

Mobile App Strategic Planning Ideas for Libraries

by JOHN RICHARDSON

ABSTRACT

SOLUS is the global leader in providing mobile apps to libraries. Enclosed are some thought-provoking ideas on how mobile may add value to your overall strategic plan and offer new ways for community engagement and outreach with smartphones and tablets.

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Mobile Anytime - Anywhere

Patrons now want access to their library resources 24/7 from anywhere so mobilising the library experience is essential. The number of mobile users today is greater than the number of desktop users! As businesses have realised the need to effectively use mobile channels to attract and retain customers so have libraries across the world, but today's users demand leading edge and elegantly designed apps that adhere to consumer models rather than a library-centric model.

SOLUS has over a decade of experience in providing mobile apps to libraries and launched the first ever UK public libraries app in Edinburgh Scotland. Our Library Apps are in use in over 8,000 library locations across 6 continents and growing rapidly.

With significant input from our library customers, we understand the benefits of a well designed app that provides an enhanced perception of the library by the community. Mobile can help maximise and contribute to changing library service priorities with the included Content Management System. A mobile app can provide a variety of benefits to the library's strategic and operational plans such as:

In efficiencies and savings - staff-time as well as reduction in hardware self-service kiosks (for initial purchase or replacement by allowing check-outs to be done by patrons with their devices)

In marketing and promotion - change perceptions of your services and provide dynamic real-time changes to content for both library and community events of interest

In audience / patron engagement - offers a more customer-focused experience of the Library and appeals to many different age groups

Consortia – Opportunities for the headquarters site and member libraries to deploy a cohesive and cost effective mobile solution – while allowing for member library autonomy

Multiculturalism- Multicultural communities are often left behind with an English-only focus of various library services. The SOLUS app is available in 28 languages with more being added

Flexibility – by providing support for numerous ILS/LSP platforms, a Library may deploy a mobile app on one ILS/LSP and gracefully migrate to another, without affecting the patron's experience

Enclosed are a variety of topics that may assist your library in crafting a mobile strategic plan or a component of your overall strategic plan. This document touts the advantages and depth of the SOLUS Library App, and some features may not be found in other mobile apps, so we encourage you to do your research.

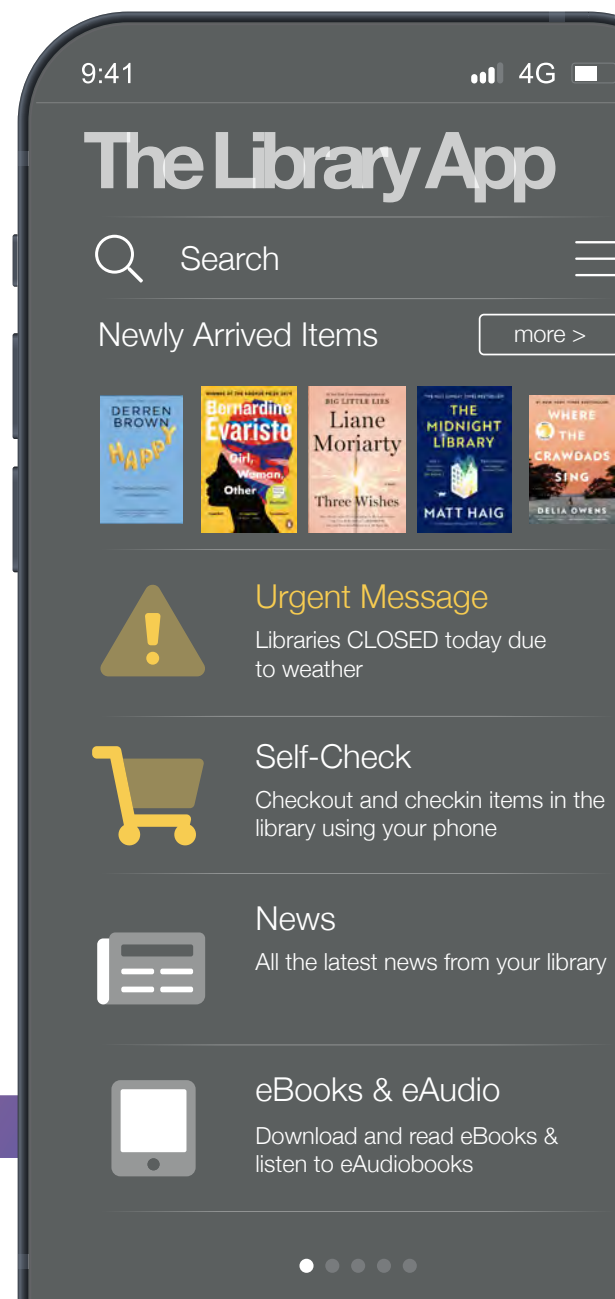
Feel free to plug-and-play with these elements and craft them into your own plan. If you've got some we've missed, please share them with the contact info at the end of this document and we'll consider adding them to a future version! If you're interested in a Word version, please request this at info@sol.us

What is a Mobile App?

A mobile app can utilize many of the phone or tablets features such as GPS, camera, NFC chip, Bluetooth connectivity, etc. and integrate with various apps such as Apple or Google maps, text messaging, etc.

A well written app can integrate with a variety of library services including the catalog for searching, filtering, placing/suspending/canceling holds, downloading eContent, barcode or RFID self check-out and check-in, curbside pickup, searching events and rooms, linking to social media feeds, newsletters, etc.

See Appendix 1 for an extract taken from the Freckle Report, 2020 – An analysis of public libraries in the US, UK and Australia, by Tim Coates for additional elements.



Adherence to Apple's mobile app policy requires that each library app have its own Apple Developer Account, free for non-profits (and \$99 per year for for-profits). This ensures that the library is a known entity (via the Dun and Bradstreet number or DUNS). Patrons would search the stores for the library name – not SOLUS or other vendor name. An important element in your branding and autonomy! To learn more visit: <https://developer.apple.com/custom-apps/>

Often a city or county may already have deployed other apps and if so, the library would simply append to the existing Apple Developer Account. SOLUS can be contacted if you have any questions.

The apps are downloadable from the Apple and Google Play stores, as well as via a unique-to-the-Library QR code (available via the SOLUS Library App) that allows patrons to bypass going to the stores and simply downloading the app. Check with other mobile app providers if this option is available.

An efficient app should generally be < 10 MBs which speeds downloading. Some inefficient apps may surpass 50 MBs in size! A well written and supported app will have several updates per year and support the latest Android and iOS features – a never ending task. Most patrons will have automatic updates turned on, which means they don't have to request an update. For those that have chosen to receive manual updates, the small program size insures fast updates.

A Mobile App Content Management System

To compliment the mobile app, SOLUS provides a fully featured Content Management System (CMS) for authorized library staff to make changes – vs. having to request the vendor to make them for you. The CMS provides the library with:

- Its unique branding (logo, color schemes, etc.)
- Ability to use any of the 7,000 included icons, or upload your own (400 x 400 pixels)
- Ability to colorize graphics/icons/text with Web Palette or Hue, Saturation, Value (HSV) Color Model (ability to match any color 100% to stay true to your branding guidelines)
- Modification of opening hours per location and/or days closed
- Mobility to showcase up to 10 content carousels (print and/or e)
- Turn on curbside service (ours is called Click & Collect)
- Link to catalog and search filters (via ILS API and web services)
- Link to eContent/resources
- Link to the calendar/events program
- Link to locally subscribed content (in addition to any State of consortium subscriptions)
- Link new content such as Video clips, pictures/images, PowerPoint, RSS Feeds, live web pages, PDF documents and text
- Ability to re-order menu options and/or create sub-menus
- Create pre-and-post login menu options
- Link to social media platforms
- Schedule content such as a survey for a period of time (start date/time, end date/time)
- Ability to toggle on specific languages (out of 28 available) made available to your patrons
- The automatic generation of monthly and cumulative statistics

SOLUS or one of our reseller partners will help setup the app initially and the library generally maintains the above going forwards, but we're always available to provide assistance.

Responsive Websites vs. Native Mobile Apps

You may have heard that if your library has a responsive website, you don't need a mobile app. A responsive website simply means that if you're using a smartphone or a tablet, the site automatically "responds" to your device and resizes the content to fit your screen. How well does it work in reality? Test it on your site, or other libraries that have a responsive designed site.



Pro-tip! See what your patron's may experience by testing your site (or other) with both Apple and Android phones as well as iPad and Android tablets. Test the various screens and especially the "search the catalog" function and search results in both Portrait and Landscape modes. How about events? Does the content automatically re-size to fit the screen? Or do you need to pinch and scroll to move around? Is it a positive experience? Frustrating? These quick tests will be informative and educational, and help provide a clearer path for the direction you wish to take.

There are functional abilities that a mobile app can provide to that a responsive designed web-site cannot such as the ability to:

Already be logged in and connected to the Library's ILS via API and web services (unless the patron logs out by choice). This, as opposed to the patron having to type in the library name or URL, or go to Favorites, and then find the appropriate resource.

Design explicitly for mobile and not a compromise - don't let your users get lost in a sea of drop downs or tiny buttons!

Put your library patron's needs first without having to deal with IT for Municipal/City/County approval from a shared web-site

Simplify the menu layouts on the mobile app which are intuitive and allow the patron to get the information they need quickly (vs. sometimes navigating a myriad of pages and options on a Municipal/City/County web site of which the library is but an option)

Notifications are timely and relevant

Use the camera to Search by ISBN or UPC number (for CDs, DVDs, etc.)

Roam inside the library and continue to use the app to search for print, eBooks, eAudio, events, chat with a librarian via text, etc. How about browsing the shelves, and then scanning the ISBN to see any reviews, or other recommendations? What time an event is on? What rooms are available to book? Etc.

Use the camera to perform self check-out and integrate with a Bluetooth beacon (for check-in)

Use the Near Field Communications (NFC) chips to perform RFID check-out/in without requiring additional hardware (unique to the SOLUS Library App and its resellers at present)

Have a digital library card ready to be scanned by a library staff member or a self-checkout kiosk (barcode or RFID)

Quick access straight from their home screen, not some forgotten bookmark or distraction filled Google search. Helps build habits and relationship with the library

Manage and use linked accounts (ideal for children, elder care, caregiver, etc.)

Use any one of the 28 languages available. These are part of the Solus mobile app offering and don't require the library to modify their existing website in any fashion

Use the camera to snap a unique QR code to bypass the Apple or Google stores and download the app (which opens up new marketing options – see below).

Add community links of value to patrons and citizens (without having to modify the library's website)

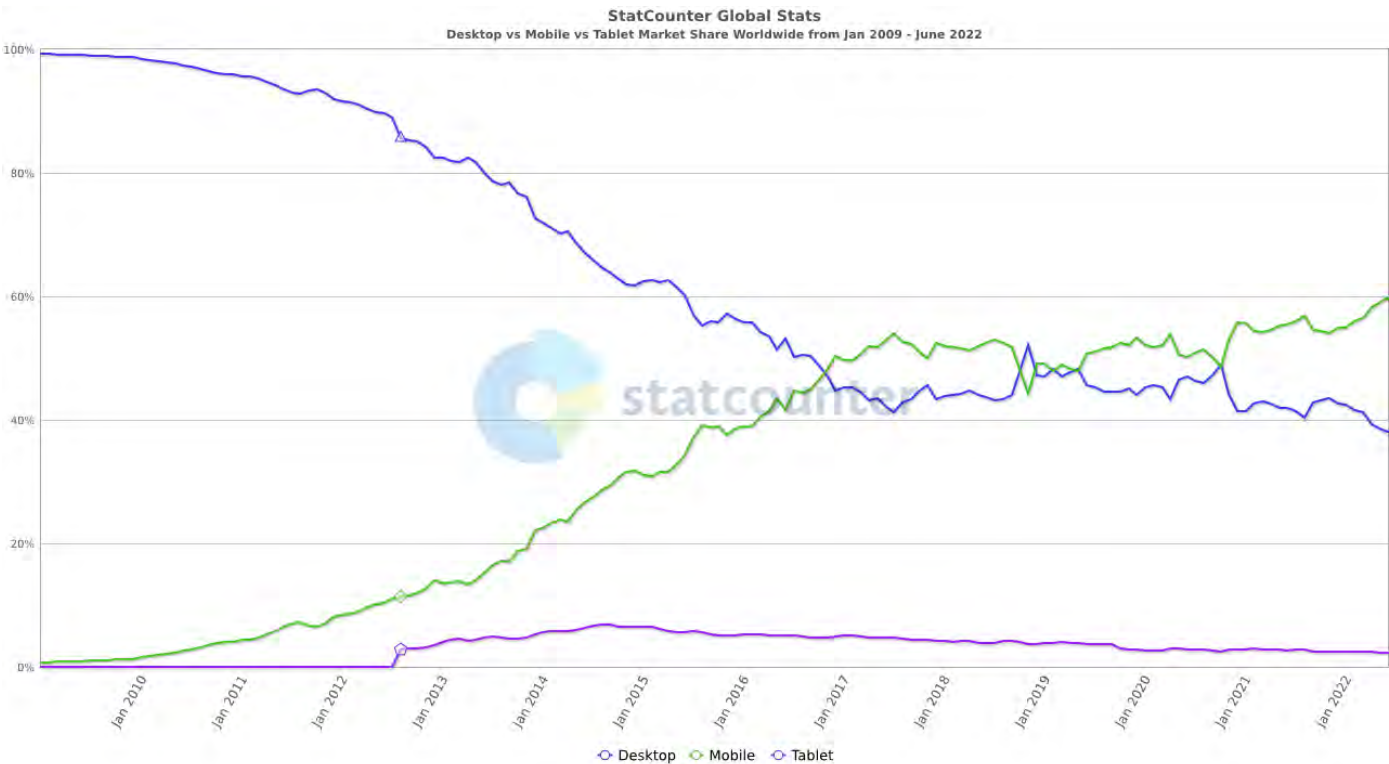
Use the GPS functionality to get directions to a specific library location and/or to see the nearest library(s) in a multi-branch or consortium environment

A mobile app can add considerable value, even if the library has deployed a responsive design web site.

When to consider mobile first?

Each community is different based on demographics, economic activity, population growth vs. decline, etc. but one thing is for certain, that mobile usage is on the rise in the majority of communities. What does this mean for portraying your library's resources and services? At which point will it make sense to pay more attention to your mobile presence vs. your desktop/web-site presence? To put forth more effort into your mobile presence vs. your web-site presence?

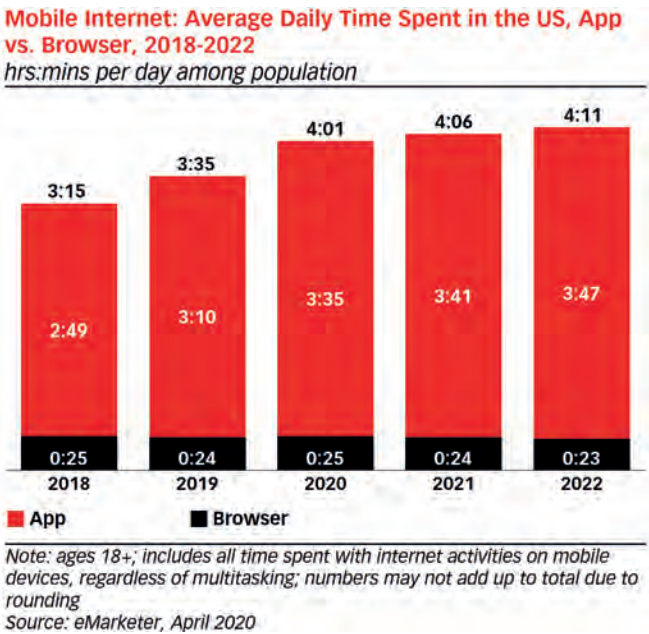
The following chart illustrates the desktop vs. mobile vs. tablet growth/decline and overall, the crossover has already happened, but may not have yet in your community. It's interesting that with the advent of larger screened smartphones, that tablets have really leveled off and are in a bit of an overall decline.



Source: <https://gs.statcounter.com/platform-market-share/desktop-mobile-tablet/worldwide/#monthly-200901-202206>

Be Where Your Users Are

A mobile app allows your patrons to interact with the library 24/7/365 via Wi-Fi or a data plan. No longer does a patron need to be tethered to a laptop or desktop computer to access the library's catalog and services – downloading of eBooks, eAudio, etc. can be done immediately and in real time. And a mobile app has tremendous utility inside your physical library buildings! Based on the following chart, mobile users are clearly spending their time in apps vs. in browser-based environments.



Bypass “Waiting for the Next Website Makeover”

It's just a matter of time before your library or the municipality/city/county plans to redo their web site. These are often intensive projects that occur over a long period of time. With the mobile app and the included Content Management System (CMS), a library can deliver a modern and fresh-looking app in 2-8 weeks and eliminate the need to “wait for the new website to be done”.

New Marketing Opportunities

A unique QR code that is created to download the SOLUS mobile app; this code can be used in a myriad of places. For example, promote digitally on the website, social media, newsletter, blog posts, and more, while also using analog methods like print bookmarks, postcards, posters, etc. Where might you place these in your community to surprise non and existing patrons?



Poster Mock-Up Example

Saving \$\$ in Replacing Existing Self-Check Kiosks

For libraries that have deployed RFID or barcode self-check kiosks, you know they are expensive to:

- Go through a procurement and contracting process
- Fund and purchase
- Implement (electrical, hardwired/wireless, setup, etc.)
- Clean daily
- Maintain with software and/or firmware updates
- Replace after x years

With the SOLUS Library App, libraries may choose to forego a costly upgrade and either not replace all self-check kiosks (and decommission them), or replace a few, and introduce the self-checkout and/or check-in options that patrons can do with their mobile phone. The SOLUS Library App supports both barcode and RFID checkout/in, and for RFID deployments, and **no additional hardware is required**, making it a very cost-effective solution. Since the pandemic, patrons are much more comfortable with self-service options at their grocery, pharmacy, coffee shops, etc. and therefore, why not the library?

Be Where Your Users Are

The Library App supports a variety of calendar and events programs that integrating using RSS and ATOM feeds so patrons can see what events are upcoming with a registration link. The new eb#1 Events & Room Booking platform (also from SOLUS) will have additional integration commencing in early 2023. With the included CMS, a staff member can easily add a new menu option to showcase a local event that may be outside of the library's traditional events but is of value to the community. This may be a municipality/city/county event, or a local organization like Lion's Club, Rotary, Chamber, etc. As most websites are responsive, a link to it will display nicely on smartphones and tablets. This functionality may help the library realize its goal(s) of community engagement and outreach. Content can also be scheduled to automatically display on a specific date and stop displaying on another. This allows the content to be fresh and dynamic vs. staid and static. Another example may be that the library issues a survey on date x, and it terminates on date y.

Communicate in Different Languages

The App comes with 28 languages (with country variations) at present, and the library can predetermine which languages they want to be made available to their patrons. Imagine having the easy ability for the library to communicate using various languages with minimal overhead!

Changing a website to be inclusive of other languages can be costly. A multilingual mobile app may help to garner new groups of users and create an earned relationship with the library. "They are speaking my language!"

How does it work? When a user downloads the app from a QR code, or by searching in the Apple and Google Play stores, the Library App will automatically download the regional language from settings on the user's phone or tablet. For example, if my native language is Spanish, and I download the Library App, it will be in the Spanish language. As a patron, I can switch the language preference to English should I wish to practice my English reading and interaction skills.

Additionally, students and adults that are learning another language may choose to switch to a different language to practice interacting in another language. How might this be used in your community?

Provide Patrons with Realtime Notifications

While email notifications are valuable, text messaging and alerts on your smartphone or tablet are timelier and as a result are more likely to be read. Examples of notifications include:

- Alert that a hold is now ready for pickup

- A message indicating you have material that is about to be due

- That there are fines outstanding (where applicable)

Mobile App for Stand-Alone Libraries and/or a Member of a Consortium

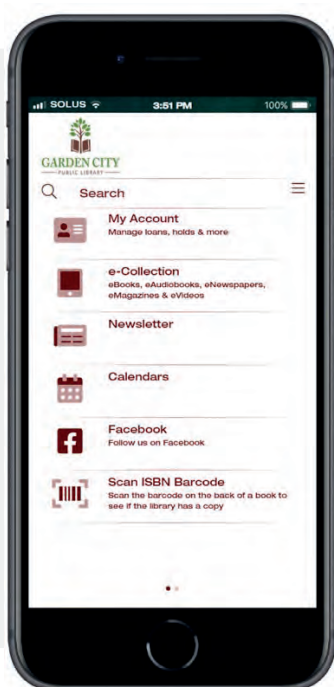
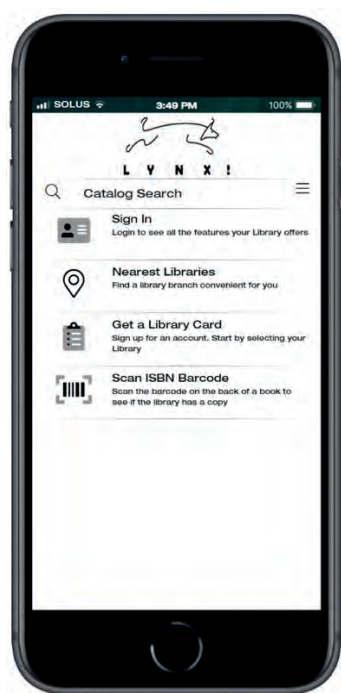
Obviously, a stand-alone library (not belonging to a consortium) can have its own mobile app. It's also possible for a member library of a consortium to have its own mobile app, without the consortium having the app. And alternatively, there is the ability for a consortium to have its own app that would include all member libraries, along with some options. See next paragraph.

Mobile App for Consortia

The SOLUS Library App has a unique consortium feature that is essentially an app within an app. Whereas, a consortium would subscribe to the primary app and it would be branded as the consortium and searchable in the stores. From there, all or some member libraries within that consortium could have a Member Library Template for a fraction of the cost of a full app exclusively for them. A template allows the member library to have its unique branding (logo, color schemes, etc.) and the management of their own CMS channel (or the consortium can do it for them if they are small and lack resources or ability). All of the elements listed in the above section A Mobile App Content Management System are available via the member library's CMS channel.

Consortium App

Member Library Template



Important Note: Patrons should know the consortium by name for this to be a viable option. This is not recommended for buying groups, where patrons do not know the name of the consortium.

How does the template work? After a patron downloads the primary app and they login for the first time, the system recognizes they belong to Member Library A, and the app then switches to that library's template. This remains intact for as long as the patron stays logged in. Generally speaking, there is no need for the patron to log out as they are using their own device. Should they log out, they only have to re-login and their local Member Library Template is displayed.

This is a very cost-effective model – vs. each member library having to procure and subscribe to their own mobile app! And the overall cost model is effective as it showcases cost sharing for the consortia, while allowing autonomy and local branding at the member library level – a win/win.

Replacing an Existing Mobile App

Mobile apps have been available for the past 16 years and Solus has migrated many libraries from older app technology to our new platform. For those libraries that have an Apple Developer account and are listed in the Apple Store (as well as Google Play Store), we help manage the transition, and patrons simply get an update automatically, or manually tap to accept the update.

For those libraries using a mobile app service where patrons need to select their library from a vendor's drop down menu, those libraries would first need to register for an Apple Developer account and the implementation process would commence as usual. Patrons would download the app from the stores, or via QR code.

For Libraries Planning to Switch its ILS

With the SOLUS Library App you can switch ILS at any time without your patrons even noticing. All they'll see is the new platform with enhanced functionality. We currently support 13 different ILS and LSP platforms, with more in our development pipeline.

You can deploy your mobile solution today on your existing platform and then once the new ILS/LSP platform is set to go-live, the switch can be made.

Summary

We trust you found some of these elements educational and of value as you consider a mobile app strategy.

Which ones are most relevant for your community?

How might you use mobile creatively to drive existing patrons to the library? Sign up new ones?

Enhance their access to resources when they are in the library?

Thank you for reviewing the enclosed and we're available to answer any questions to help you craft and deploy your mobile strategy. If you wish to receive a copy of this document, please send a request to the e-mail address below. If you have any comments, please direct them to:

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APPENDIX 1

Extract taken from Freckle Report, 2020 –

An analysis of public libraries in the US, UK and Australia, by Tim Coates

Part 8: Recommendations for a public library App

What should a library App and eBook service look like to be “Best for Readers”?

- Should be as good as Kindle, but free
- Should be on one website and one app, not many
- Should provide non-personally identifiable information for the public, authors and publishers about what is being read and where
- Should be a high-quality reader platform, constantly improving and competitive
- Should contain all available and forthcoming titles, resources, holdings and materials in public libraries, both digital and print, not just those which licenses have been acquired
- Should hold secure membership information and authorization to access material
- Should allow people to join
- Should contain information about local library events and activities
- Should contain information about services available at local libraries
- Should discover print, audio, documents, and other related editions and locate all library holdings wherever they are and deliver them
- Should offer “click and collect” and other delivery services
- Should transact a deal at the moment a reader requires it
- Should contain back-office functions such as accounting, HR and payroll
- Will be the service that operates the library