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Social media

A guide for college and university libraries

Social media is a powerful new form of communication. The number of users on popular social media sites is growing at exponential rates. Facebook has more than 300 million active users,¹ which rivals the population of the United States. From February 2008 to February 2009, Twitter experienced 1,382% growth rate.² Millions of people are using these tools as part of their everyday lives for both work and play.

Because of the ubiquity of social media use, academic libraries can leverage these communication tools to interact with faculty, staff, and students in new ways. It is often difficult in academic libraries to spread the word about different events or services that the library is offering. Social media provides another vein in which to market new library products or initiatives.

In addition to marketing, the simple act of having conversations and creating relationships with patrons is immensely useful. Through conversations on social media, libraries can gain insights into what their users want and need and ultimately understand their users better.

Many libraries are already experimenting with different social media services like Twitter or Facebook to interact and connect with their patrons, yet there are still a number of questions that come up as this is still fairly new territory. “How do I get started?” “What sorts of things should I post?” “How can I grow our social media presence and gain more fans or followers?”

This article seeks to be a practical guide for launching and sustaining a successful social media presence.

Why use social media?

When starting out, the first thing libraries should always do is ask, “Why are we doing this, and what do we hope to gain from it.” There are plenty of great reasons, but you will have to find the ones specific to your library. Framing your new endeavor in these terms gives the project focus and is important whether you are trying out social media, redesigning your Web site, or deciding to replace the furniture in the library.

Asking questions like these will eventually inform what tools you will choose and how you will use them. Once you understand your reasons for implementing a social media presence, the next step is to come up with concrete goals. A goal can be something as simple as, “After one year we will have 100 fans.” The goals you set may eventually evolve into something different as you start using the tools and interacting with patrons, but having goals allows you to know whether you are succeeding.

Not everyone may be keen on something new, though. This is where coming up with reasons for why you should be using these tools comes in handy. Write a brief, well thought out proposal using the reasons you chose. Also include other important information such as who will monitor and post to your social media account. Showing that you have given this idea significant consideration goes a long way. It also may help to offer this idea as a pilot project that you could revisit in

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a year's time. This allows you to revisit your goals to see if you're meeting them.

Prep work

When setting up a social media account it is important to personalize it. No matter which social media service your library decides on, there are a few things that your account should include. Foremost, a link to your library Web site is necessary. Patrons should be able to easily get to your Web site, where they can learn more or begin their research. Almost all social media profiles have a section for a bio or description. Always fill this out. Make it succinct and friendly. This is social media, not your mission statement. Create a welcoming and informal description of the library. There are also always options for customization. Work with these options until you find something that fits your library. You can change colors and backgrounds in Twitter. You can add custom tabs and boxes in Facebook. Take some time to make your library profile unique.

What to post?

After all the preparatory work, you must begin creating content and posting things on a regular basis. This can be one of the more difficult things for anyone starting an institutional social media presence. "What should I post?" "How professional should I be?" Here are a few ideas of things you could post to your social media account:

- **Library news and events**—If you are going to host a gaming night in the library, social media is the perfect place to tell people about it. If your Web site is going to be down for repairs, let people know via your social media accounts. Social media is great for updating people on what is going on.

- **New additions to your collection**—Got some new books? Have a great new bibliographic citation management tool? People might not know about additions to your collection unless you tell them. Social media can be helpful for informing patrons about new resources.

- **Links to articles, videos, etc.**—If you come across Web content that would be rel-

evant or helpful to your patrons, post it. Not everything you post has to be directly related to your library. Do not lose sight of why you started using this tool in the first place, but a variety of postings keep things fresh.

- **Community information**—You can also pass along information of significance to your community via your social media channels. The library is the heart of a college campus. It is natural that it should be a place where people go to get information about the community.

- **Solicit feedback**—Social networking is built for conversations, so feel free to ask questions of your fans or followers. Questions also often get the most response. Ask interesting things that you actually want to know, such as, "Why do you use the library?" When people answer, continue the conversation with your patrons.

- **Respond to people**—Acknowledge compliments to your library gracefully. Reply to negative feedback by addressing the problem people are having and staying positive. For example if someone complains via Twitter that the library is too loud, perhaps a response could be, "Who do we need to come shush? Also we have some great private study rooms in the basement that are quiet as it gets." Using humor, staying positive, and trying to help with the problem are good strategies to use when trying to change people's minds. You have power online to influence conversations about your library, and the worst thing you can do is ignore people.

- **Pictures**—Both Twitter and Facebook allow you, without much hassle, to post or link to pictures. Text can get boring after a while. Enhance your posts by including a picture. For example, if you have an event where an author is on campus, include a picture of him talking to students and tell people to stop by.

- **Anything else**—Get creative with your posts. Do not limit yourself to this list. You know your community. Ask yourself, "What would be interesting or useful to them," and then post that.

When posting content to a social media account like Twitter or Facebook, it is important to remember to be both social and human. Being social means responding to people when they comment on your Facebook wall or @reply to you in Twitter. It means having conversations. Being human involves humor and a personal touch. Not every post has to be strictly library related or in perfectly punctuated English. Be authentic when you are tweeting and let the human behind the post shine through. Users are going to connect with and respond to a human. They'll likely ignore a robotic institution.

How to market your presence

Having interesting, useful content to post is important, but how do you let users know about your social media presence? Just like any new library resource or initiative it is necessary to promote it. "Build it and they will come" is not a viable strategy. "Market it and they may take a look" is much more realistic. Then, if you have interesting content and are engaging they may stick around. The following are several strategies for how to market your social media presence.

- **Link wherever possible**—Have a link to your social media account on your library homepage. If you're on multiple social networks, mention one on the other. Put links to them in your e-mail signature. Links are good. Use them generously.

- **Talk to people**—Word of mouth is one of the most powerful forms of marketing, so mention it to friends, people at the reference desk, and people in your community.

- **Instruction sessions**—When you're in the classroom feel free to mention your social media presence to students. Let them know that you're trying to make it as easy as possible to connect with the library. They just might appreciate it.

- **Print advertising**—Post fliers around your library and around campus, especially next to computers. You could even take out an ad in your local or school newspaper. There's still a place for print.

- **Web ads**—On Facebook you have

the ability to purchase ads targeted to your community. They are fairly inexpensive and some libraries, Stanford being one, have had success with them.

- **Build a contingent of friends**—There are probably people already in your community who you are friends with on a social network. On Facebook you can "suggest a page to friends." Ask people who are your friends to follow/fan the library. You can also mention your social media presence to student workers. They are often some of the first students to follow or fan the library on a social network.

- **Follow and be followed in return**—On Twitter, find people in your community and start following them. Chances are most of them will follow you back. This one is important because the goal of social media is not simply to gain followers. Social media is about sharing, learning, conversations, and giving. Following others shows that you are interested in them and care about what they have to say.

- **Give it time**—Set small goals for yourself and meet them. Then set larger goals. You likely will not attract a thousand followers the first day. Social media requires time and attention, but slowly your presence will grow.

Maintain communication

Having a social media presence is a commitment. It is much like maintaining a friendship. Friendships require constant attention and communication to remain strong. Social media is no different. Much like in real life if you talk only about yourself, people will soon become bored. If you ignore your fans and followers when they are talking to you or post to your profile, they will not continue to talk to you. Constant communication in both directions is crucial to social media success.

When you are just starting out, you may not always get it right. It is okay if things begin slowly or you make a few mistakes. It takes time to learn what sorts of things get reactions from people or how to keep the conversation going. Feel free to experiment

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2. See libraries.mit.edu/oapolicy.
3. See www.arl.org/sparc/advocacy/campus/.
4. One librarian, who had unsuccessfully worked for a binding open access policy at his institution told me, "Focus on the principle of an open access policy, not the implementation. Unfortunately, we focused on the implementation, and the faculty saw it as another workload being forced on them by administration, and they did not support it."



5. See opcit.eprints.org/oacitation-biblio.html.
6. In the worst case scenario, most American institutional policies (including the MIT and Harvard policies) offer an opt-out, which faculty could use in the unlikely event of a recalcitrant publisher.
7. See www.eprints.org/openaccess/policysignup/
8. With the press especially, stick ruthlessly to your message. *zz*

("Social media," continued from page 12)
 from time to time with different or unorthodox posts, but, as with any experiment, remember to note results. See which posts get responses and attempt to replicate them.

Social media, like any other technology, takes a bit of time and play to learn. Once you do get the hang of it, though, you will see a growing, active community begin to emerge. This community can be a powerful thing, and the benefits to both your library and patrons will become clear.

Notes

1. "Statistics," Facebook, 2009, www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics (accessed November 5th, 2009).
2. Michelle McGiboney, "Twitter's Tweet Smell of Success," Nielsen Wire. 18 March 2009, blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/online_mobile/twitters-tweet-smell-of-success/.
3. Chris Bourg, "Our Library Facebook Page," Feral Librarian. 16 October 2008. chrisbourg.wordpress.com/2008/10/16/our-library-facebook-page/ *zz*

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