

Providing Electronic Services Through Readers' Mobile Devices at the Russian State Library for Young Adults

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Abstract:

One of the main features of contemporary life is using mobile devices (smartphones, tablets) everywhere. If a while ago a smartphone revealed a wealthy person or a techno geek, nowadays everyone can afford it. Young people today work with electronic information mostly on their phones and that is why it would be strange if the library did not try to serve them this way using their smartphones and tablets.

The paper is devoted to organization and processing of mailing through emails and SMS, usage of messengers, bot design, implementation of QR-codes, providing equal access to information on all devices, creation of mobile apps, making video content available everywhere.

Keywords: mobile services, remote access, mobile apps, mailing lists, web design

One of the main features of contemporary life is a widespread penetration of mobile devices (smartphones, tablets). If a while ago a smartphone revealed a wealthy person or a technogeek, nowadays almost everyone can afford it. Certainly, these are devices of different price segments but with similar basic technological abilities. In a half of the cases, today's young people work with electronic information on their smartphones. That is why it would be strange if a library did not try to provide users with informational services in this, mobile form, through their own smartphone or tablet.

Email informing

The easiest and the most obvious thing is communication through email. Previously, email configuration on mobile devices was quite difficult, but nowadays having access to email on your smartphone has become a sign of good manners. Our library has several thousands of confirmed emails of users, which we use to inform people that their borrowed books are expired or that they should return books in two days. Mailing of this information is completely automatic: every morning a robot checks books' expiration dates and sends the users corresponding emails.

A slightly different version of our work with emails is monthly mailing of information about upcoming events, interesting things taken place at the library, other news. This practice is supposed to be obvious and was included in business processes long time ago, but still it demands significant accuracy. All emails for mailing on the one hand have to be received in an “honest” (legal) way – users should express their consent to get your materials, and on the other hand, they have to have an option to cancel the mailings – and it should be noted in email.

One more important thing – mailing should not be just a boring press release “black on white”, which in 99% cases goes to a trashcan unread. It should be short but concise, not pretentious and not too familiar, with photos related to the topic. In general, mailing should be organized in a way when a reader can quickly look through it and notice all necessary and important details. Everything should be displayed equally well through email client, through any web browser, and, of course, on the screen of a smartphone.

SMS informing

Using SMS (Short Message Service) is also a convenient way to bring information to a library user.

Now, at the Russian State Library for Young Adults (RSLYA), only personified service data can be sent through SMS – in order to link a user’s library card to the personal account on the website. Besides, planning communication with users through SMS we have to take into consideration that sending these messages in large numbers cannot be free of charge, and these costs should be included in certain projects’ budget.

SMS-service is the most universal and assured way to deliver any kind of information to a subscriber because all phones support this technology and, on the other side, a sender always can get SMS delivery confirmation. Despite that facts, since outgoing SMS are not free of charge yet and are quite limited in terms of transferring content; young (and not only young) library users prefer to use different kinds of messengers (WhatsApp, Messenger, Viber, Telegram, Skype etc.) in everyday life. These messengers provide the audience with more opportunities to communicate and do not imply service fee except for the Internet-traffic payment. Besides, in most cases they are cross platform, i.e. do not depend on an operational system on which a phone works. Thus, we can say that SMS is a primarily channel of interaction between a library and its users and not vice versa.

Messengers as a new word in building communications with users

If the most popular in the world messenger WhatsApp (more than 1,5 billion of active users) cannot offer to its subscribers a full-fledged version for a desktop computer not connected to a smartphone its competitors such as Viber and Telegram did that a long time ago. That is why the most convenient format for direct communication with users in chat, except for widely used online consulting on a website, can be an invitation to ask questions through any services they are comfortable with. It would be preferable to have several messengers because in this case one of the necessary programs is definitely set up on a user’s phone.

An interesting type of work is also using so-called bots on Telegram-messenger. A common principle of their functioning is communicating in an ordinary chat window, although your companion is not a real person, but just a robot, able to answer correctly asked questions. The RSLYA designed such a bot, and now it can:

- show information about upcoming events at the library and latest news;
- display a list of books borrowed by a user and renew them;
- search books in electronic catalog;
- download an electronic library card to a user's phone.

Using wireless networks

Since the current legislation of the Russian Federation prohibits having public Internet access points without user's identification, we added a function of authorization to them. Only those people who have a library card can authorize themselves, and although we perceived this as a negative factor, part of our users had left a "grey zone", registered and finally personalized themselves. It is not a secret that Wi-Fi in a library is not only a way to provide users with free Internet access but a good opportunity to give them full access to library electronic resources on a mobile device as well as they have the same IP-address with the library. In addition, the authorization form let redirect users to these resources in a shortest way and to increase their attendance and usage.

Mobile or full version of the website

Since users access library websites from their mobile devices more and more often, the most important thing is how a webpage is displayed on a screen of a mobile device. There are two options how to solve this task: a special mobile version or a responsive web design of the same website.

There is an argument for a mobile version: it is loading fast, and there should be significant elements for easy finger navigation through pages. Nevertheless, a mobile version is overwhelmingly a truncated version of the website.

The most harmonic and modern approach is, to our mind, using a practice of web design when websites themselves adjust content to a device, which a person uses, i.e. adapt to it. It is obvious that this approach demands more skills from a designer and a web developer, but a result justifies itself because everything on a website is available on any device. On the other side, an information output will be convenient for normal interaction with it.

Mobile apps

One of the important differences between mobile devices and desktop computers is not only a screen size but also a bigger amount of specialized apps, which users set up on their gadgets. Now a library could have come up with a logical idea to design its own app. However, we face many problems in that case scenario: an expensive design, a necessity to create versions for different platforms, a support of updates, and the most important thing – there is no real need for a user to set it up. The reason is – although users set up many programs on their smartphone, most of them are topping charts and have unique functions thanks to which they are staying on phone desktops for years, or they are deleted just after the first opening. It is difficult for a library app to offer a user a really interesting content. Any attempts to build a mini social network of library readers becomes utopian.

I think that a more productive approach would be to promote to users those apps, which the library is subscribed to, receiving them from electronic resources providers. Thereafter, in evaluating of a provider, a factor of presence and quality of a mobile app becomes one of the most important.

So shouldn't a library do anything to take root on a user's smartphone? To my mind, on the contrary. In August 2015, the RSLYA launched the first genuine electronic library card in Russia.

Electronic library card in a Wallet format

The idea is that all iPhones have a built-in program Wallet (previously - Passbook), in which electronic duplicates of cards, passes, coupons, tickets etc. can be stored. This card in case of necessity is displayed on a screen, and you can get a service without showing your plastic card. Cards for Wallet also can be read, saved and reproduced on Android devices.

The RSLYA designed its own version of a library card in a Wallet format and provided all the users with the opportunity to download it from a personal account. On a library card, except for obvious things like a barcode, a photo, name and surname which a librarian needs to lend you books, cardholder will be able to see information on borrowed books and their expiration date, upcoming events, and to receive important announcements on time. Everything is updated automatically through ILS (Integrated Library System) and the library website without user's participation. A card is displayed on a screen when a user approaches the library building. An electronic card is not a substitute for a regular plastic card, but a supplement to it.

Advantages of this approach over creating a separate app are - a price for design is much less; it is easy to set it up on a user's phone, absence of extra elements, conciseness, and usability.

Conclusion

Despite the variety of technologies, which can be used in a today's library, I would like to stress that, first of all, they should solve tasks, which a library sets up for itself for a certain period. Only in this case we can state that the money of founders, sponsors and library itself are not wasted but help to create really demanded and mandatory elements of the library infrastructure.