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Casting A Wider Net with Roving Reference

By Terence K. Huwe

Long ago, before I joined the profession, I paid the San Francisco Public Library a visit, just to check it out. The “Old Main” building was beautiful and quirky, and has since been traded in for a new, really quirky structure of no small fame.

I was browsing the card catalog (read and weep, Nicholson Baker), when I became aware of a reference librarian who was hard at work helping a telephone patron. She unplugged the phone from the information desk and carried it directly to the card catalog. She plugged it into a built-in jack above the card drawers, one of several in the range. She then browsed the catalogue and refined her search, in consultation with the patron. This seemed really powerful to me as an intellectual activity; it had a real impact and saved a lot of time. As this librarian offered outstanding service, she was climbing up the information value chain in the presence of many people, and undoubtedly building good public relations. It was one of those moments that occur where you leave thinking, “librarians are terrific.”

Technology has changed our workdays profoundly, but effective reference and access counsel holds similar challenges to this day. We still need to take reference where it's needed the most, and emphasize the social interactions that add value to our collections. Wireless networking is currently offering public service providers with a compelling opportunity to do just that, enlivening services and extending their reach. This public service challenge impacts developers, or should if it isn't.

My pre-OPAC story illustrates two of the most powerful roles we can play even more effectively with wireless networks. First, we either have to transport our collections and access tools to where the patron is, or make it very easy for them to use of the library remotely. The profession has been doing this for years now, on multiple technology platforms, so we have a pretty good gut level sense of how to do it well—if we dare step outside our comfort zones. Second, and probably more importantly, we can go to our clients ourselves. We can visit them in the stacks and in offices, get in their faces, charm them, and practice active listening. Some of us do this naturally, others need to push themselves.

Now we're all getting a push, as wireless networks have spread rapidly in both academic and public libraries.

The Roving Reference "Wow" Effect

Anyone who's ever had to design a Web page that shows all the resources available online at a glance knows just how hard that is. Screens spill over, directories stretch on forever, and links need to be updated. We've learned a lot about usability in recent years, and our Web catalogues show improvements. But when it comes to tackling a research task, our Web access points require interpretation, explanation, and annotation. One of the most effective moments for that counsel to occur is when the search is underway. Wireless networks enable us to take a notebook computer with us and rove more freely in study areas and even the stacks.

Our wireless future is much on our minds these days, and there have been several outstanding articles and lectures on the subject. A lot of these focus on nuts and bolts: 802.11b protocols, laptop and e-book circulation, and checklists for rolling out a network. I would like to see more attention paid to the synergy between print and digital knowledge. It's terrific that our users can use wireless networks for Internet applications, in the library, but wireless networks will make the library "lively" when we take our conversations direct to the source.

For example, with sufficient wireless coverage, online access to digital resources reaches not only study halls but also the stacks. It's now possible to find a citation in the bibliography of a book, search ejournals and databases, and download the article for reading then or later. This is a great example of how to maximize value of print material through the use of digital resources. What's more, this reference sleuthing takes place in the presence of students and patrons—teaching through demonstration, which is the heart of library pedagogy.

Roving reference is what should follow the rollout of the network. Let's face it, it's not at all unusual for our valuable digital collections to go under-utilized. We take that kind of "pattern recognition" for granted, but it doesn't occur to everyone else.

Training on the Go

In addition to roving reference, roving training is an option. This can breath new life into spaces that are less than optimal. For example, the Institute of Industrial Relations is located in a grand old building in the California Mission style, but it's basically a former Methodist womens' dorm. The library is the dining room, and it's not half bad as a library space. But for us to really bring in students and run trainings, we need easier access to the network. One of our upcoming training modules ("Managing Your Bookmarks" — an under-appreciated skill) will be held in our reading room. This makes things less formal and roomier, compared with our small cramped computer lab. Moreover, many of our patrons are doctoral students who have deep knowledge of narrow parts of the knowledge spectrum. It's often easier to get and keep their attention when we tackle a research problem together. That's the moment we can really introduce new resources to our super users.

Cultivating Knowledge Based Relationships

Reference and training strategies vary depending the environment, and my staff and I find that our user community really does prefer that we go to them. Most of the consultations we hold take place in offices, not in the library. Network access is pretty good here, but even so, taking a notebook computer with me to a colleague's office is a pretty snazzy concept. Wireless access helps us emphasize visually how up to date the profession is, particularly when research is ongoing and information is needed over time. Over and over again, we have seen that few of our users know all they might about the OPACs we use, and the digital collections we've built. Once again, beyond the obvious convenience factor, the potential for us to go where we are needed and interact with people is eased by wireless. This ought to free to us to do what we better than most professionals: listen actively, conduct an interview, find a pattern in seemingly disparate clues.

Gadgets on the Go

I live in a Palm-free zone where personal digital assistants are anathema, so I'm less interested in what's new and hot in PDAs. However, my love affair with the notebook may finally be on the wane. I sense a lot of promise in the new tablet-style computing that coming onto the market. Wireless access to databases on a decently-sized screen, coupled together with the ability to download, copy notes, and jot down outlines on the fly sounds very powerful.

Marydee Ojala, writing in *ONLINE*, recently made the point that people want "answers not articles". In other words, they may look at articles and want to

verify quality, but they go for the answers and not the cite. The Internet is encouraging this quick turnaround, because it's a terrific ready-reference tool. Tablet computing combines lightweight and small dimensions with a decently sized screen. Tablet computing might ease not only public service work but also may assist in circulation, inventory control, and technical service cleanup.

The Invisible Infrastructure

Wireless access is making rapid inroads at home and at work, and the setup process is likely to become easier with time. However, the Web has taught many technologists that "easy is hard" — that is to say, the front end looks easy because the back end was designed carefully. Nonetheless, once a wireless network is running and stable, it will offer us three interesting new roles to play—if we dare. I've touched on these already, but let me rephrase them to challenge your creative urges.

First, we can extend reference to the study hall and the stacks, by moving around and engaging our users. We're seeing more experimentation with this, and it's not really a new idea anyway. However, it is new to have fast access on distributed systems, and to engage users in search strategies as they work on their own systems. This is another opportunity to build support and preserve the library as a site for effective information counsel.

Second, depending on the environment, we can move training out of the lab and into the study hall. If we can offer brief, modular training to small groups of interested patrons, we extend the liveliness of training into the halls of the library.

Finally, we can use wireless access to create new synergy between our digital and print collections. Electronic journals and online reference tools can follow the user to the stacks, where searches in books can be paired with journal and reference searches.

It's a safe bet to expect wireless access to be a staple of the digital library. But in my experience, the "social sphere" of the library is where the action is. Making sure our collections remain lively and grow in liveliness is up to us.

“Remote Interactive Search Systems” which were advanced by Teltech in the online glory days are a terrific example of remote searching.