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Supplementing inductions with text messages, an SMS “tips and tricks” service.

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Background

The project described below was kindly supported by the UC&R Group's Innovation Award, presented to the author at the Umbrella conference, 2009. It takes place in the context of saturation in the mobile phone market within the UK, with 76.9 million active mobile phone subscribers in the UK in 2009 (Mintel, 2010), with a UK population of around 61.4 million (Office on National Statistics) giving roughly 1.25 mobile phones per head of population. Within this near universal ownership, 43% of people use their phones every day, mainly for phone calls and text messages (Mintel, 2009).

Few libraries, however, seem to be taking advantage of these devices that practically all our users have and use regularly. The project aimed to experiment with some mobile phone friendly materials, trying to find out what materials we could develop that our users would find useful.

The project

Our overall project was concerned with mobile friendly materials in general, but the major part of it focussed on text messaging. There are many ways we could use text messaging in our libraries, some of which I've described previously (Walsh, 2009) but this project in particular developed a series of text message “tips and tricks” in the Autumn term of 2009. This article will cover this text “tips and tricks” service, describing the messages sent out; how we sent them; initial feedback from our students; and future plans.

The messages were designed to supplement our traditional inductions. We've long been aware that our students get bombarded with so much information in their first few weeks at University that we can't realistically expect them to retain it all. As such we've tried to make our face-to-face inductions more interesting and interactive; we cover the same material in our library and IT handbook that we give to all students; and we cover similar material in our online induction site “The Basics”.

The text messages covered a series of topics that we'd normally talk about in our inductions, but were spaced out roughly one per week and delivered at times we thought were most appropriate. For example, a tip on renewing books was sent out in week three (when books issued in the first week would be due back), and a tip on accessing electronic resources wasn't sent out until nearly the end of term, when students were likely to be working on their first assignments.

The messages were a mixture of plain text and web links, as we were interested in how many would access the links or prefer simply the maximum 160 characters of text.

The messages in full:

Introductory text	Thank you for signing up to this series of tips & tricks to using the library. You'll receive a series of text messages during the term, starting on 28/09/09
Week 1	Just to start off, here is a quick audio guide to the Student Centre, that's the floor where you enter the library. http://studentcentre.notlong.com

Week 2	Do you know how to find books? Use the library catalogue (http://webcat.hud.ac.uk) from any device connected to the internet. Demo at: http://hudcat.notlong.com
Week 3	Are your books due back and you still want to keep them? Try renewing them over the catalogue (http://webcat.hud.ac.uk) or on the self-service machines.
Week 4	With luck most of you will have had a library induction. If not (or you want to remind yourself of something) it's all online at www.hud.ac.ac/cls/thebasics
Week 5	Have you been checking your student email (http://mail.hud.ac.uk)? If it's easier you can redirect it to another email account – http://fwdemail.notlong.com
Week 6	To use the printers and copiers you need print credit. Top it up using the print credit machines on every floor – http://printcredit.notlong.com
Week 7	Need more than book? Metalib (http://metalib.hud.ac.uk) is our gateway to a whole world of electronic resources.
Week 8	Save your work on your (k:) drive and want to get it from home? You can do this on the portal http://portal.hud.ac.uk or mobile home http://mobile.hud.ac.uk
Week 9	Got a quick question? We've a text a librarian service available. Just text LIBRARY followed by your question to 81025 and we'll try and help.
Week 10	There's lots of basic help at www.hud.ac.uk/cls/thebasics – but for more help in searching for information try www.hud.ac.uk/cls/infolit
Thank you message	That's all the messages from us. We hope you've found them useful. We'd love to receive feedback, so our very last message on how to do that will be in a moment!

An additional message followed immediately afterwards asking for feedback via a Google Docs online form.

We used an online SMS portal to send messages out, enabling us to set all the messages up before the ever hectic start of term, simply adding students to a group when they contacted us, with the whole group being sent a message at the click of a button.

Results and feedback

The text “tips and tricks” service was promoted largely through our face to face inductions with first year students, asking them to text HUDUNI LIB to 81025 if they were interested in starting to receive them.

A total of 60 students signed up during the first few weeks of term, many after the initial two messages had gone out, resulting in some students getting two messages a week initially, until all had “caught up”. There were some teething problems with the online text messaging portal we used, and it seems that some students missed out on the first few messages.

The URLs in the text messages using the “notlong.com” service include statistics tracking, so we could tell how many people used the links. They averaged only 2 clicks each, or only 1 in 30 of the recipients of the text messages. This matches comments we've received elsewhere in looking at

mobile friendly materials, that students are still reluctant to access the internet using their 'phones.

There was little feedback received through the short online survey sent out at the end of the series of text messages, with only two respondents, though we were able to talk with another person who had received the messages and get their feedback verbally. The limited feedback we had through the online survey was positive, with the reservation that one person thought the messages were a little repetitive, for instance with links to “The Basics” website appearing more than once. The person we received verbal feedback from was generally positive, stating they found “*a couple of bits were quite useful*”, though again saying they found some elements repetitive. We were also told verbally that the tips and tricks were “*definitely going to work because a little bit of information over a long period is far more likely to sink in.... definitely a good way to get in touch with people*”.

Looking forward

The limited feedback we received seemed consistently positive, though with a preference for the pure text messages rather than additional “mobile friendly” but web based materials and a note that they didn't want messages repeating and reinforcing each other, but each to stand alone. These messages have come through several times from our students, with even those who can access our university wifi network for free by using their phone, seeming reluctant to use the “mobile web”.

We're therefore considering whether to develop the existing messages to reduce duplication and with limited online materials, but offering them automatically to all first year students, giving them a chance to “opt-out” rather than having to choose to “opt-in”, making it part of the common first year experience at the University of Huddersfield. Plans are still at an early stage however, with no decisions yet made.

References

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