The Mobile iRevolution

Karen Coombs explains why you should get your library's resources onto ultrapopular handheld devices—and how

According to the 2008 Horizon Report, which charts the landscape of emerging technologies for teaching, learning, and creative expression, one of the key technologies that will be "adopted" over the next two to three years is mobile broadband.

More than one billion new mobile devices are being manufactured each year, says Horizon, and "innovation is unfolding at an unprecedented pace. Indeed, mobiles are quickly becoming the most affordable portable platform for staying networked on the go."

Handheld tools of change

The most recent significant entries into this space are Apple's iPhone 3G and its iPod Touch. While some librarians have been developing mobile services for a while, Apple's products transform the landscape. Since their initial release, iPhones and the iPod Touch have been designed to allow users to browse the web with ease regardless of whether or not sites have been designed for a mobile display. By building in this functionality directly, Apple has made the mobile browsing experience much better.

To make the creation of mobile library apps even easier, Apple recently released a tool kit that allows for the development of applications specifically for the iPhone and iPod Touch. Many librarians and library developers see this as an opportunity for libraries to extend their reach and be where their users are. Peter Brantley commented on his Shimenawa blog, "Where, for example, were the software library vendors like Ex Libris or Sirsi, or even open source alternatives like Evergreen, in espousing their new iPhone applications? OCLC should certainly have a georef WorldCat application, like NOW, that would show me WHERE my nearest library is when I do a book search on my iPhone."

Mobilize your content

Those who want to make their library's content iPhone/iPod Touch-friendly should first test their library website and catalog on these devices (see "Mobile Connection Development," p. 6). Consider building a streamlined iPhone native interface for your site. Documentation is available via the Apple Developer's site (developer.apple.com/iphone), which discusses how to optimize your web site for Safari on the iPhone.

Second, think about developing standalone applications specifically for the iPhone/iPod Touch. Libraries can register to develop applications and download the tool kit via the iPhone Dev Center. To make apps available via the iPhone App Store, libraries will need to apply for the iPhone developer program, which costs between $100 and $300.

Third, consider making audio and video content available via iTunes. If you work at an academic institution, see if your organization has an iTunes U site that you can use to distribute your content. This can be especially helpful for library tutorials. For information on acceptable formats and how to optimize for playback on an iPod, check out the iTunes U User's Guide (apple.com/education/itunesu_mobilelearning).

Keeping pace

These mobile strategies can dramatically impact how libraries deliver services to their users. Currently, the web services, public services, and collections areas at the University of Houston Libraries are collaborating to plan new mobile services. We are piloting many of those described above, including creating apps for the iPhone, optimizing the library web site, and adding content to the University’s iTunes U site.

We’re also testing the idea of having our subject liaisons use the iPod Touch in their daily work and interactions with faculty and students to see how mobile apparatus could potentially enhance their services. Because the campus has wireless access in nearly every location, subject liaisons using iPods are now able to check their calendars, send emails, and perform routine tasks while outside the library.

Advances such as the iPhone and iPod Touch present a wealth of opportunities and challenges for libraries. They can allow libraries and librarians to stretch their presence beyond the library building and web site and into user spaces. However, like any technology, these devices change rapidly and require time to build knowledge and options around them. With the growing use of mobile devices, librarians need to find ways to overcome these challenges in order to capitalize on the ability to build vivid new services for their users.

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