Taking Care of Business: Why Libraries Should Incorporate Listening into their Social Media Goals

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Taking Care of Business

Purpose

This article summarizes the importance of practicing social listening and online engagement on behalf of one's library. While the literature shows that libraries, both public and academic, often strategize their social media goals to include listening, a concerted effort should be made by all libraries with an online presence to take an active role in engagement. By including social listening in one's social media plan, goals and objectives, a library can anticipate a higher rate of engagement and meaningful interactions with their patrons.

Literature Review

Social media is used by libraries of all types and sizes. Libraries often share content relating to library news and current events regarding events and collections; in other words, outreach and promotion (King, 2015). Other uses that libraries employ for social media include assessment, reference services, education, and collection building (Mon, 2015).

Social listening is defined by Stewart and Arnold (2016) as actively "observing, interpreting, and responding" to digital conversations. Sometimes referred to as "lurking," "stalking" and other pejorative terms, listening via social media allows for businesses to "forge a closer relationship with customers, gain information about products, and enhance public personae" (Crawford, 2009). Fournier, Quelch and Rietveld (2016) describe listening as a way for "marketers to economically and regularly peer inside people's lives as they are being lived, without introducing biases through direct interaction" (p.2).

Social media is seen as an easy and cost-effective way for libraries to demonstrate their value (Gaha & Hall, 2015). Ned Potter (2015) noted librarians should take advantage of informal social media tools such as Twitter because "you can boost your reputation, you can reach new

audiences, you can engage existing customers and you can really show some personality" (p.167). Especially for academic libraries, social media can be seen as a new and trending way to interact with students while also introducing information literacy concepts (Palmer, 2014). With the advent of networking groups and pages, libraries have also come to see social media as an interactive, community-driven tool, as opposed to just a way to broadcast information to users (Young & Rossmann, 2015). As one participant noted in a 2014 survey, users "don't get on social media to listen to you, they get on social media to be heard" (Smeaton & Davis, 2014, p.229).

Practical Implications

Businesses large and small can participate in social listening, and libraries are no different. Listening can be seen as a powerful customer relation tool: what are people saying about our brand and our products, and how can we engage with them so they will come back for more? Furthermore, what are people saying about us when they think we can't hear them?

Libraries often forget that they are a business, and that they too have products to "sell." Their brand is their core mission: their goals are to serve the public, teach information literacy concepts, create a community of lifelong readers and tech users, develop enticing events/workshops/programs, and more. The products that libraries offer are the wealth of physical and online materials accessed from catalogs, databases, and discovery tools. Therefore, even if money does not exchange hands, libraries still exist for and profit from their patrons. Patrons are library customers, and it is time that we treated them as such. Social listening is one way to accomplish this, via cultivating online comments and conversations.

Social media pages, groups and accounts are often treated as online message boards. Libraries create content and then post the same message to their website, their newsletters, and

their various accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc. While this message may be a worthwhile one - a catchy phrase and enticing photo to highlight a library's collections, resources, databases, etc. - when sent off into the ether, it becomes nothing more than noise. Library staff members wait with bated breath to see if their patrons interact with the message. Do they like it, share it, and comment on it? If patrons do one of the scripted responses, library staff can rejoice! If not, staff can cut their losses and move on to the next message.

The main issue with focusing on curated content is that we as social media administrators expect too much. First, we expect that the majority of our patrons see most posts, tweets, and photos that we upload to social media. While this may have been true in the early years of social media, due to strangling algorithms and the sheer amount of accounts the average person follows, this is not the case (King, 2015). We also expect our patrons to care; not only are they dying to learn about the new database we have acquired for them, but they also want to like and share the news with their friends! Rather than asking a patron to settle for a post or tweet that the library decides is important, libraries should instead focus on what the patron says and thinks.

In the online world, libraries are competing with dozens, if not hundreds of other organizations and groups that are followed by a single user. When multiplied by hundreds or thousands of users that may follow a library account, it's easy to see how we may fall to the bottom of the pile. How is a library supposed to compete with Apple, the New York Times, or a recent meme on Facebook or Twitter? One post on social media is a flash in the pan, and forgotten quickly. In order to meet perceived demands, library social media administrators tend to focus on content creation and curation in sheer numbers: five posts a day to Facebook, three tweets per day, etc. By making a goal of the number of times libraries throw out a lifeline, we are

looking at the wrong information. Libraries need to follow the path already set by businesses that care for and cultivate personal, online relationships with their patrons.

At the University of North Florida's Thomas G. Carpenter Library in Jacksonville, Florida, social listening has become a hallmark of its social media policy. For the first five years of the Carpenter Library's presence on social media (2009-2014), content creation was king. Expressed goals were only dedicated to writing and posting original, informational, and thought-provoking posts on Facebook and Twitter that would hopefully be liked and shared by the library's followers. Once it became clear that the library's social media accounts were receiving fewer interactions, it was decided to take a proactive rather than passive approach to engagement.

As of 2016, the Carpenter Library's three fundamental goals for social media include:

1. Increase awareness of our organization and the services, events, spaces, and resources we offer

2. Listen to, communicate with, and engage online users in order to foster norms of reciprocity and trust while also building a sense of community

3. Simply and effectively use tools and media to connect with our constituents, including students, staff, and the community at large

The three goals can be summed up by a quote from Harry Glazer (2012), "[b]e interesting…be interested" (p.20). To expand on that, while the #1 goal in the Carpenter Library's social media policy is to create and post engaging content to Facebook, Twitter, etc., the #2 goal is to actually engage with patrons (namely students). By listening, the Carpenter Library aims to create opportunities for interactions, troubleshooting, and goodwill, while also

building a sense of community between the library and its patrons. This community is fostered by library staff who actively seek out patrons, whether affiliated with the University or not, who mention or feature the Library on social media. Once these instances have been discovered, a connection is created and encouraged with that patron by replying to, liking, and/or sharing their content from the Library's social media account.

The Carpenter Library, which goes by @unflibrary for its social media accounts, made the switch away from concentrating on original content in 2013. Its social media plan for 2016/17 breaks down the content to be 50% original, 40% listening, and 10% shared from other sources. Almost half of staff time is spent on actively monitoring social media channels and responding to comments and questions on Facebook and Twitter.
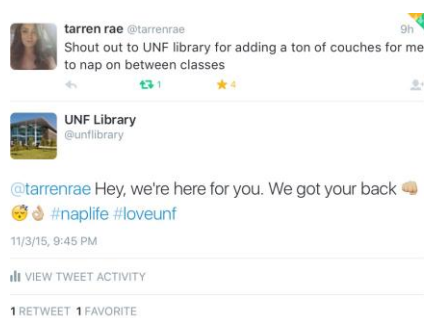

Figure 1: Example of a positive and friendly interaction with a student on Twitter

While the majority of the Carpenter Library's listening is focused on Twitter, a largely open and searchable network, the Carpenter Library also listens on Facebook and Instagram. In order to track patron comments about the library's services, resources, events, and much more, library staff began monitoring specific keywords and hashtags, as well as the Library and its University as locations. Common keywords and hashtags are used by various individuals and

groups on social media. By simply researching which keywords and hashtags were most likely to mention the library, the Carpenter Library built a list of listening practices.

Deciding on keywords and hashtags for which to listen came down to research and getting a feel of our audience. Because the majority of those we wished to reach and interact with were students, we began by following words and phrases that were created for and by our student population. Examples of keywords and hashtags include:

- "UNF Library"
- "Thomas G. Carpenter Library"
- "Carpenter Library"
- #loveUNF
- #SWOOPLife
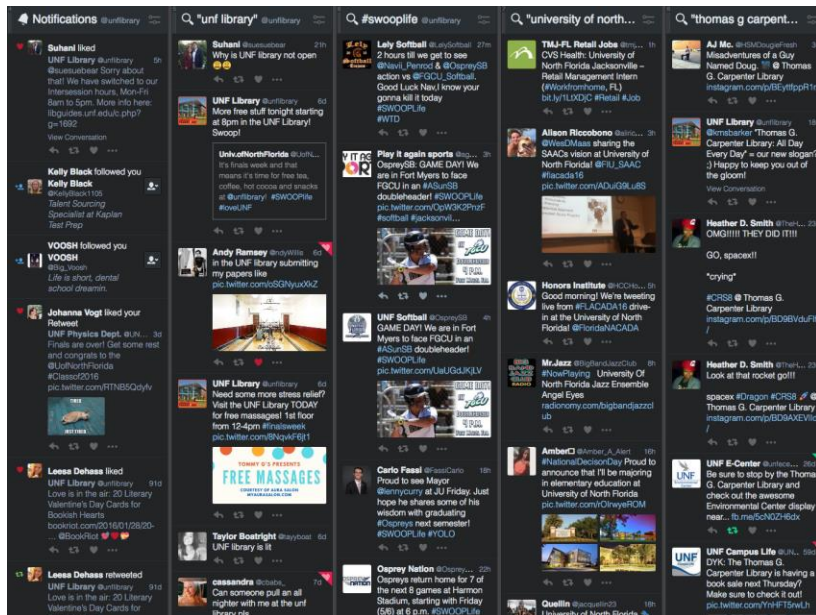
Figure 2: A view of the @unflibrary and how it listens on TweetDeck

It is important in these examples to stress that keywords, hashtags, and geotags will change based on location and also on the type of library that is doing the listening. While the Carpenter Library is academic, listening can be done by any library type or size. Organizations who create and publicize their own hashtags as part of campaigns can follow these to gauge interest, but listening is far more effective when organic keywords and phrases are discovered and monitored. This can lead to some interesting discoveries; for example, Carpenter Library staff discovered that students were referring to the Library by nicknames such as "Tommy G's" and "Tom's House" simply by finding mentions of this on Twitter. These nicknames have since been added to the list of terms to listen for on social media.

The Carpenter Library's social media team consists of one full time faculty member, one full time staff member, several faculty backups, and two-to-three student assistants. The full time

faculty and staff members are responsible for listening and the majority of original content creation, whereas the student assistants also aid with the creation of content. Listening takes an estimated 30 minutes a day: luckily, much of it can be automated with the use of tools.

There are several free tools available that make listening quick and easy for social media administrators. The Carpenter Library utilizes the following:

- **TweetDeck**: a Twitter dashboard application that updates automatically and allows users to create feeds that follow hashtags, keywords, users and more
- **HootSuite**: a social media manager that links with many platforms. Multiple accounts and team members can be added, but the free version limits these
- **Feedly**: an RSS feed aggregator that can be organized and shared. Some social media platforms, like Instagram and Twitter, can easily be transferred into feeds
- **TagBoard**: follow hashtags across platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, for example) and create shareable "boards" similar to Pinterest

Because of its social listening practices, meaningful conversations have taken place between library staff and patrons, especially on Twitter. These conversations cover a wide range and can fall anywhere between positive and negative, as well as between scholarly and pure fun. One week students can be seen on Twitter complaining about the temperature in the library building, or about the state of the second floor women's restroom. The next week, a member of the community can be witnessed tweeting her thanks to the library's Special Collections and Archives department for their generous assistance on her research. The week after that, a faculty member will post a picturesque photo of his view from the third floor reading room while he works on his next publication.

Figure 3: A student compliments the library on Instagram for its selection of reading materials

By listening, library staff has immediate access to patron concerns and compliments. Both types of comments are valuable, depending on the situation, and can lead to further avenues for engagement. If a patron voices a concern or question, a library staff member will see it and respond accordingly. Seeing these mentions about the library is only half the battle: the next step is engagement. Whether the tweet is positive or negative, library staff should take into account the practice of interaction. Response times vary from a few minutes, to a day - depending on the hour or day on which the comment was made. The actual response time is less important than the quality of the response.

The Carpenter Library makes a habit of not only recognizing and responding to negative comments on social media; positive comments can lead to similarly meaningful interactions with patrons. If a patron posts a photo and comments that highlight a favorite library book, or a comfy spot on the third floor to study, the library's account responds by liking/favoriting and thanking

the patron for their kind words and beautiful photo. Oftentimes the patron responds in kind by thanking the library, sharing the library's post, and then following the library's account. In many cases, the patron was probably not aware that the Carpenter Library was active on social media, but once the avenue of conversation has been opened, they are more likely to interact with us online.

Figure 4: Student comments collected from social media during finals week construction

Listening not only creates ample opportunities for worthwhile interactions, but it also has the opportunity to provide libraries with valuable statistical data. For example, the Carpenter Library used listening in Fall 2014 to gauge reactions from students regarding the construction of its Library Commons. While several patrons took to social media to voice their excitement over the project, which completely renovated the library's first and second floors, more than 80% of the comments were negative due to construction taking place the week before final exams. Students were understandably upset, and voiced their disdain to their friends and followers on Facebook and Twitter. These comments were individually recognized and replied to; excuses and apologies were made on behalf of library staff, and many students appreciated the effort.

Other than these individual interactions, each post and tweet was collected into a spreadsheet and presented to library administration, as an example of student negative reactions.

Value

As a result of its new social media policies, the number of engagements and interactions with UNF students and members of the community have almost doubled in the last two years. Students and staff recognize it for the reliable, friendly, and helpful online community, and many other UNF-affiliated accounts have followed suit to actively engage online.

Social listening is the solution to both passive posting and inactive followers. By actively seeking out interactions, libraries can become the active party in a conversation. The onus is therefore taken from the patron, who can now enjoy a friendly and helpful connection built upon his or her own terms.

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