

2011

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Recommended Citation

Keating, Maura, "Will They Come? Get Out The Word About Going Mobile" (2011). *Library Staff Publications, Presentations & Journal Articles*. Paper 2.

https://digitalcommons.bryant.edu/libr_jou/2

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Will They Come? Get Out the Word about Going Mobile

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ABSTRACT. In order to be effective, libraries must promote, market, and advertise mobile initiatives. When libraries introduce services that use new tools and modes of thought, they must demonstrate what is possible, how services are relevant, and how new resources can help.

The 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*¹ is often referenced when talking about advertising and all because of one misquoted line. In *Field of Dreams*, Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) builds a baseball field in the middle of his cornfield in Iowa after he hears a whisper, “If you build it, he will come” and sees a vision of the field. When you are building the first mobile applications for your library users, you might feel a little like this lonely Iowa farmer, doubting your sanity and your ability to fill the stands. Unlike Kinsella, librarians can’t rely on ghost baseball players to fill our stadiums. We need to get the word out there. Libraries have been around for a while, but as the world shifts, libraries do too. People aren’t sure how libraries fit in anymore. If we want to make sure that we stay relevant, then we need to put ourselves out there and that means advertising. Whether you’ve been using mobile services in your library since the technology first emerged or whether you are just now thinking of implementing mobile services to complement traditional library services, no one will come if they don’t know the service exists. Likewise, no one will come if they don’t know how to use the service or how the service can benefit them.

In 2007, the staff at Bryant University began to talk about implementing a text reference service at the Douglas and Judith Krupp University Library. After reviewing the options available at that time, including the text reference service Altarama, we decided to keep it simple. Bryant University has a pre-established relationship with Verizon that provided us with an inexpensive cellular phone with a QWERTY keyboard. We chose a plan with the lowest monthly calling minutes possible and about 200 text messages per month. Our total expense to implement the texting service was \$340. The service now costs about \$240 per year.

Our staff appreciates the physicality of a phone, as opposed to a virtual service, and it was easy to train everyone on staff how to use it. Most are already comfortable with cell phones. We chose a flip-top phone, the LG enV, to maximize screen space while retaining a physical keyboard. We have since upgraded to an Android smartphone, the Motorola Droid, and again chose to keep a physical keyboard. A service like Google Voice, formerly Grand Central, is another way to add SMS to a library's list of offered services. Google Voice enables users to send free SMS messages using a computer. If you use a phone, standard messaging rates for your service still apply. Google Voice is quick, cost effective, and easy—now that an invite is no longer required. At Bryant University Library, we currently use a cell phone service, complimented with Google Voice. Google Voice calls can be forwarded to our other line and to email addresses to ensure that we do not miss a message. At this time, we use Google Voice primarily to initiate texts. It is the perfect tool to copy and paste call numbers from the library catalog to send to patrons. Bryant is also experimenting with augmenting our Google Voice service with GVMax, a free web service that can send Google Voice notifications via Instant Messenger, email, SMS and more. Since we use Meebo for our Chat reference, GVMax could push incoming SMS messages to the Meebo client, making it even easier for our librarians to respond to a text reference question.

Google Voice features a widget that enables visitors to a web page to call a Google Voice number without dialing. The widget is interesting, but a widget with alternative functionality would be better for libraries. In our academic library, phone calls from our patrons are rare, unless they're calling to see if we're open. Instead of a phone call, I wish that there was a Google Voice widget that would enable visitors on a web page to send a text message. Ideally, the widget would allow a user to enter a cell phone number with SMS service. Responses from the librarian would be forwarded to the user's text messaging service. The user would be able to take the conversation with them and the library's Google Voice telephone number would remain in the user's call history once a librarian responds. It would make it that much easier for the user to save the library's telephone number for future reference queries. Widgets, such as the one imagined above or the Meebo widget popular at many libraries, are not only useful, they also serve to advertise a library's services to compensate for the valuable screen real estate that they inhabit on a web page.

In addition to widgets, there are other ways to advertise online without spending a penny:

- Your web site (of course) – Advertise and promote the variety of services available at your library on your home page and any other pages relevant to the services in question.
- Social Media – Blogs (Internal and External), Twitter, Facebook, Foursquare, etc. The landscape of social media is a constant ebb and flow. Pay attention to your users – where are they pointing their mobile devices? You should be there too.

Of course, we advertise offline too. You can find information all about us, how to contact us, and what we do on:

- Paper – We put a simple box with our contact information on the bottom of handouts, pathfinders, brochures, and notepads. The notepads are particularly cool. They are made by

hand by the Copy Center at Bryant University using new or recycled computer paper. We use them whenever we need to write something down for people to ensure that they can contact us again quickly and easily.

- E-mail signatures
- Library newsletter – Our newsletter is circulated by email to the entire campus. Paper copies in color are delivered to some offices and are on display in the library at public desks.
- Cards – Everybody has them, but we have two kinds:
 - Business Cards – All Bryant library employees carry traditional business cards. Part-time employees have generic cards where they can write their name. Although the Bryant business cards are standard issue, our clientele are not. We added a standard Avery label sticker on the back of our business cards to customize them and highlight the services that we want to promote and those that our clientele think are important. Our students are much more likely to use IM than our fax number —and many of our colleagues too.
 - Moo MiniCards – Moo MiniCards are small cards, about half the size of a traditional business card, with a photo or design on one side and text on the other. You can customize Minicards with your own design or use Moo’s ready-made designs. The MiniCards are yet another way to expand advertising— students think they look “cool” and they attract attention. Since each design can be different, Moo MiniCards look colorful and fun spread out on a public desk or on tables when we are roving, like a rainbow. If punch a small hole in the end of a MiniCard, you can add them to a keychain with a small ring or transform them into a bookmark by adding a tassel.

- **AxisTV Signage**— Flat screen televisions scattered throughout campus provide dynamic, “just in time” advertising. AxisTV’s digital signs can be programmed to display bulletins, tickers, audio, and video. Creating new content is as easy as making a new Powerpoint slide. At Bryant University, we currently have a total of 13 screens, plus one cable TV channel displaying AxisTV content. Each screen is fed from five different players and each player serves up unique content. For example, the library has its own player and we have two screens— one next to the reference desk and one by the front door of the library. AxisTV is easily recreated on a smaller scale – just run a Powerpoint presentation on an old computer. There are also many free software applications that can display RSS or Twitter feeds as a screen saver.
- **QR Codes**— The library has begun to use QR Codes or 2D barcodes as a way to enable users to quickly access our web pages using their mobile phones. We display codes on AxisTV and in paper advertising. We have tied the codes into our “Ask a Librarian” campaign as a way to educate our users about how to use QR codes.
- **Tear-off Flyers**— We added tear-off slips at the bottom of paper advertisements with the “Text a Librarian” telephone number. We post these simple and popular advertisements on bulletin boards and in rest rooms across campus.
- **Informal advertising** – We publicize services through library tours, those given internally by our staff as well as external tours given by the Admissions department. Every year a librarian trains the tour guides on campus. It is a great opportunity to reach incoming students and parents, as well as the tour guides themselves. We advertise our services during information literacy instruction sessions, especially to the “Foundations for Learning” classes, a first-year experience class. Many first-year students will not be doing research at the time of their first interaction with a librarian. While the details about how to do research may fade from their inundated

brains, we want them to remember the services that we offer, that reference librarians are friendly, and that we will be there to help them when they do need us.

- Promotions— From time to time, when special events or a surplus in the budget allow, we invest in promotional items such as pens, magnets, decals, or even can coolers. These promotional items serve as reminders or visual cues and are usually designed for a particular target market, from students to potential library donors.

From our home page to the ladies' room, we try to think about advertising everywhere our patrons are. One student told me, "Most students don't know what clubs are on campus, but everyone knows that they can text a librarian."

They say that the first impression is everything. Advertisements begin as an introduction, the prelude to a potential relationship. The service that users actually receive at the library is the real test. Did the service meet a user's expectations? Was the outcome what the user needed? Once a user has had an opportunity to try the services available at a library, advertisements become a reminder. It is hard for people to abandon what they know, what they are familiar with, and what is habit. Google is easy and many students may be more comfortable asking Mom. As librarians, we need to get them out of that rut. An advertisement may help to jumpstart their memory to recall how easy text services can be and how a librarian may help.

Companies such as Cold Stone Creamery, Pfizer, and Benjamin Moore all give away free samples of their product for promotional purposes. Each offers consumers a trial of its brand experience, confident that once a consumer tries its product the consumer will be back for more. Cold Stone Creamery offers free tastes of ice cream to ensure that you'll be happy with the flavor that you pick. Pfizer gives free drug samples, as well as clinical data and other marketing boons to your doctor in hopes that that information (and your doctor's influence) will be passed on to you. You can take home as many paint

chips as you can carry from Benjamin Moore, but you can also buy a small pot of paint for a nominal fee. The sample encourages DIY decorators to paint a small patch of wall before they waste a day making a garish mistake. It is easy to see how samples may be advantageous to companies that sell a product, but how might this apply to libraries that already give their product away for free? How do you bottle the library experience?

Although there is no monetary cost associated with most library services, our users' time is just as valuable. The ability to try something makes doing easier. Patrons can try without fear. It is human nature to be a little afraid of new things. Often people prefer to do what they know, thinking that it is easier, even if they get poor or inconsistent results, and even if it takes longer. Think Google. There is an ancient Chinese proverb that states, "I hear, and I forget. I see, and I remember. I do, and I understand." When practice is added, learning is reinforced. Active learning is an instructional approach that encourages learner interaction and involvement. John Dewey was among the first to propose that experience plays an essential role in learning, ensuring that learners understand and retain knowledge.²

In the children's classic book *Caps for Sale*, Esphyr Slobodkina writes about a sleeping peddler whose caps are stolen by monkeys in a tree.³ When the peddler wakes and discovers his hats are missing, he asks, he yells, he shakes his fist at the monkeys, but they do not return the hats. The caps are returned only when the peddler throws the only cap he has left to the ground in frustration. When he throws his cap down, the monkeys do too. We are much more likely to try something, when we have witnessed positive results from the action. We learn by example and from doing. In the development of sociocultural theory, Vygotsky establishes the significance of "conscious understanding" in a learning environment and describes the value of conscious imitation, where a learner's understanding is influenced by his or her perception of different elements and their relationship to one another.⁴ Both of these learning theories are at work when libraries present advertising and learning activities and

processes in a relevant, social context. This strategy has worked for us in the past with our Meebo instant messaging service.

Meebo is a free web-based instant messaging (IM) program that supports multiple IM services, including AIM, Facebook Chat, Google Talk, NET Messenger Service, Yahoo! and more. Meebo also features an anonymous widget that can be added to any web page. The Bryant University Library web site includes a Meebo widget in several places, including the library home page, the “Ask a Librarian” page, and subject guide pages. We also include a Meebo widget on external web sites that relate to library content, such as Facebook and Blackboard. The Meebo widget allows students to ask a reference question anonymously, but most importantly they can ask us a question without logging into their own IM. That’s how we sell it to them. When our students have a question for a librarian, they are usually studying. When you are studying you may not want to be bothered by your friends. Meebo allows our users to IM a librarian without letting their friends know that they are online. It also sells itself by its convenient location. It’s already on and it lives where they are. Users don’t have to open another program or click on a pop up window.

When we began introducing and showing students how to use the Meebo widget in class, our statistics began to rise and they keep rising. We don’t just point to the widget, we type in a question or a greeting to the librarian on duty and wait for a response while we continue to describe the service. When students see the librarian respond, there is a collective, audible acknowledgement that indicates both understanding and excitement. It works. The popularity of Meebo is huge—the number of questions has more than doubled in one year. We do not keep detailed user statistics, but librarians who field Meebo questions believe that anonymous users outnumber those asking questions from their own IM accounts by nearly two to one.

It is easy to translate this same strategy for text messaging. In instruction classes, students should be urged to enter the text reference number in class. It can also become an assessment strategy—students can text a question that they still have after the end of an instruction session. After the session, it would be important for the library to answer every question seriously. At the reference desk, librarians can respond to students and follow up with research requests by sending students text messages. Poll Everywhere (www.polleverywhere.com) is an easy-to-use text message voting application that is free for up to 32 users. It can be used with any live audience – in a classroom, discussion group, or presentations. People vote by sending text messages or using Twitter to options displayed on-screen. The poll updates in real time as voting results appear and the poll can be embedded within a presentation or a web page. Poll Everywhere is a great excuse for people take their cell phones out and also a way to reinforce the cell phone/library connection. At Bryant, students enjoy it, raving “It is like a game show” and “It is like American idol.” It makes instruction sessions dynamic and encourages increased participation.

Henry Ford, the founder of the Ford Motor Company, is reported to have said, “If I had asked my customers what they wanted, they would have said a faster horse.” Customers aren’t right if they do not know that what they want exists or is even possible. In a blog post entitled, “Apple’s Secret? It Tells Us What We Should Love,” Roberto Verganti writes about the iPad and Apple’s approach to innovation. Led by Steve Jobs, Apple doesn’t innovate based on what consumers want; they envision the ideal and then wait to see if consumers are ready.⁵ At our university, students want Google. Do we give them what they want, or do we teach them how to use something better? We can’t wait for our users to demand services – we have to be one step ahead of them and be ready to fill the gap.

Bryant University officially launched the “Text a Librarian” service at the Douglas and Judith Krupp Library in October 2007. Since that time, the numbers have been climbing steadily. Text messaging

enhances the quality of our outreach to our users. The number of total reference inquiries continues to rise at Bryant University. We believe that advertising is a way to get and keep our customers. When people like something, they recommend it to their friends. By winning one customer, you win his or her friends and your brand spreads. In essence, advertising is like a game of “Go Fish” where you collect as many ranks (customers) as you can. You win the game by collecting them all.

NOTES

1. *Field of Dreams*, DVD, directed by Phil Alden Robinson (1989; Los Angeles, CA: Universal Studios, 2004).
2. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Macmillan, 1938).
3. Esphyr Slobodkina, *Caps for Sale. A Tale of a Peddler, a Monkey and Their Monkey Business* (New York: Scholastic Books, 1973).
4. L. S. Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, trans. Alex Kozulin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986).
5. Roberto Verganti, January 28, 2010, “Apple’s secret? It tells us what we should love” *The Conversation*, accessed May 30, 2010, http://blogs.hbr.org/cs/2010/01/how_apple_innovates_by_telling.html.