Mobile technology is a favorite discussion topic among senior IT leaders and higher education administrators. Is your institution planning for a mobile website? If so, be aware that the decisions to be made are less about technology and more about communication.
Talking with key constituencies is a large, and not easily quantifiable, percentage of what we do in higher education. The technology available for this communication is powerful and complicated. Keeping up with the wide range of available tools can be difficult. It can also be overwhelming and disconcerting to realize that even hosting an excellent institutional website is not enough. In addition, an institution needs a web presence, and that now includes delivering some portion of web content to mobile devices.

Your institution may not have a mobile site right now, but it will. Predictions are that by the end of 2011, one in two Americans will have a smartphone. This puts enormous pressure on those colleges and universities that are not yet ready to communicate with their key audiences using mobile technology. Certainly, higher education will lag behind corporate entities. Yet despite our campuses’ more limited resources, we’ll have to figure out how to solve this problem—just as we always do.

So, what to do about mobile? I recommend making choices while keeping two essentials in mind: (1) the needs of primary audiences and (2) a commitment to a practical, phased approach.

**Primary Audiences**

Who are your key audiences? What do you want to say to them? Equally important, what do your customers want from you? With mobile delivery, a college or university literally meets the audiences where they are. This is a tremendous communication opportunity.

I recommend that we get out of our own way and develop a laser-sharp focus on content. If we don’t, decisions will be harder to make. To plan for mobile, we need to start viewing primary audiences as customers. By responding to the needs of customers, campuses will deliver content that matters. Two such primary audiences are alumni and current students.

**Alumni.** With any luck, alumni are previously satisfied customers: they recommend the institution to others, talk about the positive educational experience they had, and decide whether or not to support the institution’s future goals with donations. Alumni magazines have long been the bread-and-butter of an alumni communication strategy. Enter the mobile device—the iPhone or Droid. Now we have the chance to put ourselves in front of our alumni audience anytime they have their phones. And for most who own a mobile device, they have their phones with them all the time. Anytime, anywhere, alumni can access the campus URL. An e-mail to their phones can deliver a message from the institution with a link to a web page. Now, the alumni audience is evaluating the campus mobile experience. Just before visiting the site, these same alumni may have been on a Fandango app checking movie times or on a mobile-aware Flickr site viewing photos from the weekend. You can take over from here; you know your campus culture and what your alumni care about. That’s what you should plan to deliver on your mobile site.

**Current students.** I worry a bit more about mobile communication with the students learning and living on campus today. The alumni audience is theoretically easier to satisfy, due to a more limited set of expected transactions with the institution. Usually, the goal of alumni communication is to keep a dialogue going; and often, the college or university deploys the content that steers the conversation. But the students on campus are paying customers who have a broad range of transactions they must complete with some regularity. Among other things, students register for classes, check their transcripts, and monitor course assignments. It’s only a matter of time before they will expect to use mobile for these transactions. Getting hooks into the densely complex campus enterprise systems is the challenge for mobile delivery to students.

**A Practical, Phased Approach**

Even with careful attention to audience needs, determining a mobile strategy may seem daunting. I recommend starting with content that can be easily delivered—and moving on from there. Although we don’t have it all figured out at William & Mary, we’re making progress. In June 2010, we started brainstorming about mobile in the context of our own audience needs, and we concluded: “It’s gotta be easy for them and easy for us.”

Early on, we decided not to re-create our complete website in a mobile version. Why not? Because our non-mobile
website looks pretty darn good on new and new-ish phones. Since there is a limited amount of content that a mobile user plans to look at from a smartphone, we decided to rely on RSS feeds for phase one of our mobile site.

We launched m.wm.edu in late August 2010. In the first six months after launch, there were nearly 36,000 unique visitors. The analytics demonstrate that traffic to William & Mary’s mobile site is not a drain on traffic to our main site but is instead a second destination.

I offer the following advice for a practical and phased approach to begin mobile delivery:

- Your first mobile site can and should create a foundation for more to come. It is perfectly acceptable to start by matching up some of what customers want with content you already have.
- Whatever your concerns about mobile, they are likely shared by other institutions. Call colleagues at the college or university across town and find out what they’re doing. Unlike the corporate world, the higher education community is collaborative. We expect to share what we know, and what we have, with others trying to do the same thing.
- There’s more than one way to deliver mobile content, and the circumstances at your institution can drive the choice. If you have the budget, consider hiring a consultant. If you have strong design and technical teams, some rock-solid open source for mobile is available. A vendor of one of the enterprise systems used on your campus may also offer a module for mobile.
- The design of a mobile site needs to be simple, with impact. Take cues from those outside of higher education who are already doing this well. A mobile interface must be clean and practical while comparing well with the thousands of attractive apps and other mobile-ready sites. Remember, your audiences are using their fingers and thumbs, not a mouse pointer.
- At William & Mary, we redirect mobile homepage traffic to the mobile site at m.wm.edu. (And the mobile site offers a button for the full website.) iPad users are not diverted; they are served the regular website.
- Once you launch a mobile site, metrics can be used to identify future content. The most popular content on the William & Mary mobile site is About W&M and Athletics. Maps and the people directory also get a lot of traffic.
- A mobile strategy need not be iOS only. Agnostic delivery of mobile content is a better choice. On the William & Mary mobile site, traffic from an iPhone or iPod Touch amounts to less than half (about 46%) of the total traffic. Our stats confirm that Android devices make up nearly a third (about 30%) of the mobile traffic and that this percentage is rising. As a result, William & Mary’s mobile strategy will respect the prevalence of both iOS and Android devices.
- We rely on the power of RSS to keep content fresh on William & Mary’s mobile site. Currently, the mobile site uses RSS feeds for news, blogs, and events.
- Six months after the launch of m.wm.edu, we launched an app called Dress the Griffin. We were intentional in the decision to launch general mobile content before developing a specialty app.

The bottom line is that even though only a small portion of colleges and universities currently offer mobile websites, mobile is the future for content delivery. Colleges and universities need to establish a strategy now and make the decisions necessary to take advantage of this communication opportunity.

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