Ad Students Aim to Bring the Library to Commuters with NFC Technology

April 3, 2013

New York City's underground transit system may be the final digital frontier: on the Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA)'s hundreds of miles of subterranean track, Internet access is not available. But a speculative ad campaign has suggested that a Wi-Fi-free digital information exchange on the subway is possible—and could boost library readership.

The one minute "Underground Library" commercial from students at the Miami Ad School promotes an as-yet nonexistent library program which would allow smartphone users to download book extracts from the New York Public Library (NYPL) during their commutes. The ad, which can be viewed online at video-sharing service Vimeo, shows subway passengers scanning an NYPL "smart poster" with their smartphones to access the first 10 pages of a current bestseller—no Wi-Fi access required. The information transfer process, known as Near Field Communications (NFC) technology, uses radio to communicate. "The data is stored in a poster in a tag containing RFID [radio-frequency identification] technology," explains Miami Ad School student and "Underground Library" art director Keri Tan. "Subway passengers just have to hold their phones close enough to the tag for the data to transfer." Upon exiting the subway, commuters' devices would alert them to the location of nearby branch libraries.

The Underground Library from Keri Tan on Vimeo.

The idea for the program began as a class assignment to boost NYPL membership, according to Tan. Featuring NYC's most recognizable form of mass transportation in their campaign appealed to Tan and her colleagues, since "pretty much all New Yorkers spend so much of their time on the subway." (NYC subways carry an estimated 1.6 billion passengers annually.) "Max [Pilwat, the ad's other art director] mentioned that the subway ad space kind of looks like a shelf, and we ran with the idea." She and Pilwat, with copywriter Ferdi Rodriguez, created the ad.

Viable Technology

While the MTA is not displaying any print campaigns featuring NFC technology at the moment, "It's doable," confirms Jodi Senese, Chief Marketing Officer at CBS Outdoor, the media company that handles advertising for the MTA. Additionally, "Advertisers are very interested in one-on-one consumer engagement opportunities, especially in venues where's there's significant 'dwell time,' like transit facilities and malls." Senese estimates that $40,000 would buy a month-long "decent-sized general showing" in MTA subway cars, and "For $50,000 you could have a month of ads in 260 MTA subway stations," many of which are underground. For a non-profit like the NYPL, CBS Outdoor might be able to negotiate a discount.

Although the students did not pilot-test their idea, or contact either the NYPL or the MTA, an "Underground Library" program holds promise, in part because an estimated

half of all American cell phone users use smartphones, and many major telecommunications corporations—including Samsung, Nexus, Motorola, Nokia and Sony—sell NFC-enabled phones and tablets.

However, the idea would likely need some tweaking before it could be implemented: most libraries already have waiting lists for bestsellers, and would not want to create a further bottleneck by promoting those titles. A more likely target could be "readalikes," suggesting undiscovered gems likely to appeal to those who loved a particular well-known title.

"One potential concern for implementation would be whether it is practical and affordable for the smart posters to hold a reasonably sized sample in epub format. Even the largest NFC tags currently on the market hold only 32 KB of information, and while some epub files are that small, most are considerably larger.

Local Libraries Respond

An "Underground Library" program might boost readership, but the ad's claim that library use has been declining "since the creation of the Internet," is incorrect: "Attendance, circulation and participation in our wide range of teen, computer, and literacy classes at The New York Public Library is up, not down in recent years," says Ken Weine, NYPL's Vice President for Communication & Marketing. Between 2008 and 2012, visits to the NYPL increased by 12 percent (in person) and 15 percent (online), and the number of circulated items jumped 44 percent, to 28 million annually. Nor would this be the NYPL's first foray into digital lending: the library also has a robust collection of downloadable titles. Nonetheless, Weine says, the Library's lab division has discussed initiatives similar to the "Underground Library."

Another library system served by the MTA, the Queens Library, is likewise interested but noncommittal: "While right now top priority at the Queens Library is restoring service to six or more days a week, access to library services in train stations and other non-traditional venues is something the library would like to pursue down the road," says Thomas W. Galante, Queens Library's President and CEO.

In the meantime, New York City's readers and researchers can take advantage of their libraries' digital offerings by downloading ebooks, browsing images in digital galleries, and locating branch libraries via their smartphones. And in the future, says a spokesperson, the Queens Library hopes to develop "outdoor customer service plazas," at certain branches, complete with seating, Wi-Fi access, and extended hours.