a citation or retrieve tabular data as soon as you found an intriguing footnote, without changing locations? Wireless access in the stacks enables us to combine diverse searches, perusing the contents and footnotes of a book while also browsing electronic journals or databases.

Roving reference needs a home in the wireless libraries we are creating. Effective, high-touch reference produces a ripple effect of respect among both business colleagues and patrons, increasing political capital and proactive commu-
cation. For those of us who already like to rove, wireless access adds to the reference arsenal, and it is a new challenge for those of us who need to stretch a little to incorporate more patron interactions into the day.

**Training Patrons on the Go**

In addition to roving reference, Wi-Fi makes it possible for us to provide mobile training, at varying levels of formality. In particular, mobile training can breathe new life into poorly designed spaces. The Institute of Industrial Relations, where I work, is a good case in point. It is located in a grand old building in the California Mission style, but it’s basically a former Methodist women’s dorm. The library is in the old dining room. For us to really bring in students and run trainings, we need to use our public rooms. One of our upcoming training modules, “Managing Your Bookmarks,” will be held in our reading room, which will be informal and roomier, compared with our small computer lab. Forums like this will be much easier to present with a wireless link.

Many of our patrons are doctoral students who have deep knowledge of narrow subject areas within the intellectual spectrum. It’s often easier to get and keep their attention when we tackle a broad research problem together and play off each other’s strengths. That’s when we librarians can really introduce new resources to our super-users.

Reference and training strategies vary depending on the environment, but my staff and I find that our users really do like it when we go to them. Most of the individual consultations we hold take place in offices, not in the library. Network access is pretty good here, but even so, taking a notebook computer with me to a colleague’s office is a pretty snazzy concept. Wireless access demonstrates how up-to-date the profession is, particularly when research needs are ongoing. Being on a user’s home turf encourages communication that may not happen otherwise, like hearing a patron admit that he’s never even used the library catalogs. For the post-Web generation, this is not at all rare, even at research universities.

**New and Changing Roles in the World of Wi-Fi**

New gadgets, including PDAs, may ease the load as you travel. I’m one of those people who choose to live in a PalmPilot no-fly zone, so I’m less personally interested in what’s new and hot in the PDA market. However, my love affair with the notebook may be challenged by tablet-style devices. I sense a lot of promise in tablet-style computing, if the bugs can get ironed out. Wireless access to databases on a decent-sized screen, coupled with the ability to download, copy notes, and jot down outlines, sounds very powerful—especially when using diverse media in an awkward space. Moreover, tablet computing might not only ease public service work but also might assist in circulation, inventory control, and technical service cleanup.

Wireless access is making rapid inroads at home and at work, and the setup process is likely to become easier with time. However, the Web has taught many technologists that “easy is hard”—that is to say, that the front end looks easy because the back end was designed carefully. Nonetheless, once a wireless network is running and stable, it will offer us three interesting new roles to play—if we dare. I’ve touched on some of these already, but let me rephrase them to challenge your creative sides.

First, we can extend reference to the study hall and the stacks, by moving around and engaging our users. We’re seeing more experimentation with this, and it’s not really a new idea anyway. However, it is new to have fast wireless access and to engage users in search strategies as they work on their own systems. This is another opportunity to build community support and to preserve the library as the home site for effective information counsel.

Second, depending on the environment, we can move training out of the lab and into the study hall. If we can offer brief, modular training to small groups of interested patrons, we will extend the fun and vibrancy of training into the halls of the library.

Finally, we can use wireless access to create new synergy between our digital and print collections. Access to e-journals and online reference tools can follow the user to the stacks, where searching in books dovetails with searching e-journals and online reference tools.

It’s a safe bet to expect wireless access to be a staple of the digital library. But in my experience, the “social sphere” of the library is the zone where we create the conditions that enable us to move up the information value chain. The wireless library should be a lively space, where we use the new mobility to engage with patrons as they work. This kind of interaction is made possible by technology, and yet the new platform’s effectiveness will depend on our long-standing service ethic and our command of an ever-growing array of digital resources. We must also be willing to share that knowledge, not just at our desks, but also throughout the entire library.

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