Chesterfield County Public Library implemented a new project in November 2011 to promote library services, especially to our teenage customers. This program is a QR code scavenger hunt, which we called the iHunt. It uses QR codes strategically placed throughout three library branches to promote library resources and programming. A mini-grant awarded by the Library of Virginia to the Chesterfield County Public Library has partially funded the iHunt project.

With the rapid proliferation of smartphones in recent years, many teenagers have gleefully jumped aboard this new technology bandwagon. Surprisingly, little quantitative research has been conducted on teens and their smartphone usage. We anecdotally surmise that teens love their gadgets, as do most of the adults who have adopted these technologies. Engaging teens via this fun, interactive platform seems like a great way to promote library services to them, but there are other reasons why smartphone programming fits the mission of the public library. It has been suggested that smartphone proliferation could help bridge the digital divide between affluent and lower-income patrons and between white and racial minority groups.¹

In July 2011, the Pew Research Center released a study showing that a quarter of adult smartphone users do most of their online browsing with their devices. Not surprisingly, smartphone ownership increases with the level of household income. Ownership rates overall, however, are higher amongst black and Hispanic adults. The Pew Center has noted for several years that these groups are more likely to access the Internet on their smartphones. Additionally, the use of smartphones for Internet access is highly correlated with low income levels and no college education.² This may be because this population has less access to high-speed Internet connections and desktop or laptop computers at home. The bridging of the digital divide may occur most rapidly among lower-income teens because they are more willing to adopt new technologies. In addition, many of these teens pay for their own smartphone plans, as opposed to their wealthier peers.³ Therefore, they may only access the Internet in Wi-Fi hotspots, such as a public library.

The use of smartphones can generate new interest in the public library and help us continue to bridge the digital divide. The Chesterfield County Public Library developed the iHunt, aimed at but not limited to teens, to help achieve both goals. This entertaining, hands-on activity transforms the information about how to use the library into working knowledge that customers are more likely

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to find useful. We hope that this format will provide access the way customers are increasingly asking for it: via smartphone. We should not make assumptions about how many teens (or interested adults) in our area have this technology readily available to them, however. Therefore, the Chesterfield County Public Library has purchased three iPod Touches that will be available for check-out. To further entice teens to join in the fun, each teen will be entered into a grand prize drawing upon completion of the iHunt.

How Does the Scavenger Hunt Work?

Clues were created specifically to highlight resources that are useful to teens. QR codes were generated using a free, web-based QR code generator. When scanned, the QR codes bring up either a text clue and/or a URL to a portion of the library’s website. The iHunt has been designed to be progressive, with one clue leading to the next. A video explaining how the iHunt works was produced to allow teens a fun method to learn more about the iHunt. Although the video provides instructions for the iHunt, librarians are still responsible for ensuring that all participants understand the instructions and have the necessary equipment to complete the iHunt successfully.

The QR codes are affixed to stationary objects, such as shelving and furniture, so they will not be accidentally checked out with a library item. When a code is scanned, a question appears. The answer to that question is typically an area in the library; going to this location leads participants to the next QR code. If a question requires the use of an online resource, the location of the next clue will be explicitly stated. (Without the ability to embed QR codes directly on the library website or in the catalog, it was necessary to place these codes in areas that did not directly relate to the answers.) The last QR code asks each participant to fill out a brief survey created with SurveyMonkey. Once the survey is completed, participants are directed to go to the reference desk to have their names entered in a prize drawing; they then receive a completion packet that includes information on teen volunteering at the library, checking out e-books, and signing up for the NextReads newsletter that provides book suggestions. Additionally, three bookmarks provide information on useful reference websites and highlight upcoming teen programs.

The iHunt was intended to last one month, but has been extended to two. Participants can do the hunt any time the library is open. It was designed with flexibility for participants who might not be able to finish the iHunt in one visit.

Presenting the Mini-iHunt

As a way to promote the iHunt, a mini-iHunt was developed and implemented at the Chesterfield County Public Library Masquerade Ball, which celebrated the end of Teen Read Week on October 22, 2011. This was a well-attended teen event (about 150 teens) that served to pique teen interest in the iHunt that started November 1. For the Masquerade Ball, the QR code clues were located at certain areas of the venue to promote participation in the various activities available, such as dancing, a photo booth, and various games. The main focus for the mini-iHunt was to demonstrate to teens the entertainment value of completing the library QR code scavenger hunt in November. Unlike the iHunt in November, the mini-iHunt provided teens with a choice of answer sheets. One answer sheet was used by the teens...
with smartphones, and the other was designed for teens who did not have access to this technology. However, as with the larger iHunt, teens were entered into a prize drawing upon completion of the mini-iHunt.

The success of the mini-iHunt was determined by counting completed answer sheets and looking over the answers written on each sheet. Out of the approximately 150 teens who attended the Masquerade Ball, forty-two completed the mini-iHunt. Although only 28 percent of the teens completed and turned in their answer sheets to be entered into the prize drawing, some teens started working on the mini-iHunt but did not complete it. Answers provided on the sheets were approximately 94 percent correct on average. Only one question had less than 90 percent correct answers.

Out of forty-two participants, only one teen completed the mini-iHunt by using a smartphone. We speculated that some of the teens did not bring their phones with them because they were not carrying purses or wearing pocketed clothing. (Most of the attendees dressed in formal wear or costumes.) Some may not have wanted to bother with installing the software on their phones at that moment. As we learned throughout the course of the larger iHunt, we may have underestimated the number of teens in this area who have smartphones.

Numerous teens at the Masquerade Ball provided positive feedback about the mini-iHunt and showed enthusiastic interest in participating in the November iHunt. Overall, there were twenty participants who completed the iHunt and one who started but did not finish. The demographics of participants included a larger percentage of teens, with a few adults. The branches provided participant data with additional insight on how well the iHunt was working and feedback that included comments, concerns, possible explanations for the results, and suggestions about ways to improve the iHunt in the future.

Training the Reference Staff
The training of staff is one of the many keys to a successful QR code scavenger hunt. At Chesterfield County Public Library, reference staff were responsible for answering questions and ensuring that all participants had everything needed to complete the iHunt. Training for the reference staff consisted of a staff-created iHunt tutorial, staff instruction handouts, software and Wi-Fi instructions specifically for the iPod Touches purchased by Chesterfield County Public Library, and the successful completion of the iHunt by each reference staff member. By completing the iHunt themselves, the reference staff gained valuable insight into what participants needed to know and might have questions about, as well as any potential problems staff or participants might face.

At the end of training, reference staff members were expected to know how to operate the QR code app on the iPod Touch, how to get a QR code scanner on a participant’s smartphone, CCPL’s procedure for checking out the iPod Touch, the location of all of the QR codes, and what to do when a participant finished the iHunt.

Though each reference staff member received training and a copy of the iHunt instructions, it became clear that additional training items were necessary. A program that lasts for an extended time with infrequent participation requires reminders, perhaps sent on a weekly basis. By mid-November, staff members felt comfortable administering the iHunt, but many seemed uneasy the first few times they were asked about the program. Several suggestions might make the initial process easier. A simple email stating the basics of the program (how to check out the iPod Touch, what participants need to get started, what they receive when they finish) could have been sent at the beginning of each week. In addition, all reference staff members might practice once a week with the iPod Touch to make sure they could still delete the app history and comfortably navigate the windows in the app.

Results
Throughout the duration of the November iHunt, the three participating branches found it harder than expected to find participants even though the program was open to customers of all ages. Overall, there were twenty participants who completed the iHunt and one who started but did not finish. The demographics of participants included a larger percentage of teens, with a few adults. The branches provided participant data with additional insight on how well the iHunt was working and feedback that included comments, concerns, possible explanations for the results, and suggestions about ways to improve the iHunt in the future.

Staff at two of the branches found that customers who were interested and elected not to par-
to participate. Additional avenues for advertising and promoting the iHunt are needed to generate a larger number of participants.

The iHunt program was scheduled to end on the last day of November. Due to a smaller turnout than anticipated, the iHunt has been extended through December, with posters amended to reflect this. During this time, additional marketing is being done. After a successful experience with a Girl Scout Troop completing the iHunt together, we decided to contact several groups scheduled to use our meeting rooms in the next month and make them aware of the activity. Reference staff have been encouraged to promote the iHunt by word of mouth and offer it to the branch’s teen volunteers. Inquiries were made about posting iHunt flyers in the schools. With about three weeks to go, it is too early to determine the success of these extra marketing efforts.

Conclusion

While the scavenger hunt will not last indefinitely, the library can continue to use QR codes to promote library materials and services. We would like to see QR codes on the shelves as readers’ advisory tools, a new take on suggested-reading bookmarks. Codes on posters advertising programs would give people a quick and easy way to get those dates in their calendars. Links to instructional videos on a wide range of topics are possible, including databases, catalog instruction, and even more basic tasks such as getting a library card or setting up a PIN for a library account.

Public libraries have struggled for years to fully engage our teenage community members. The creation of teen spaces and programming has not gone unappreciated, but engaging teens with their favorite technological devices seems the logical next step. For those without smartphones or comparable devices, the Chesterfield County Public Library still made this program available. The popularity of these devices will only continue to grow, and librarians can look forward to incorporating more of this technology in the future.

Notes

