Using Mobile Tools for Advocacy

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Abstract

Libraries’ focus on mobile devices as information portals (e.g. text reference and mobile websites) and productivity tools (e.g. calendars and documents) has caused them to overlook a more subtle opportunity. Smartphones and tablets are ideal for advocacy and organizational storytelling, which are increasingly important functions of libraries. This article discusses advocacy and four main categories of applications, more commonly known as apps, to support it: apps for photos and videos, personal databases, concept maps, and business intelligence. The objective of this paper is to inspire others to experiment with these tools and apply them to their advocacy efforts.

KEYWORDS mobile, mobile device, advocacy, smartphone, tablet, application, app, library

Introduction

Librarians often focus on using mobile devices to deliver just-in-time services to library users at their point of need. Yet, they frequently miss those same opportunities to deliver powerful just-in-time information about their libraries to administrators, peers, users, and other key stakeholders. In today’s difficult economic climate, this is not a chance libraries can afford to pass up.
Mobile devices are thought of as service delivery tools, giving a method of reaching library users in ways that were not possible in the past, such as text reference (Cole and Krkoska 2011; Stahr 2011) and a mobile web presence (Connolly, Cosgrave and Krkoska, 2011; Haefele 2011; Ryan 2011). They are also thought of as tools to make librarians and staff more productive, for example, using Quick Response (QR) codes for shelf reading (http://andymorton.org/2011/03/a-shelf-reading-android-app). However, librarians also need to think of mobile devices in a third way: as a tool to tell the library’s story to stakeholders. This empowers anyone with a smartphone or tablet, from front line staff to upper administration, to be a library advocate.

This paper will briefly discuss advocacy and describe mobile applications that can be used to support different types of advocacy efforts. While this paper will focus primarily on apps for the iPad and iPhone, many of the applications and services discussed in depth are available or have analogs on other platforms as well. Librarians should not wait to give a formal report to advocate for users and funding; they should leverage mobile tools to take advantage of informal or casual times with stakeholders, such as when riding in the elevator or waiting in line, to advocate for the library.

Advocacy

Advocacy is storytelling to reach a goal or objective, and it is increasingly a focused, frontline activity in many libraries (Alire 2010, 90). While often not directly expressed, advocacy is an underlying function of many librarians’ routine activities such as library tours. Whether explicit or implicit, advocacy accomplishes the same broad objective, sharing the value or message of the library with an audience in terms they understand. Mobile devices are the ideal advocacy platforms for all kinds of frontline organizational storytelling. They are there at the
point and time of need. They are multimodal. They promote authenticity. They are interactive, and, at least for now, they are novel.

Writing about organizational storytelling, Kate Marek (2011) lists several things to do: “Listen to those around you … be authentic, consider the audience, and consider your goals” (75-76). Librarians need to think about their traditional advocacy efforts, how they already tell their library’s stories, and what barriers they face in telling their stories. This information can cause them to rethink and retool their presentations to fit the target audiences for mobile advocacy efforts. Often, librarians are so used to communicating to their traditional audience, such as library users and staff, that they forget that the population outside those groups might not share the same knowledge, experience, or values.

Libraries might hesitate to implement mobile tools for advocacy work citing concerns for technical skills required to use them or their cost. However, using an Android, iPhone, iPad, other smartphone, or tablet computer requires no special programming or technical expertise. As for cost, the most recent models of mobile tools are not required, allowing for considerable flexibility in purchasing. Both smartphones and tablets work well although the larger screen of a tablet is sometimes more convenient. The key is to know what advocacy goals to meet, what stories to tell to whom, and what mobile applications best help tell those stories. Other issues, such as data security and data storage, must be considered and will influence where the data is stored.

There are several types of applications that will help organize and prepare information for advocacy. They fall into four different categories, which are ranked from requiring the least planning to the most planning: visual apps, personal databases, concept mapping apps, and business intelligence apps.
Visuals: Images and Videos

Images and videos are powerful visual tools. It can be argued that they are the most natural to use; everyone has photo collections and videos they use to store their memories. For libraries they put a face and voice to many requests, compliments, and otherwise generic raw data. Mobile devices can provide a myriad of opportunities to show the pictures and videos that support advocacy efforts.

Most mobile devices come with native, or built-in, apps such as photo galleries (http://www.apple.com/ipad/built-in-apps/photos.html) and video storage (http://www.apple.com/ipad/built-in-apps/videos.html). These are great places to store visuals of recent library events, testimonials, examples of common library problems, and assessments. Patron-produced visuals are even more impactful for advocacy because of their authenticity. For example, a candid video of patrons expressing their library likes and dislikes is a far better advocacy tool than a scripted publicity production.

These visuals can become exponentially more influential if they are posted on YouTube (http://www.google.com/mobile/youtube) or Flickr (http://mobile.yahoo.com/flickr) where they can be searched, shared, and stored. This is an ideal option when dealing with a smartphone or tablet with limited storage as both of these services and many others have dedicated mobile apps.

In spite of these conveniences, there are two issues to keep in mind when posting images online: privacy and intended audience. Some patrons have greater privacy concerns, so always get permission before making images publicly available. Also, there are some visuals that could be very valuable to show administrators to advocate for funding but are not intended for a general audience. For example, images of overflowing trashcans or dirty public toilets could be quite effective when advocating for more custodial staff. This is not information that a library...
wants to make part of their public image. In these cases, a stash of sensitive photos or videos should be stored on the device in a native video app.

Personal Databases

As librarians, interaction with databases in one form or another is an inescapable part of daily life. Why not always carry a small database with key information for advocating to administrators or others? This approach can be particularly valuable when there are stakeholders that have a quantitative focus. A relational database allows sorting of information as it fits the discussion, so relatively little advanced planning is required to use this tool for advocacy. It is simply necessary to know what datasets are going to be interesting and relevant to the audience and to load them onto the device. There are many applications that can serve well in that capacity. Three will be discussed in this section. Two are traditional, relational databases, and one is a database of a newer, evolving variety.

Bento (http://itunes.apple.com/us/app/bento/id314638416?mt=8) for iPad or iPhone is a personal database for mobile devices. It works with personal database software for Mac computers, also called Bento (http://www.filemaker.com/products/bento/mac.html). Bento has many pre-designed templates for different libraries, which is Bento’s term for an individual database. Customizing records and fields is quick and easy, allowing for great flexibility. This app is a good solution for those who want to be able to easily synchronize their mobile device with more powerful desktop software. It is also ideal for those who want to have their data contained within a device, rather than stored on a network or on virtual servers on the internet, which also known as “the cloud” (Hayes 2008). This application has two potential drawbacks. First, while the mobile software can stand alone, it is really intended as companion software to...
the desktop version, adding to the overall expense of the system. Second, Bento works with Mac platforms only.

HanDBase (http://www.ddhsoftwre.com/handbase.html) is among the most platform-independent of mobile databases. It works with iPhone, iPad, Android, Blackberry, Palm, and Symbian devices as well as having desktop options for Windows and Mac operating systems. On the HanDBase website, they also claim to have two thousand database templates available for free. The interface of the software is userable but is not as slick as some of the other database applications. For those concerned about data security, the database is stored on the mobile device, and is not retrieved from the cloud. HanDBase’s storage system can also be a drawback if large databases are paired with devices that have limited memory.

The two database apps already discussed are based on more traditional database models. However, there is a database category whose user base is growing. One of the best-known apps in this category is Evernote (http://www.evernote.com), which offers searchable note-taking tools and can store photos, text, audio recordings, documents, and more. The Evernote app is free and is available on iPhone, iPad, and Android. All of the data put into Evernote is stored in the cloud. This is a factor to consider if sensitive data is being handled. Evernote has both a web-based interface and desktop versions for Windows and Mac. It allows organization of data both in “notebooks” and by tagging, so it allows flexibility in data-to-project categorizations. For example, a photo of students using a smartboard might be put in a finals week notebook, an organized collection based on an event. That image could also be tagged as “smartboard,” making it findable for discussions that encompass all event and project notebooks. Evernote is a good choice for piloting an advocacy database. It is free as long the user stay under the monthly
Concept Maps

Concept mapping apps are also an extremely valuable way of gathering and organizing information for advocacy. Concept mapping is a way of visualizing and capturing brainstorming. It can show compelling relationships between seemingly disparate thoughts, items, people, and more. Concept mapping applications can contain videos, photos, text, idea groupings, and drawings within a digital dossier or scrapbook.

It takes more effort to create a concept map than it does to create a simple database because all the main points and documentation must be created and arranged in advance. The difference in effort required is like that between creating a simple photo packet as opposed to an annotated scrapbook. The power of the storytelling is also greater because concept mapping allows clearer narratives and connections. There are two examples of concept mapping applications that will be discussed: Corkulous and Popplet.

Corkulous (http://www.appigo.com/corkulous) is best compared to an endless bulletin board. Librarians can create lists, tack up photos, put up sticky notes, and include links to websites. Bulletin boards can even be created within bulletin boards. This can lead to a bottomless container of information. An example of use might be a bulletin board representing a department. This board might include photos of patrons using services or programs, patron notes or comments, and lists of departmental objectives. Within each of those sections, there could be another bulletin board. When tapped, that board would open and give more information on the topic. Bulletin boards can be nested within other bulletin boards to give even more detail.
One great advantage of Corkulus is that the bulletin boards can be exported in PDF format and emailed to others. That means it is not only a discussion aid but also a handout available to email to the stakeholder. It would act as a reminder of the discussion. A possible drawback of Corkulous is its appearance; it looks just like a cork bulletin board, which may be too casual for some audiences.

Popplet (http://www.popplet.com) is another concept mapping application. It looks more polished than Corkulous, and unlike Corkulous, it has the benefit of an online interface as well as a mobile application. It is a slick, modern version of a traditional mind map with connecting lines rather than just groupings on a board. Photos, text, different levels of notes, shared notes, and video are all able to be embedded in the Popplet display.

Another useful feature of Popplet, if dealing with an early version of the iPad or iPhone, is that one can use a VGA adaptor to connect the device to a projector and display the images on a screen. This is a valuable function if there is an opportunity for an impromptu presentation. Unlike Corkulus, Popplet uses cloud storage for its data. In the rare event that its servers are down, data may be inaccessible, as happened to the consternation of some users earlier this year (http://www.popplet.com/about/letter).

Business Intelligence

Business intelligence apps are visual data comparison dashboards. They excel at presenting quantitative data drawn from spreadsheets. When working with administrators who have a strong preference for numbers and charts, this might be the best mobile advocacy platform. They are not suitable for presenting purely qualitative data. However, they can be formidable tools, but their use requires planning and preparation. They generally have several set formats they display data in and are inflexible beyond those styles. The spreadsheets that are
entered into them for rendering must be formatted strictly according to the application’s requirements. On the other hand, once the data are entered into them, qualitative data become literally tangible. Side-by-side pie-charts can be spun around for comparison, and line graphs can be drilled into for detail with a few taps of a finger. Because of the complexity of business intelligence applications, this section will focus on only one free app, Roambi (http://www.roambi.com).

The data entered into Roambi must be uploaded onto its website for formatting before becoming available in the app. Data currently can be displayed in one of seven different views: Blink, Cardex, CataList, Elements, PieView, SuperList, and Trends. All of the views are designed for different types of data and/or comparisons. For example, if comparing circulation data at different branch libraries over time, CataList would be useful because it shows line graphs stacked above each other in a list format. CataList might also be useful for comparing peer library data. If analyzing student demographic data about different departments on campus, PieView would be the better choice. New data views are added periodically. There are also formatting and user help available. Roambi on download comes with sample datasets in each view. This is very helpful for getting ideas on how certain views would best fit data and presentation needs.

Currently Roambi is available only for the iPhone and iPad, but there are many other business intelligence apps available. As with every mobile application type, they are proliferating. Be aware that business intelligence apps in particular seem to vary considerably in appearance and layout. For those wanting to learn more about a business intelligence app that works on various devices, such as Android and Blackberry, QlikView
(http://www.qlikview.com/us/explore/products/qv-for-mobile) is an app available on those platforms.

Conclusion

There are many types of mobile apps enabling frontline advocacy. Visual data can be presented on native photo and video apps or through apps that use cloud storage such as Flickr or YouTube. Personal databases can hold many types of data, whether relational, like Bento and HanDBase, or notebook-like, such as Evernote. Concept mapping applications, of which Corkulous and Popplet are examples, help make relationships and connections clear. Business Intelligence apps, like Roambi and QlikView, require planning but make quantitative data touchable and interactive. All of these types of advocacy tools are just a few taps away if you have a mobile device.

With the rise of tablets and smartphones, all library staff can have the opportunity to carry just-in-time, customizable advocacy data. This availability of information was not possible before. As with all emerging technologies, the numbers of smartphone and tablet tools available are multiplying exponentially as the mobile market matures. Hence, the applications and examples discussed are meant to inspire and spark discussion in libraries. It will be fascinating to see further research and practice in this area grow. The library community looks forward to hearing the results of your mobile advocacy efforts.
References


DDH Software – HanDBase Database Manager for Palm OS Windows Mobile Classic, Standard and Professional, Symbian S60, Blackberry and Apple iPhone iPod touch and iPad


http://www.google.com/mobile/youtube