

# Mobile in the Library

Today's library patrons most likely have smartphones. In your building, someone will use their phone to look up a library book to get the call number on their smartphone's screen instead of writing it on a scrap of paper.

Another patron might send a text message while looking for a DVD for their kid's birthday party: "Do we want *Toy Story 4* or *SpongeBob*?"

Your patrons could be doing any number of things on their smartphones. How should the library interact with a person who is in your building but who is also mobile-focused? This chapter will cover how patron use of mobile technology has changed; some basic mobile technology needs—including adequate power, Wi-Fi, and comfortable furniture; ways to help patrons charge their devices; and ways to promote mobile services in the building. I will also share some fun ways to connect patrons to mobile promotions, including social media connections and hashtag signs.

## Patron Use of Mobile Technology in the Library Has Changed

As more library patrons enter the library building with their phone in hand, libraries need to alter our approach for connecting with and helping these mobile device users. That's a big shift.

Some libraries have been pretty draconian about phone use in the library, even asking patrons to turn their phones off when in the library. For the most part, the people using their mobile devices weren't actually talking; they were texting (which is pretty quiet). Nonetheless, those patrons would be asked to put their phones away.

Some people will also, while looking for a book (figure 2.1), take a photo of other books they might be interested in reading. Then they will look up a book review of the book to see if it's something they want to check out. I've certainly done this in libraries, and



**Figure 2.1**  
Using your smartphone inside the library

I've also done it in bookstores.

That type of mobile phone use—texting, not talking—is a huge shift from the cell phones of old to today's multifaceted smartphones. In today's mobile-focused world, you don't usually talk to people using your phone (though it's certainly an option). Instead, you type—with a text message or a Facebook Message. If you want to share with a larger group of people, you might do that using a social media post. If you

decide to talk, you might also be videoconferencing, so you can see the person while you talk.

Or if you're talking, you might not be talking to an actual person. You might be talking to a virtual assistant, such as Apple Siri, Amazon Alexa, or Google Assistant.

But your library isn't like that, you say. Your library is a phone-friendly library. That's great! So, how's your Wi-Fi signal? If you have bad Wi-Fi access in your library building, I'm not sure I'd say your building is a phone-friendly one. And that might not be your fault—many libraries aren't new buildings. Some older library buildings were built with thick walls, basements, and other things that can easily interfere with a cell phone signal.

Here's my point—a mobile device is an important tool for our patrons to have, even inside the library building. Because of this, our responsibility is to help our patrons be able to comfortably use their favorite mobile devices while they are visiting the library. We want that customer mobile experience to be a good one, whether it's outside or inside the library.

## Basic Mobile Technology Needs in the Library

Hopefully, it's pretty obvious at this point that your customers will bring their mobile devices into the building with them. They might even use those devices to enhance their experience at the library.

What are you doing to help the mobile-focused part of a customer's library visit be a positive one? Here are some things to think about and improve for your mobile-focused customers.

### Mobile Basics

There are some things that you can and should provide that I would call mobile basics. These are things that all mobile users will need—both experienced and novice users.

These mobile basics include the following:

- power
- great Wi-Fi
- comfortable seating options

*Power:* Your customers will probably need to charge their devices, especially if they use them a lot. Make sure to provide multiple ways for customers to charge their mobile devices at the point of need. More on this in a second.

*Great Wi-Fi:* I've already mentioned Wi-Fi a couple of times. But it's important, so I'll mention it again! Most likely, the normal cell phone signal won't be

that great. Thankfully, you can provide a good Wi-Fi internet signal that will provide connectivity inside the building.

That Wi-Fi signal should be fast—24mb at a bare minimum; faster is better! It should be fast enough to do all the normal web and mobile app activities with no issues (e.g., Facebook, YouTube, games, etc.).

You should also have a robust signal that does not slow down with a lot of simultaneous use. For example, some libraries' internet still slows down in the afternoons when the kids get out of school and descend on the library. If that's the case, there's a simple solution. You need to budget for better bandwidth. I know—that costs money that you might not have. However, this is important in today's mobile-focused society. So if possible, work on setting aside money, forgo another project, or work toward being able to budget for an upgrade to your in-house Wi-Fi service.

If you need to convince a higher-up that an upgrade is needed, start by gathering information such as increased usage stats, the number of people in the building, cell phone connectivity issues, customer stories, and customer complaints. Use that information to help build an argument for updated internet.

*Comfortable seating options:* Have you ever needed to sit for a long time, doing something on a laptop or a phone? Most likely you have. Did you ever have to do it in an uncomfortable chair? Probably so.

Guess what? Those old, solid, dependable oak chairs that your library has had forever are not always all that comfortable to sit on for long periods of time.

But in today's mobile-focused world, we want to offer people the option to hang out at the library if they want to. These people might want to use the library's Wi-Fi to run their startup business or to write that paper for school—or just level up in their favorite game. All of these activities are things that a library patron might find important to do while they are visiting the library.

This is easy to fix. Start researching more comfortable seating options and arrangements. There are some modern comfortable seating options with flip-up tables and USB plug options, which is great.

If people want to hang out together, make sure this furniture is movable! An impromptu study group or group project is so much easier when you can work (and sit, and power up) together.

## Helping Customers Recharge

Adequate and easy-to-access power is also important in today's mobile-focused world. A few years ago, I discovered that my library did not have adequate power options for customers. I was walking around the building and noticed something interesting. At the time, we had these little wooden tables with lamps



**Figure 2.2**  
USB outlet installed on a table



**Figure 2.3**  
Charging station at the library

attached to the table. The lamps were supposed to be plugged into the wall.

Guess what? Almost all of the lamps were unplugged. Why? Because people with mobile devices were sitting in the chairs by the tables. They needed to recharge their devices, so they unplugged the lamps and plugged in their devices. And then forgot to plug the lamps back in when they were done.

Thankfully, there are easy ways to offer power and charging stations in the library. For starters, your library probably has a variety of normal electrical outlets throughout the building. If that's all you have—great! Don't block them. Rearrange library furniture so power outlets are easy to access.

If you have tables pushed up against the walls and there are power outlets under the tables, simply attach a power bar under the table (you might have seen this at some airports). That way, anyone sitting at or around the tables will be able to charge up their devices without having to wiggle themselves under the table to reach the power outlets.

My library retrofitted some of our older tables with pop-up power and USB outlets (figure 2.2). So instead of just having a table, we now have tables with a couple of power outlets in the middle of the table.

You can go one step further than easy access to power outlets and can set up mobile charging stations. There are many different types of charging stations. My library has two types. We have a couple of those charging stations on a stand (figure 2.3). They offer different mobile device cables. That works great in a shared space or an area where people might gather. We have placed those in our teen room, in a common seating area, and by a comfortable seating area in the Kids Library, by our aquarium. There are toddler toys in that part of the building, and parents and kids like to hang out in that space. The parents talk, the kids play, and their devices get recharged.



**Figure 2.4**  
Power outlet pole

We also have a power outlet charging station. It's basically a short pole that stands upright with six power outlets on it (figure 2.4). We have it by a table. I've seen these deployed in a library's common seating or gathering area and thought it was a fabulous idea. Often people have power adapters with them—so they might not need a mobile phone cable, but just easy access to a power outlet.

Some libraries offer portable battery chargers that can be checked out at a service desk. One step up from that is Temple University's Battery Share service. Here's what Temple says about its Battery Share service:

Temple Center City now has a kiosk containing 24 portable battery units called power banks for charging your laptop or mobile devices. As a student, you can borrow a power bank and bring it to your classroom. After class, you can then return the power bank to the kiosk. This service is free, and the borrowing period is up to five hours, depending on when the building closes. Note: Each power bank includes a standard three-prong outlet and USB ports, but does not include the cables that connect to your devices. So you make sure to please bring your own.<sup>1</sup>

Make sure that your customers can use their mobile devices in your building. Also make sure that they can leave the library 100 percent powered up!

## Promoting Mobile Services in the Building

You have decided that patrons are welcome to use smartphones in the building. You have purchased comfortable seating, and you have great Wi-Fi. Now, how can you promote your mobile offerings to your mobile-focused library customers? There are many ways to do this. Here are some places to start.

**Signs:** Start by simply hanging signs on the walls! Use simple signage to point customers to your digital services, and place these signs and posters in strategic places. For example, if your library has an audiobook collection, place signs for Hoopla's and OverDrive's digital audiobook collections close to the physical audiobooks. Do the same thing with Hoopla and DVD videos.

You could add some signs pointing to OverDrive by the mystery collection and add some signage about Freegal close to the music CD collection. Adding signs that point to your digital collections can help promote these digital collections to patrons who are already using the physical versions of the collection.

Think about the signs you see in a department store and consider similar signage. Have you seen signs that say something like "More items can be found at mystore.com"? These signs are a good reminder that more colors and sizes are offered online.

A library can use the same strategy. At any given time, a large part of your collection is checked out. Remind people that they don't have to visit that same shelf five times to get the next book in a series. Instead, they can just go to your website and put the



**Figure 2.5**  
QR code on a sign at the library

book on hold. This is important because the only way to access your library's full collection is online.

**QR codes:** QR codes are coming back into vogue, and this time around they are easier to use. Modern smartphone camera apps automatically read a QR code and direct the user to a website for more information, so no secondary app is needed.

My library is using QR codes on signs in the building (figure 2.5), so you can quickly find more information about some of our new services, such as our new curbside pickup service. Just aim your phone at the QR code, and you are immediately presented with the page pointing to information about the library service.

Because of the current COVID-19 pandemic, we have mobile-focused signs outside the building as well. Our Wi-Fi signal stretches outside the building and is accessible from 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. every day. We communicate this to our customers via a sign (figure 2.6). We also share where to park in order to access the strongest signal. That way, people can easily socially distance in our parking lot and connect to the things they need through a strong Wi-Fi signal provided by the library.

Library staff is an important part of these newer mobile-focused services. If your staff doesn't know how to connect to Wi-Fi on different types of devices

or how to download and use a mobile app for your library's digital content, they won't be able to provide good customer service to your library patrons.

It's relatively easy to help your staff learn mobile-focused services through staff training initiatives. Make sure to train your library's staff on everything that you offer to your mobile customers. Buy a smartphone or two if needed. Train staff on the basics of different mobile OSs (operating systems), show them how to download mobile apps (and what app stores to use) and how to connect different types of devices to your library's Wi-Fi system.

While you're at it, go one step further with staff and teach them how to gently "upsell" the library. According to Wikipedia:

Upselling is a sales technique where a seller invites the customer to purchase more expensive items, upgrades, or other add-ons to generate more revenue. While it usually involves marketing more profitable services or products, it can be simply exposing the customer to other options that were perhaps not considered (A different technique is cross-selling in which a seller tries to sell something else). In practice, large businesses usually combine upselling and cross-selling to maximize revenue.<sup>2</sup>

Obviously, in a library we're not trying to sell a customer more expensive products. But we can do a type of upselling by simply sharing other similar services with our customers. For example, when customers check items out at the circulation desk, circulation staff can "upsell" by letting customers know about the library's new mobile app for catalog access and showing them how to download the app. Or when librarians help customers find books on the shelf, they can share information about the Libby e-book mobile app.

Upselling is a simple tweak to a library's customer service that can add a lot of mobile traffic through simple conversations about a library's digital services. If staff members have a smartphone or tablet with them, they can even show the customer where to download the app and demonstrate how it works.

## Mobile Promotions in the Building

We can have a lot of fun with customers in the building if they have their mobile devices with them by offering selfie-focused promotions that use a mobile phone camera, hashtags, and social media. Here are some examples.

### Selfie Stations

Set up some creative selfie stations in your building. My library has set up an iPad with a selfie station app



**Figure 2.6**  
Best Wi-Fi sign in the library's parking lot

on a stand, usually connected to an event at the library (such as summer reading). We'll have fun backdrops people can use and accessories to hold for the photo. The app we use has different filters and backgrounds, so it makes it fun to take a picture of yourself and your friends. After taking the photo, patrons can share the photo via e-mail or text message. From there, they can share the photo on social media.

If you don't have a selfie station, you can skip that part and simply set up a fun backdrop and provide props. Then direct people to take photos and share them to social media.

### Hashtags for Library Selfies

When you use selfie stations, make sure to have signs directing customers to use a specific hashtag when they post their photos to social media. In this way, when someone posts their photo to Instagram or Facebook, everyone will be able to see the photo by clicking on the hashtag. It's a fun, free way to get some customer-created library promotion of an event.

The city of Topeka, Kansas (where I live), has gone a step further with hashtags. A local nonprofit organization, Greater Topeka Partnership, has created a large physical version of a hashtag (#topcity) that it

carts around the city. People take photos of themselves and others with the hashtag and share it. It's a way to promote living in Topeka.

Your library might also have what I call "Instagram-able areas" of the library. In my library, we have a few Instagram-able areas: our aquarium is one. You can get a selfie with a fish! Our Kids Library is pretty cool, with large murals, boats to sit in, and even some dinosaur legs (yes, we have dinosaur legs). Put some hashtag signs up by these areas in the library. Encourage people to snap photos of themselves and their kids and share them to social media.

Hashtags and selfies in the library are great ways to help patrons share the fun of visiting the library. As

an added bonus, you can (with permission) re-share those photos and videos on your library's social media channels. It's a great way to capture authentic use of your library building, which people love seeing.

## Notes

1. "Battery Share," Temple University Information Technology Services, accessed September 9, 2020, <https://its.temple.edu/battery-share>.
2. Wikipedia, s.v. "Upselling," last updated August 18, 2020, <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Upselling>.