

Chapter 4

Mobile Applications for Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This chapter will detail the use of mobile applications in libraries. It will begin by briefly exploring the history of mobile application development, its inception, and progress to its relevance and use within libraries as a means of improving access and resource delivery for patrons. The prevalence of mobile devices, both inside and outside of the library, has affected the way individuals locate and use information. Libraries play an essential role in delivering resources to enhance the way users retrieve information, and therefore it is important to facilitate learning and scholarship through meaningful experiences in a variety of areas and mediums. A mobile application, not just a mobile-friendly website, can appeal to an increasingly digital population of library users in an environment that is both familiar and modern.

INTRODUCTION

Deciding to invest in, and potentially develop, a mobile library application is a tremendous decision, often invoking feelings of both exhilaration and anxiety. Some may question the need for a library application, as well as the decision to spend valuable time and funds developing a mobile presence when monographs, serials, and other resources demand so much of a library's finite budget. However, many librarians would agree that a library's collection means little if it's not easily discovered and accessible. A collection can be expansive, well-rounded, and comprehensive, but if it's not easily searchable, what value does it truly hold for a patron or researcher?

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Every year information technology becomes more sophisticated; search engine algorithms are faster than ever, delivering results at six-tenths of a second. Library technology is forced to keep up with commercial search engines or run the risk of becoming dispensable. Library mobile applications can offer users another, possibly simpler, path to connect them to the information they need. Mobile applications offer a direct connection to users, eliminating navigation barriers and valuable page-loading time, effectively lessening the gap between what's visible, and invisible, in a collection.

But why develop a mobile application? Why isn't a mobile-friendly website enough? The first reason is relatively straightforward: an overwhelming majority of Americans use a smartphone. According to a study by the Pew Research Center (2017), approximately 95% of Americans in 2016 owned a cellphone, with 77% of that share belonging in the smartphone category. The percentage was even higher for Americans aged 18-29, amounting to 92% smartphone ownership. The same study also found that about half of Americans own a tablet computer. So, while a mobile-friendly website is best practice, there is a slight barrier to entry: requiring a user to perform a search for the library's website or enter a URL. This seemingly small barrier has the potential to dissuade patrons from even attempting to access a library website. If they do make it to the website, the site itself may not be compatible with the user's device, which can lead to a frustrating mobile experience. Creating a native library application takes away this barrier, giving users access to what they need in a familiar format. With one tap users can land on a simple, easy-to-use page of library resources, enabling research to start instantly. Without navigational barriers, engagement increases, which can in turn lead to increased circulation and ROI for resources.

While the decision to invest in a mobile library application may be becoming clearer, the choice to develop the application in-house is probably still intimidating. To take on a project of this complexity requires a person or team of people familiar with mobile development in addition to the time and resources required to develop it. It also demands familiarity with user navigation, user experience, and web design. A mobile application should be recognizable, intuitive, and intriguing. Ideally, a user could open an application for the first time and know exactly where to go and what to do in order to reach the information they need. While this may sound overwhelming, there are many steps one can take to ensure a library application meets all of the needs and wants of its users.

This chapter will explore a brief history of mobile applications and its introduction in libraries in order to provide an understanding of the evolution of mobile application development. It will then advance to some of the differences between paid and homegrown library applications, equipping the reader with a basic understanding of the benefits and drawbacks for each. Finally, the chapter will describe the homegrown

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