

LibraryCrunch

Bringing You A "Library 2.0" Perspective, by Michael Casey

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They're Gonna Love Your Wi-Fi Connection

How is your library going to respond to the changes in portable communication technologies? If you have Wi-Fi, and I hope you do, then you may already be seeing some changes in the way people interact with your library. Is that customer talking to his computer? Yes, that customer with the laptop surfing the web and browsing your catalog is also speaking into a headset that's plugged into that laptop using [softphone](#) software to create a voice connection. Customers, via your Wi-Fi connection, can now collaborate across oceans using Web 2.0 technologies like [Writely](#) and [Google Talk](#) – talking and editing online documents and projects in real-time.

But far more convenient for voice communications, VoIP-enabled portable phones (both VoIP-only and VoIP/cellular) are now beginning to hit the market, and they'll catch on quickly as VoIP is already firmly entrenched -- [52% of all U.S. businesses and about 3 million of the nation's consumers are using VoIP](#).

VoIP-only phones allow users to make calls using VoIP service providers, such as Vonage or Skype, anywhere an open Wi-Fi connection is available (and some phones are being designed to work with subscription Wi-Fi hotspots such as Starbucks). ([Several new portable and home service phones are linked from here.](#)) The VoIP/cell combination phones take advantage of free hotspots to route calls over the Internet instead of the local cellular network, reducing costs for the user.

Many of the newer PDAs, such as the [Dell Axim 51V](#), are capable of VoIP operation. The Axim also has [Bluetooth](#) built-in, so it's easy to strap the PDA to your hip or toss it in your purse and talk via a Bluetooth earpiece (even if you do look a bit odd doing so).

Speaking of Bluetooth, will your library offer Bluetooth printing? Are you planning on pushing any content to Bluetooth-enabled customers as they enter and walk around your library?

To be sure, there are security and network issues that libraries need to address. Will the increase in VoIP traffic burden your network connection? Many public libraries pull their Wi-Fi connection from a DSL or cable hookup, so having several customers downloading music and videos and talking on their VoIP phones may consume much of your bandwidth. It's a very good idea to invest up-front in a good Wi-Fi access point that comes with bandwidth management in order to prevent customers from hogging your airwaves while downloading large files. What this means is, don't go to Best Buy and purchase a \$75 Wi-Fi router. I'm not going to mention names here, but there are plenty of very good commercial-quality Wi-Fi access points out there that can manage bandwidth, and the initial investment will pay dividends in quality-of-service.

In describing the future of portable wireless technologies, [Business Week writer Andy Reinhardt](#) sums up everything when he says:

One minute, the phone might be connected to a conventional cellular operator. Moments later, as you pass within range of a Wi-Fi hotspot, it could switch automatically to a faster and cheaper connection to download a batch of e-mails. While you stroll around the mall, it might pick up coupons from stores via free short-range Bluetooth radio. Then, overnight, it could receive the day's sports highlights via digital-TV broadcast for you to watch on your morning commute.

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