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Likes, Shares and Follows: Launching a Facebook Page for Your Academic Library

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Abstract

Facebook is a powerful social media platform that, when used correctly, can have beneficial effects for academic library outreach and marketing. However, it is not a catch-all for engagement with students, staff, faculty, and the public. Engagement through Facebook needs to be carefully thought out and well-planned in order to meet the needs of library outreach. This review provides a discussion of best practices, including the content and frequency of posts, and most importantly, tips on how to get started on a library oriented page.

Introduction

Facebook is an online social networking site that allows users to create a profile, viewable to themselves and others. Users can then add friends, create and join online groups, RSVP to public events or even create their own events open to a specific subset of their virtual friends. Facebook started as a place for college students to connect online, but in recent years it has launched into a new digital marketing space as businesses and corporations have realized the potential outreach and customer service orientation that the web-based network gives them. Much of today's student population, though not all, is already very active on social networking sites, including Facebook. A 2013 Pew Research Center survey shows that 67% of American adults who use the Internet are active on Facebook; that is 57% of the total adult population in the United States. While research conducted by Cheung, Chui, and Lee (2010) shows that the primary use of Facebook is still social, its use also now encompasses interaction with businesses, organizations, causes, and events (Facebook, 2016). The main challenge facing these entities is to be important enough for an individual to reach out virtually. In Facebook language, that is called a connection.

Previous research shows that most often, new connections are made in person and then added online, rather than initially connecting through a virtual space (Lampe, Ellison & Steinfield, 2006). This same idea exists in the Facebook relationship between an individual and an organization (Facebook, 2016). This indicates that in order to connect virtually, there must be some relationship in the real world. Academic libraries are at an advantage in this point, as most of their audience is aware of their existence and many interact face to face with librarians and staff on a regular basis. The challenge is posting content that is applicable and engaging enough to supplement, yet not replace, an in-person exchange. This paper will provide a best practices review on creating, sharing, and managing content.

Literature Review

Research on the use of Facebook has been a popular topic in recent years. This review focuses on the use of Facebook among academic libraries to provide context for how libraries look at Facebook as a tool for student engagement. Much research has been done on student use of Facebook. This article should be a starting point for those who are unsure of how to best utilize Facebook, or how to even get started.

Studies (Palmer, 2014; Grieve, Indian, Witteveen, Tolan, & Marrington, 2012; McCorkindale, DiStaso, & Sisco, 2013; Phillips, 2011; Wan, 2011; and Young & Rossman, 2015), show that feelings of social connectedness grow through Facebook. Facebook provides an opportunity to “develop and maintain social connectedness in the online environment” (Grieve, et al., p.604). Libraries have been trying to use this to their advantage for years, however only with the advent of the “organizational” pages in Facebook has there been a concerted effort to market libraries through this medium (Breeding, 2007). Articles about Facebook’s use by academic libraries began to be published around 2007. As noted by Glazer (2009), face to face

interactions with librarians often resulted in the student being acquainted with the physical library, but also led to virtual interactions, including a follow or like on the library's Facebook page. The sentiment of connecting real world interactions with connections in the virtual space is echoed by Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2007, p. 1144), who state that social networks such as Facebook both support "the maintenance of existing social ties and the formation of new connections." As Phillips noted, "Facebook is fundamentally about relationships" (2011, p. 512). Academic libraries, in an effort to create meaningful relationships with students, should embrace social media as a strategy to supplement their already existing means of outreach. In fact, research done in 2015 by Young and Rossman, suggests that there exists a "strong community-building capability of social media" (p. 28). However, as pointed out by Collins (2014), there is a debate over the degree to which resources and time should be used to participate in social media sites, such as Facebook.

Elizabeth Brookbank's article "So Much Social Media, So Little Time: Using Student Feedback to Guide Academic Library Social Media Strategy" reports results of a survey in which students at one university were asked about personal usage of social media, as well as preferences for how the library uses social media. She poses the question wondering if libraries create and manage a Facebook page, does it necessarily mean that students will want to interact with it? (236). Phillips notes the same idea, stating that if "social status were the primary driver for Facebook connections, libraries might not rank high enough on the 'coolness factor' to experience widespread Facebook fans" (513). Social status plays an important role in whom students interact with on Facebook. As noted by Facebook marketing director Randi Zuckerberg, anytime an individual "clicks like or joins a cause, they are building awareness of that message among their friends by aligning themselves with a particular issue" (Vericat, 2010). There is

more to following an organization on Facebook than simply wanting news updates from them. It also reflects who that individual is in their online personae.

It should be noted that much of the literature encompasses multiple forms of social media, and this review focuses solely on Facebook, but many of the management proscriptions made here are equally as applicable to other forms of social media.

Best Practices

Serve YOUR population

The most important idea to note is that social media platforms should be adopted based on local needs and preferences (Brookbank, 2015). Some librarians advocate the need to embrace newer platforms, such as Instagram, as they become popular, and move away from Facebook, (Salomon, 2013), but whatever platform your population is using will be the best tool for your library. Whether that is Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or a different platform will depend on the population of your institution. If you serve a population with limited Internet access, social media strategies may not be for you. The first step in creating your page is to know what your population uses; this will help your outreach succeed.

Facebook is a good starting point because it encompasses each of the currencies in which other platforms are trading. Whereas Twitter sends snippets of text, limited to 140 characters, and Instagram's content is limited to images and videos, Facebook allows for text of any length, links to websites, multimedia postings, including image and video, and curation of albums and events. Essentially it is a one-stop shop for your library's engagement events, public announcements, research tips, holiday hours, and citation tips. This does not mean that Instagram and Twitter should be ignored, but their use should also be compatible with your institution's outreach goals.

Aims and goals - create YOUR content

People are interested in content that is relevant to them. As an institution, you should make sure that your content is applicable to your goals as well as your students' interests. This is a little give and take. It's possible, and even likely in many cases, that what the library wants to showcase and publicize is not of interest to students. They may not even know that it exists, in which case it is appropriate content to create on that topic or service, and educate students about resources. Do you have a writing studio in your library, which will help with the university's retention goals? Posting hours, appointment slots, or the location of the writing studio will help the lab get more traffic, and more importantly, it will also support the overall goal that the institution has put forward.

Depending on what the goals of your library and university are, the content you post may be different than other academic institutions. If the five-year plan of the institution is building civic engagement, content should be relevant to that topic. Are students doing research projects in a particular field? Then highlight a database or collection that would be beneficial to them. Post tips on best search strategies and how to contact librarians if they have questions. If a goal of the semester is to increase circulation of the leisure reading collection, highlighting new books and reader engagement events would be applicable.

Brookbank's (2015) research suggests that students turn to social media to learn about something new, to get news, or to find out about what is going on around campus (p.239). She notes that this survey was student self-reported, and that these are opinions and interests, not necessarily actual use. However, these findings give an idea of what type of content attracts users, what they think the library will provide, and how they believe they would interact with it. It is certainly a starting point to engage with events and news on the campus and larger

community, but that should be in line with your institution's goal, and not limit the content that is produced. If students think of the library as a place to borrow textbooks, it should certainly be publicized on Facebook that course reserves are offered. If a goal of the institution is to provide more quiet study, then publicizing the quiet areas of the library is important.

Content itself is important, but so is appearance. Facebook is a visual medium, and with hundreds of posts in a user's newsfeed, there needs to be something exciting about the post to receive a click. Content should be eye-catching. Long blocks of text should be avoided. Images, whether snapshots, infographics, charts, or a stock photograph, can help to make the post more lively and appealing. Websites such as Canva.com help those without a design or artistic background create colorful and professional looking posts. We are already invested in the content enough to be interested and engaged with it, but putting ourselves in the mindframe of a student might help. Is this something that looks enticing? Does it catch my eye and draw me in to read more? Or, in the case of posting hours or events, do I understand the post? These are a few questions to ask when creating Facebook posts.

It is also important to maintain a conversational tone when writing posts. It often helps to speak the post aloud before hitting enter. Encourage conversations with your audience by posting questions. Are you highlighting leisure reading collections? Pick a few book recommendations and ask what others are reading. Engage with their responses and try to get a dialogue going. If your audience thinks of your Facebook page as another resource, one with a personality, they are more likely to interact.

Make it public - post your content

Once you are happy with your content, it's time to make it public. Research shows that too frequent postings can cause users to unfollow or hide your page, so stick to the less is more

approach (McCorkindale, DiStaso & Sisco, 2013, p. 76). Helpfully, Facebook keeps metrics on engagement and post views. Keep track of these during the first few months of posting and see what content gets the most engagement. Also make a note of what time the post goes live. Though many of us log on multiple times a day, it is useful to see what time posts are best received. Perhaps it's during a free hour on campus, or between day and night classes. Maybe early morning works best for students who also work full time, but perhaps a traditional first-year student will only see posts in mid-afternoon between classes.

Connect through content

Part of the fun of Facebook is connecting with users or institutions. This is an important aspect of making sure that your institutional page does not seem cold or overly formal. Be sure to participate in conversations started on the page, and engage with other Facebook pages from organizations within your institution. Of course, make sure your comments align with your institutional values. Share and like content that the main university or student affairs has posted, and be sure to ask them to share your content, as well. Student affairs may reach a broader audience than the library, but cross-content postings will help both groups reach more users.

Other organizations in your field should be followed and engaged with, as well. Does your school work with high schools in the area? Are you linked with a town, community, or other civic institution? Be sure to follow them through your library account. Not all of their content will be relevant to you or your audience, but by engaging on another organization's page, you will find new followers to connect with and with whom you can share your library specific content.

Publicize your page

Although it can seem counterintuitive to create a publicity campaign for your library's Facebook page, signage, digital or otherwise, should be posted around the library and campus letting individuals know the page exists. Without followers, a Facebook page is sending your well-thought out content into an empty void. Encouraging users to find your page will start the reciprocal connection process, at which point your Facebook page becomes what you advertise events on, instead of using events to promote your Facebook. Often organizations make buttons or pins to "like" and follow us on Facebook. My institution embraced the idea of selfies (or "shelfies") and had a photo taking station set up during Freshman Convocation. We then posted the photos on Facebook. This happened again during Banned Books Week, where students could take pictures in front of a mock mugshot board. Students were encouraged to follow us and tag themselves in the pictures.

Getting Started

Experience not required

A challenge many libraries face is deciding whom should be tasked with the Facebook creation and upkeep. An individual absolutely does not need to be an active Facebook user to get started with a page for your institution. The Facebook learning curve is short. Logging in and posting is the easy part. Creation of content and adherence to your message is the most challenging aspect of running a page. With a team, those duties can be divvied up. One person may have great ideas about how to design an infographic, while another individual may be tasked with logging in and scheduling the post. To create a feel of authenticity and familiarity, sharing ideas a few times a week and chatting informally about Facebook is a good idea.

Building your brand

Facebook is a visual medium, so it is important to brand your page. When deciding on photographs for your cover and profile pictures, choose photographs that are identifiable as your institution and your building. Anyone visiting your page should know its purpose without having to search for information. We have short online attention spans, and spending too much time figuring out what a page is for will distract and discourage your users. To that end, make sure the name is recognizable, and that contact details are included. Website, address, and phone number should all be updated and maintained.

As mentioned above, materials should be created to publicize your new page. Make sure to keep the name on these items so there is no mystery about what they are for. Buttons and pins should have your library name and a Facebook symbol. Digital signage should include a Facebook icon and a link to the new page whenever possible. Table tents are a useful tool to get students' attention as they are studying or working in groups.

Maintain relevance

One of the pitfalls of launching a Facebook page is that it can easily become a low priority, and slip to no-priority. There needs to be a stream of new and engaging information posted in order to keep existing followers and gain new ones. Any new forms of outreach at the library should be placed on Facebook, as well as other forms of digital engagement and outreach. This is why it's often best to have a team in place to manage content, instead of placing that burden on one individual.

Equally important is continuing to reevaluate goals. Content must be appropriate for your institution and your audience. If your institution's goals change, then the content you post will change, too. If a traditional student population transitions into a more non-traditional group, the content will need to be adjusted, as well.

Conclusion

Starting a Facebook page for your university or college library may sound like a daunting task, but it is a tool that, when used correctly, can enhance and increase student engagement. The challenge for academic libraries is to create a social space that feels both like a friend whose updates you look forward to, and a teacher whose class you would not miss. Task your library faculty, staff, and student workers with deciding who your content should speak to, and what goals you want it to achieve. Tie these goals to larger institution-wide goals, as well as library-specific ideas and projects. Create colorful content using photographs, infographics, and videos. Make your page engaging and engaged. Follow and interact with other libraries and university groups to share your content locally, and globally.

Facebook cannot replace the help and care given by a librarian face to face, or even over a virtual reference chat. It can increase your library's virtual space in a way that students seek out your content. Engagement through social media can be difficult, but with a few starting tips it is an easy way to increase your virtual audience and make strides towards institutional goals.

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