

Mobile outside the Library

The last chapter provided some ideas for helping a library's mobile-focused customers when they are visiting the library—but what about when they leave the building? For the most part, your library customers are at home, at work, or at school. Even your regular customers spend most of their time outside the library.

Thankfully, we have the capability to use mobile technology to connect with those customers. If they have a smartphone and a couple of apps, they can still use the library, even if they are not in your building.

This chapter covers the mobile technology needs that your customers might have when they are away from the library, including checking out materials, reading library news, receiving library-focused notifications, accessing e-books and other e-resources, and asking questions.

This chapter also covers mobile access to the library's website, the library catalog, and databases; mobile apps the library has; and ways a library can connect with customers using a mobile device (including social media and podcasts). I'll also discuss other opportunities to use mobile technology in the community (for example, with area schools).

Basic Library Activities Using Mobile Technology

The majority of your customers have the capability to do quite a few library-related tasks using a mobile device. For example, if customers have smartphones, they should be able to visit your website, browse the library catalog, and use a database. If those websites are not mobile-friendly, it might not be the greatest experience in the world, but they can at least access the website.

Let's explore some basic library activities that can be done using a mobile device, including

- checking out materials
- accessing e-books and other e-resources
- reading library news
- getting notifications
- asking a question

Checking Out Materials

Checking out materials is foundational to libraries. Most libraries have, at this point, moved their library catalogs (integrated library systems, or ILSs) to an online system, where customers can search, find items, put books on hold, and take care of account-related tasks such as updating a phone number.

Your customers should also be able to perform these basic library tasks from a mobile device. There are a couple of ways this can be accomplished. Today, most ILSs can be accessed using a mobile web browser; however, the user experience will vary greatly. Some ILSs have created a responsive, mobile-friendly version that works well on mobile web browsers. Other systems are not there yet. In some cases, customers can navigate to the catalog, but they will then need to pinch and zoom to make the website readable.

Another way to accomplish using the catalog on a mobile device is to access it through a mobile app. Some ILSs have a mobile app version of the catalog. If they do not offer this feature, there are third-party mobile apps that include this type of functionality. My library, for example, uses a mobile app that we purchased from Communico (figure 3.1).¹

A third option to make an ILS work in a mobile setting is to install a discovery overlay that sits on top of the ILS. A discovery overlay is a way to provide extended functionality and features to an existing ILS's customer-facing library catalog. BiblioCommons is a great example of a discovery overlay that uses responsive web design. It easily adapts to any number of mobile devices.

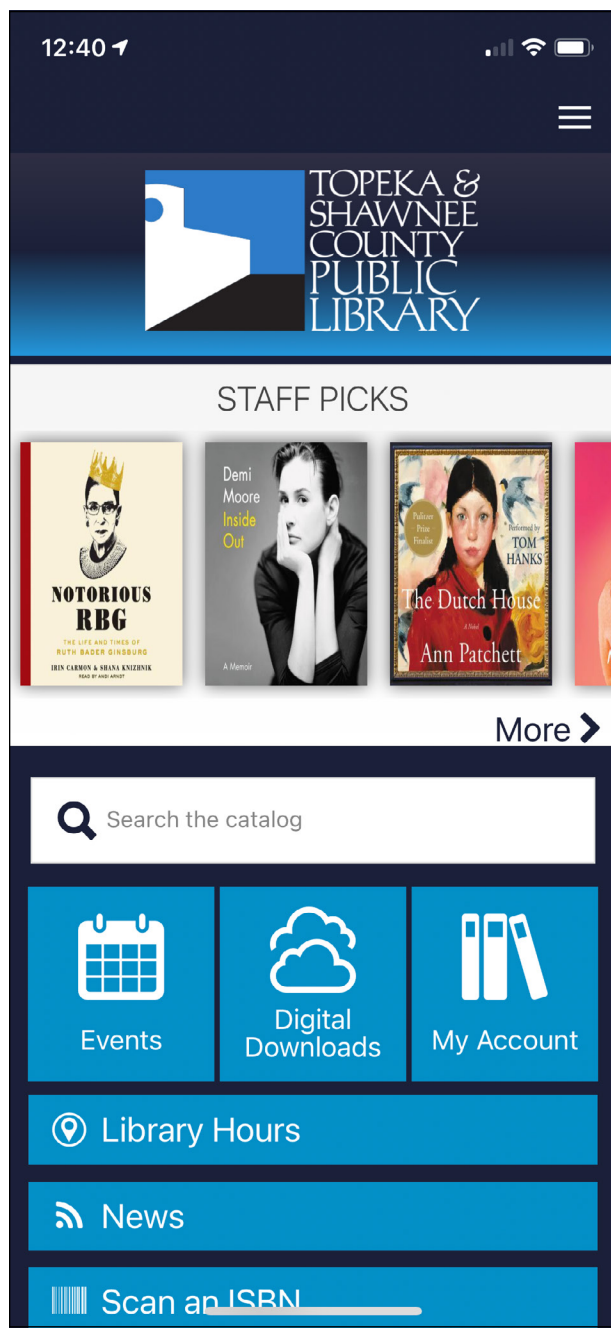


Figure 3.1
Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library's mobile app from Communico

Accessing E-books and Other E-resources

Today's library has a large collection of e-collections. Often, a library doesn't include e-books, streaming video, and other online resources as part of its total collection count, but it should. A library can spend a large percent of its collection budget on e-resources; it makes sense to treat these resources the same way we

treat other resources in the library.

To maximize the impact of e-collections, we need to help library customers access a library's e-content in an easy way. Sometimes there is a simple solution. For example, if you use OverDrive for e-books, all you have to do is point customers to the mobile app and help them connect to the library's e-book collection. After that, the customer has instant access to the collection.

The tricky part is figuring out the best way to share that your library has e-content in the first place. We have all heard a library customer say something like, "I didn't know the library had e-books!" Our customers don't know because the library hasn't done a great job of promoting the service.

Sometimes, even finding information about the service—let alone finding a link to the mobile app—can be challenging. Now multiply those challenges by all the e-resources your library has. For example, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library has eighty-five databases and eleven mobile apps. It is definitely a challenge to promote all of our e-content along with everything else the library does.

Reading Library News

People want to know what's happening at the library. They might be interested in major events at the library, or they might be interested in finding out more about a new library service.

Can library news be delivered to library customers in a mobile format? Yes, it can—through responsive-designed websites with a news section, through electronic newsletters, and through social media channels.

There are also different ways to "subscribe" to library news. RSS feeds and RSS feed readers are still simple and useful tools for getting updated content from a website. RSS functionality is included in many modern websites.

Electronic newsletters are also an easy way to share library news and updates. You can set up a newsletter through many services, including Mailchimp, Constant Contact, or OrangeBoy. Customers sign up for the newsletter using an e-mail address, so news of the library is delivered to their e-mail inbox.

Make sure you use multiple ways to share library news so your customers know what's happening at the library.

Getting Notifications

Here is a good explanation of notifications from Airship.com:

A push notification is a message that pops up on a mobile device. App publishers can send them at any time; users don't have to be in the app or using their devices to receive them. They can do a lot of things; for example, they can show the latest sports scores, get a user to take an action, such as downloading a coupon, or let a user know about an event, such as a flash sale. Push notifications look like SMS text messages and mobile alerts, but they only reach users who have installed your app. Each mobile platform has support for push notifications—iOS, Android, Fire OS, Windows and BlackBerry all have their own services.²

In the library world, a notification might be a Facebook Live post to communicate something to customers, for example. When my library “goes live” on Facebook, the Facebook app sends a notification to everyone who follows the library on Facebook, letting them know that the library is sharing a live video. Then, if people seeing the notification click on it, the app will open, and they can watch the live video.

There are some library-focused mobile app companies that are creating this type of functionality in their mobile apps. For example, Capira Technologies (now part of OCLC) builds mobile apps for libraries that send push notifications. Here's what Capira Technologies says about the types of notifications its app can send to customers who have downloaded the mobile app:

Push Notifications are also a great way to highlight your library's events and promotions. Do you have a program that isn't getting the number [of] registrations you want? Send out a Push Notification with a link directly to the registration page for that program, and watch your numbers increase right away. Promoting your Facebook page with a raffle or some other contest for those who “like” your page? Deploy a Push Notification informing your users about the promotion, and watch the number of “likes” go up and up, minute by minute after deploying your message!³

Asking a Question

One major function of a library is to answer questions. Most libraries have a traditional reference desk to help customers inside the building. In an online setting, libraries have different types of ask-a-librarian services.

A library customer who is not in the library building can simply use the phone and call the reference desk. But today's mobile library customers aren't limited to making a phone call. Depending on what types of mobile reference services a library uses, library customers can also use SMS text messaging to ask a

question. They might ask a question using Facebook Messenger. They might send a question using e-mail, or they might send a DM (direct message) using Twitter. A library can also set up an ask-a-librarian service in a mobile communication app such as Telegram or WhatsApp and answer questions there.

If your library offers multiple ways for library customers to ask questions online, it can quickly get confusing with questions coming at you from phone calls, web-based chat services, voice mails, text messages, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp!


Thankfully, there are services that consolidate questions and responses from many sources into a single web-based interface. For example, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library uses Springshare's LibAnswers to consolidate our ask-a-librarian service.⁴ LibAnswers allows my library to combine web-based chat, text messages, e-mail messages, and voice mail from our VoIP phone system into a single web-based system for staff. This allows library staff to answer questions and to keep track of a variety of answers for use at a later date. LibAnswers also lets us forward questions to another staff member for more specialized help, as needed.

Multiple Mobile Apps

I have already mentioned library-focused mobile apps, but I have one more suggestion about a library's mobile apps that are offered to customers: create a mobile apps page on your website (figure 3.2). As I said before, my library currently has eleven mobile apps for a variety of library services. Here are the apps we currently point to:

- Communico's Engage Mobile App Library App (connects to the library catalog, our event calendar, and other information on the library's website)
- Libby (one of OverDrive's e-book apps)
- OverDrive (OverDrive's first e-book app)
- Hoopla Digital (e-books, audiobooks, movies, television shows, educational and instructional videos, documentaries, and music)
- Flipster (digital magazine collection)
- SmartAlec (mobile printing service from Comprise Technologies)
- Creativebug (a craft-based app)
- Lynda (a collection of instructional videos)
- Mango Languages (a language learning app)
- EBSCOhost (access to EBSCOhost databases)
- Beanstack (We use this for reading challenges and our summer reading program.)

A library's collection of mobile apps can add up fast! So it makes sense to create a mobile apps page



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CHECK IT OUT

DOWNLOAD IT

RESEARCH IT


Mobile Apps at the Library

The library has several mobile apps you can use to connect with your library while on-the-go (ok, or "on-the-couch" too). Here's a list of apps, what they do and links to download them.




Library App: Check out books, ebooks, movies, etc. Connect to your library account and your library card. Keep up-to-date with library news and events. Find library hours and the bookmobile schedule. Scan a book's ISBN to see if it's available at the library. Find staff picks.

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Figure 3.2
Topeka's mobile apps page

on your website. Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library's mobile apps page includes a short description of each mobile app.⁵ We also provide links to the Apple and Google app stores for each app, which helps make finding and downloading all the library's mobile apps much easier for our library customers.

Social Media

One reason social media is so popular is because of mobile devices. Social media apps work great on mobile devices, and many people have at least one mobile device with them for most of the day.

This makes communicating through social media very easy! A part of a modern library's communication to customers includes creating social media posts on a variety of social media services. Most likely, your customers will have installed at least one of these social media apps. If they have followed your social media channel, they will receive updates as you post them.

What social media services should a library use? If we look at national statistics, you should definitely think about using Facebook and YouTube. In the United States, Pew Research reports that 69 percent of adults use Facebook, and 73 percent use YouTube.⁶

That means your library needs to create multimedia content. Text-based posts work fine on Facebook, but photo- and video-based content tends to get more interaction. And of course, YouTube is a video-based service.

Some of these services send notifications to a follower's mobile device when new content gets posted. For example, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube all allow content creators to share live videos and more ephemeral, temporary content such as Stories. When someone posts these types of content, the mobile app sends a notification letting users know there's a new story or live video.

Podcasts are another type of multimedia content to consider creating. Podcasts work great on mobile devices because there are apps focused on subscribing to podcasts. For example, Apple devices have an

app called Podcasts built for following podcasts from Apple's iTunes collection of podcasts.

It's relatively easy to create a twenty-minute podcast about library news or book recommendations (figure 3.3). These can be uploaded into Apple's Podcast service and then promoted to library customers.

Community Connections with Mobile Technology

Finally, let's explore some ways to create community connections using mobile technology. Here are some examples of libraries using their community partnerships in unique ways.

Many students in Shawnee County, Kansas, are provided with either Chromebooks or iPads for schoolwork. Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library has worked with local school districts to make sure the students' school-supplied tablets work well with the library's Wi-Fi systems. For some reason, when schools first started providing tablets to students, the devices were locked down in a way that restricted the tablet from connecting to the library's Wi-Fi network. My library's technology department worked with the school IT departments to figure out what was going on and how to fix the issue so students could use the library's Wi-Fi system.

We could also work with local school districts to get our library mobile apps installed on student tablets. For example, if your library has a library catalog mobile app, this would ensure that all students have easy access to your library catalog. Then, you could even set up training classes to train teachers on how to use the library's mobile apps.

Some libraries have partnered with local cultural centers and museums to create interesting partnership learning opportunities centered around a mobile app. For example, the Carroll County Public Library in Carroll County, Maryland, partnered with a local museum and a local technology company to create an augmented reality exhibit. Here's more information from its website about the exhibit:

The Union Mills: Early Industry Comes Alive exhibit is a partnership between the Carroll County Public Library, The Union Mills Homestead, and Balti Virtual to engage the community in local history. This project combines a traveling exhibit of artifacts with augmented reality animations to offer an interactive experience. This project was funded by a Library Services and Technology Act Grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Maryland State Library. View the augmented reality animations for the grist mill and tannery using the free HoloTats app



Figure 3.3
Topeka's podcast

available at the App Store or Google Play. Open the HoloTats app and scan the grist mill and tannery images noted below to bring each to life. Don't forget to turn on your sound.⁷

These are just a few ideas of ways to partner with other organizations in your community using a library's mobile apps. The opportunities are endless!

Notes

1. “Engage,” Communico, accessed September 26, 2020, <https://communico.us/patron-app-936>.
2. “Push Notifications Explained,” Airship, accessed September 26, 2020, <https://www.airship.com/resources/explainer/push-notifications-explained>.
3. “Push Notifications,” Capira Technologies, accessed August 11, 2020, <https://www.capiratech.com/push-notification>.
4. “LibAnswers + Social,” Springshare, <https://www.springshare.com/libanswers>.
5. “Mobile Apps at the Library,” Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library, <https://tscpl.org/mobile-apps-at-the-library>.
6. Andrew Perrin and Monica Anderson, “Share of U.S. Adults Using Social Media, Including Facebook, Is Mostly Unchanged Since 2018,” Pew Research Center, April 10, 2019, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/10/share-of-u-s-adults-using-social-media-including-facebook-is-mostly-unchanged-since-2018>.
7. “Union Mills: Early Industry Comes Alive,” Carroll County Public Library, accessed September 26, 2020, <https://library.carr.org/programs/unionmills.asp>.