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101 things you wanted to know about mobiles, but were afraid to ask

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History

- 1 Mobile libraries have been around for a long time. The first recorded vehicle in the UK was a horse-drawn vehicle in Warrington in 1859. But mobiles really came to use with surplus army vehicles after the First World War and became the norm for counties after the Second World War.
- 2 As the first of the Nordic countries, Denmark had its first mobile library running in 1926. However, an up-to-date service, lending books directly to the users, was not introduced until the end of the sixties.

- 3 In Scandinavia, like the United State, the first buses were launched by private initiative. A Norwegian part time librarian, who also happened to be a baker, took the saying "Man does not live on bread alone" quite literally. He filled his bakery van with books from the local library, and then hit the road in order to feed people's hunger for literature. This was in 1938. In 1939 two bus services, operating on a regional basis, were established. A library boat was launched in 1958.

Justification

- 4 Mobile libraries are a key component of the delivery of public library services, especially, but not exclusively, in rural areas. They are a way of ensuring that the service is available to those who might have difficulty in using the static libraries in an authority's area. They reach the socially excluded sections of society.
- 5 Mobile Libraries are still the main method of reaching large sections of the population especially in rural areas.
- 6 The mobile is readily able to change to meet changing conditions; it can easily change routes.
- 7 Vehicles can easily be updated to match changing circumstances. Example: All new vehicles now have ICT, which didn't exist 10 years ago.
- 8 As vehicles only last 10 years they are usually more up to date than the comparative branch library and can more readily adapt to new ideas in technology, management ideology and Health & Safety
- 9 Mobile libraries can cover for closures temporary and permanent of branches.
- 10 Mobiles Libraries can act as a trial for a permanent branch. Branches are best for well-populated areas in a static situation. Mobiles are best in scattered communities or reasonably nomadic groups. There must be continuous consideration of alternatives to mobile libraries for key communities.
- 11 Mobiles give very personal service. The staff gets to know each borrower.
- 12 Mobiles come nearer to the door. Might encourage people out in rough neighbourhood.

Funding

- 13 New mobiles can be funded by statutory grants, by regional or local authorities
- 14 Local authorities own the mobile libraries in Finland. By application, a new mobile library may be governmentally subsidized by 25% to 50% of the costs.
- 15 Local authorities own and finance the buses in Denmark and Sweden.
- 16 In Norway the state supports 50% of the purchase of new buses in the Sami regions. Buses are owned and operated both by county and local authorities.
- 17 Funding can be easier on a regional level, but a regional organization of the service, too far away from the customer, can block mobiles' potential to be an inherent and valuable part of local communities.
- 18 The operational costs can be reduced through sharing of buses between local authorities
- 19 Leased vehicles for ease of budget planning. Renting at a fixed rate for a fixed period is easier to manage on a library budget, rather than having the cost of a new vehicle to find every 10 years or so.

Design of vehicles

- 20 What sort of chassis should I use? See if your transport people want to obtain a chassis for you - they might have a preferred type. Don't waste money on an expensive Mercedes or Volvo if all you do is wander round the suburbs. They are beautiful vehicles designed to pull heavy loads for 500-600 kms a day, totally wasted parking outside a school for a couple of hours. They are however extremely good in harsh weather and longer haul work.

- 21 Vehicles must be fully accessible for all, including people with disabilities. Remember your borrowers can be old and infirm, put bright handrails and be well lit.
- 22 Hearing loops should be installed.
- 23 On-line computer issue system.
- 24 How to heat and cool it. A warm vehicle is an inviting vehicle, or in summer a cool vehicle is inviting.
- 25 How to light it. Using tubes spotlights or energy savers.
- 26 Good design is even more important than in a normal library as space is limited c.f. boat design and gypsy caravan.
- 27 Every item must earn its keep.
- 28 Whilst continuous improvement is generally considered a desirable goal, don't strive so hard that the product ends up worse.
- 29 Avoid designs that make people queue in the rain.
- 30 Have easy flow of people through the vehicle.
- 31 Size does not matter.
- 32 A mobile library is a travelling billboard to advertise itself and the library service as a whole. Great care should be taken to ensure that maximum use is made of this unique feature to boldly grab public attention

Running a vehicle

- 33 Regular monitoring of use. Monitor servicing schedules breakdowns per year Down time (i.e. time in workshop)
- 34 Sufficient vehicles, or back-up facilities to ensure optimum coverage and to meet service criteria.
- 35 Appropriate planning to reduce service downtime including spare vehicle(s) and use of replacement or agency staff.
- 36 Vehicles garaged where possible and close to the operational base.
- 37 Cleaning facilities available.
- 38 Route planning which optimises the service time per vehicle.
- 39 Appropriate "after hours" service availability (Saturday, Sunday, evenings) based on local need, with a seasonal timetable to take into account the problems inherent in winter evening stops, or summer closures.
- 40 A service frequency, which meets the needs of users and potential users.
- 41 Duration of stops, which facilitate use.
- 42 Longer stops in the centre of communities to enable useful access to IT equipment.
- 43 Shorter stops on the extremities of communities and at remoter locations – a book to your doorstep.
- 44 Number of stops which maximise access but minimise travelling time.

Stock

- 45 Have a well-structured stock policy for mobiles, including targeting stock and stock exchange rates.
- 46 A balanced and flexible stock (with flexible shelving to house it) that reflects the needs of the communities served.
- 47 Get the balance of stock right for the communities served.
- 48 What about non-book material like DVD's, CD's, maps, Music scores, toys, games.

- 49 Stock holding can be much greater than van holding. Vans can share routes and automatically swap stock. Example: Kirklees (UK) run 4 vehicles round one set of halts. Each vehicle has a different colour so the readers are aware that they see a different van each week. The driver stays with his own vehicle and thus knows all the routes and all the borrowers. The assistant stays with the route so the readers have continuity. Sheffield (UK) does similar but some of their vans have more specialist material - the discerning reader can visit the appropriate van. For instance some vehicles specialise in different languages.

Management

- 50 Local area managed service, with a strong strategic, central overview at senior level.
51 A contact point in each community for communication and a contact point at the library for them.
52 Maintaining the collection of relevant performance indicators (input and output measures) so that the effectiveness and efficiency of the service (e.g. cost per issue, cost per mile) can be measured and compared.
53 Maintain the service at the median of such indicators (subject to local conditions) and strive for the upper quartile.
54 Look at serving communities with different vehicles at different times
55 Maximise use of vehicle - some do 25 hours could do 60+.

Staff

- 56 At least double staffed service wherever possible. Single staff when travelling.
57 Appropriate training and qualifications for staff.
58 Professional member of staff on each vehicle regularly.
59 Look at actual costs of single staffing. Is it as cheap as imagined?
60 Work through lunch when double staffed.

Partnerships

- 61 Pursue joint working arrangements or partnerships with other appropriate services and agencies, e.g. schools, kindergartens etc.

Services

- 62 Have a clear statement of policy including criteria for service
63 The mobile library can serve the general public or special target groups or can be specialist in other ways or can be used for different purposes at different times. Here are some ideas:
64 Homework help. Example: One locality in Denmark allows the bus to have exceptionally long afternoon stops at places that cover immigrant communities: In this way, foreign speaking children may have a helping hand with their homework.
65 Language stimulation. Example: One locality in Denmark specifically uses the bus in a project of for children in transition from kindergarten to school.
66 School library. Example: In many Norwegian local authorities, with a number of schools that are too small to develop their own library, the buses represent the only library service offered to the pupils
67 Children's mobile. Example: One Danish bus is specially equipped to serve children under the age of six. It exists a French Bebebus.
68 Cultural activities. Example: A Norwegian bus is used bringing cultural presentations to children in a joint venture involving both schools and public libraries. These tours involve a wide range of cultural expressions, inspiring pupils and teachers alike to venture into foreign territory: at one time a belly dancer, at other times a sculptor, a drummer or an African storyteller.

- 69 Public services. In sparsely populated parts of Scandinavia mobile libraries are sometimes used to distribute services other than the original purpose. Examples exist of buses functioning as banks, in addition to libraries, and also - since trading wine and spirits is controlled by the government in Norway, Sweden and Finland - as distributor of alcohol.

ICT

- 70 Installation of computer facilities has made customers feel that mobile services are in no way inferior to a stationary library. Some units profile themselves as “Internet Buses”, offering computer training and free access to the Web.
- 71 On-line public access catalogues. This is becoming the norm now as all UK libraries had to have Public access computer catalogue by April 2004. So mobiles need fitting with internet to access this.
- 72 Public Access Workstations available where space and stopping times permit
- 73 Its best to use the same system for on-line issue and internet. Three basic ways to access internet:
- 74 Mobile phone. Cheapest to install, can be expensive to run. ,can have connection problems in more rural areas.
- 75 Radio. Much better signal giving faster connection. Much more expensive first cost. Can become cheaper if you share someone else’s e.g. Finland uses sawmills. Can be used in conjunction with mobile phone.
- 76 Satellite most expensive, but can be the most practical depending on mobile phone network coverage. Can have detachable, roof mount or self-seeking dishes.
- 77 There are quite a few vehicles, which are only fitted with IT. They usually serve the same halts as the book mobile but go at different times.
- 78 Some UK libraries including mine are changing halt times to create longer times for internet access. For example in one village 6 sites are visited in two hours at about 20 minutes per halt. This can be changed to 5 halts at 15 minutes and a Super halt at 45 minutes.
- 79 Some UK libraries have a separate little IT suite with three or four pc’s scanner and printer. Others have them out in the vehicle. Some have touch screen for ease of use.

Social inclusion

- 80 Mobile Libraries go to geographically excluded places.
- 81 Mobile Libraries go to politically sensitive places, e.g. travellers, gypsies, refugee camps
- 82 Mobile Libraries go to small communities that have few or no live cultural services. Example: industry mining communities are served in Wales (UK)

Lifelong learning

- 83 Mobile libraries can be used in the education of adults.
- 84 Mobile libraries are the route to learning.

Replacement

- 85 How long should a mobile library last? It depends what you want. A heavily built mobile could last 20 years, but having two lighter ones in the same period may cost less and give an up date half way through the period.
- 86 Replacement of vehicles at an age/mileage which maximises their life but which does not require significant down time or costs for repair.
- 87 The availability of a formula for optimising replacements based on overall costs, running costs and downtime.
- 88 Regular consultation with staff and maintenance people.

Ensuring future

- 89 Regular consultation with users and non-users.
- 90 Regular consultation with politicians and sponsors.
- 91 Regular route revision, taking account of changing communities, with the decision being made as close to the community as possible (accepting that major revisions affecting more than one route are undertaken centrally).
- 92 Regular and targeted promotion of service.
- 93 Form a friends of the mobile libraries group.

Future

- 94 The quality of the bus services must change according to changes in society at large. Mobile libraries must be a part of a value adding public library system, and therefore join new trends of development.
- 95 The trend is twofold: smaller units designed to serve special target groups; or big, fully equipped units with an enlarged staff, designed to replace ailing branches with limited opening hours.
- 96 If the alternative is closing down the service, old vehicles can be renovated.
- 97 To avoid closing down the service, two or more local authorities can join their forces, sharing a mobile library between them.
- 98 In Scandinavia there is a tendency towards a narrowing focus within this field. From being movable library branches, the buses now offer specialized services to special target groups.
- 99 In the future, it is not only access to, but also the quality of knowledge that will be important. The library, as a quality institution, is expected to provide the answer to this. This is also a challenge to mobile libraries.

More information

- 100 IFLA section on Mobile Libraries is concerned with all aspects of mobile library operations, collections, services, education and training, and research in all geographical areas. Look at the web: <http://www.ifla.org/VII/s38/ml.htm>
- 101 I have just been appointed to run the mobile service in my library
What should I do? Contact IFLA mobile section!!