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MARKETING THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY WITH ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORK ADVERTISING

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Abstract

Facebook is now a ubiquitous part of the lives of many university students across the world. The libraries that serve them now have an opportunity to leverage this online social network to promote their services and resources. However, the effectiveness of a library's efforts in this area will depend greatly on the number of connections it can make between its users and its Facebook presence. Building on a previous investigation that suggested online advertising might be a cost-effective way to achieve this goal, this paper investigates the relative effectiveness of several different approaches to Facebook advertising. To his end, the results of several advertising campaigns conducted by an academic library in Hong Kong are analyzed. Based on the results of these campaigns, it is suggested that social network advertising is effective in promoting the library at a surprisingly minimal financial cost. Academic libraries can consider using social network advertising to complement their existing marketing efforts.

Keywords: marketing, advertising, academic libraries, social networks, Facebook

Introduction

Over the past half-decade, the social networking phenomenon has continued to grow exponentially. A growing number of people visit various social networking platforms as an integral part of their daily routine ("Friends in Online Places", 2011). Service providers have sought to monetize their products. Given their millions of users and billions of pageviews, advertising is one area where much effort has been made. Commercial entities have found success in using social networks to promote their brands. This paper will explore how non-profit organizations like academic libraries might also benefit from paid advertising on social networks, and will investigate whether such activity can generate an acceptable return on investment.

Background

The Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) is a relatively small government-funded

institution with an enrollment of approximately 8,400 students of all levels, ranging from sub-degree to PhD programmes. Late in 2010, HKBU Library conducted a small scale pilot of Facebook advertising. The results of this initial experiment were positive and suggested that such advertising was a potentially cost-effective way of promoting the Library and its services (Chan, 2011). However, that rather basic campaign utilised only one type of advertisement. Since the pilot was run, Facebook has added several new features to its advertising application. Given these developments and the relative success of the pilot project, HKBU Library embarked on several additional advertising campaigns. This paper will report on the results of these subsequent social media marketing efforts.

Literature Review

This review will primarily focus on what evidence already exists as to the effectiveness of social network advertising (SNA) and its potential role in marketing the academic library. Before proceeding to that discussion, it is first necessary to provide a concrete definition of what is meant by a “social network site” (SNS). A widely-used definition is one provided by boyd and Ellison (2008, p. 211), who characterize SNSs as web-based services that allow individuals to:

1. Construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system
2. Articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection
3. View and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system

In this paper, SNA refers specifically to any form of paid advertising that appears on such sites.

By far the most popular SNS in the world today is Facebook. In its recent filing with the United States financial authorities ahead of a planned initial public offering of shares in the company, Facebook revealed that it now has 845 million monthly active users. Additionally, it reported that over half of these users (425 million) logged into the SNS every day (Facebook, Inc., 2012). The current dominance of Facebook in the SNS sphere is undeniable. However, it is uncertain as to how long Facebook will maintain its position as the undisputed leader of the SNS space. Previous market leaders such as MySpace and Friendster fell into obscurity after a period of popularity. Friendster’s problems stemmed from a breakdown in the trust users placed in the site (boyd & Ellison, 2008, pp. 215-216), and there is no guarantee that this will not happen to Facebook. New products may also come to prominence. For example, Google has been trying to break into this market for some time, with Google+ being its latest attempt. Nevertheless, in the current environment, any study of the possible impact of SNA on academic libraries must necessarily focus on Facebook to be relevant.

Academic librarians have been aware of Facebook for some time, although it seems that the initial reaction to it was lukewarm. Charnigo and Barnett-Ellis (2007) surveyed the attitude of academic librarians towards Facebook, and found that most could be described as being

apathetic. Although not overtly hostile to the use of the SNS within libraries, one respondent expressed the opinion that Facebook was “not an appropriate venue” to promote library services. That research was completed some time ago, and since then some academic librarians have attempted to use Facebook in their work. A later survey conducted by Hendrix, Chiarella, Hasman, Murphy, and Zafron (2009) that focused specifically on academic health sciences libraries found that only 11 out of 72 responding libraries maintained a presence on Facebook. However, those libraries that did have a Facebook presence felt positive about the future success of their Facebook initiatives, and with using the platform to market the library.

It is useful to consider why there might be reason to have such high expectations for the use of Facebook as a marketing tool, and what advantages a Facebook presence might have over more traditional library marketing strategies. This requires a basic understanding of the most common way that libraries (and indeed most organizations) maintain a Facebook presence. The library creates a “Page”, which is a permanent, customizable profile. Users can then choose to become “fans” of the library by indicating that they “like” its page. After liking the page, fans will begin to receive updates posted by the library to their News Feed, a core Facebook feature. This is essential to understand, as it has been asserted that Facebook users rarely go out and seek information on Facebook, rather they browse those items that come into their News Feed (Miller & Jensen, 2007, p. 19). Furthermore, users are able to like and share these library updates. These will in turn be fed into the News Feeds of their Facebook friends, many of whom are very likely to be their classmates. In this way, information about library services can organically spread among the user population. This phenomenon has been described as a type of “electronic word-of-mouth” (eWOM) in the business literature, and it is recognized as a potentially critical promotional tool (Chu & Kim, 2011).

There are several advertising case studies that demonstrate the effectiveness of eWOM on Facebook. A Facebook campaign by Unilever to promote its Lynx brand of deodorant stressed the “open, conversational, and ‘always on’ nature” of its interactions with users (Sykes, Harrison, & Clark, 2011, p. 3), and it was shown that this strategy was highly effective in influencing consumer behaviour. In another campaign, Equifax (a consumer credit reporting agency) created a Facebook Page with the intent of encouraging users to join and share the content they posted to the page with their friends. Their eWOM gradually took off, with the marketers involved reporting that “[a]s our fan base grew, we found that a positive atmosphere organically developed where fans felt comfortable enough to create dialogue with Equifax and speak to each other” (Direct Marketing Organization, 2010, p. 8).

Considering these experiences and the nature of how eWOM works on SNSs like Facebook, it becomes clear that the impact of a Page is directly related to the number of fans that the Page has. What strategies can be put in place to grow the fan base? An obvious tactic is to pay for advertising on the SNS itself, and this method has been exploited to great effect by commercial enterprises. One campaign reported increasing their fan base from 9,000 to 19,000 within 24 hours of placing their first advertisements (Interactive Advertising Bureau, 2010, p. 3).

Non-profit making organizations seem to be much more reluctant in trying out paid SNS advertising. In an examination of university health centre Facebook Pages, Waters, Canfield, Foster, and Harvey (2011) suggested the use of dialogic principles to organically build the number of fans of this type of Page. No mention is made of the possibility of using paid advertising. Discussing the Facebook experience of their academic library, Graham, Faix, and Hartman (2009, p. 235) say that Facebook Pages are “difficult to promote without paying for Facebook advertisements”. Although they do not say so explicitly, their statement implies that paid advertisement is not something that many libraries will consider. This attitude could be the result of a belief that such advertising would be expensive.

In fact, as several authors in the business studies discipline have noted, tangible results can be achieved with SNA at relatively little expense (Neff, 2009). Writing from the perspective of the benefits to small businesses, Harris and Rae (2009) assert that courting Facebook fans raises brand awareness and builds customer relationships at a very low cost. Expenditure on advertising can be kept at an absolute minimum because Facebook enables the precise targeting of consumers by advertisers (“Friends in Online Places”, 2011). In the academic library context, an advertising campaign can be targeted at only those Facebook users who have indicated that they are students at the university in question. As reported in the author’s previous study, this approach meant that a two-month long SNA campaign for an academic library cost a modest US\$60 in total (Chan, 2011, p. 368). However, it should be noted that the literature on SNA is not universally positive. Hadija, Barnes, and Hair (2012) have reported that most users may actually ignore social network advertising. This might be mitigated by aligning advertisements with user interests – specifically it has been suggested they should have entertainment, informational, or social value (Taylor, Lewin, & Strutton, 2011). In other words, careful thought and planning should go into any paid SNA campaign to ensure the money committed is well-spent.

Given the potential benefits described in this review, it is arguable that the trivial financial costs should not deter libraries from at least experimenting with SNA. In the hope of providing some additional evidence to support this view, this paper will build upon the author’s previous experiences with using paid SNA to promote the library. During the period between September 2011 and March 2012, three campaigns were conducted by HKBU Library, each focused on a different feature of Facebook advertising. A full description of each campaign will be provided, together with an assessment of its effectiveness.

Methodology and Results

The process of setting up a Facebook advertising campaign is relatively straightforward, and was described in some detail in the study that preceded this paper (Chan, 2011, pp. 364-366) therefore a complete description will not be repeated here. A brief summary of the steps involved will suffice:

1. Advertisement design: All Facebook advertisements must conform to a standard layout, consisting of a small image and a short text message (limited to 135 characters).
2. Advertisement targeting: This is the key advantage of Facebook as an advertising platform. For academic libraries, it generally makes sense to target only those who identify themselves as currently attending their parent institution.
3. Pricing configuration: The default pricing model is to pay for the number times the advertisement is clicked. An auction model is used to set the exact price, thus it is necessary to specify the highest amount (“bid”) you are willing to pay for each click. The system will provide a suggested amount.

While advertising on Facebook always involves these basic steps, there is significant scope for experimentation. For example, choice of image and text, selection of targeting options, the number of different advertisements run in the campaign, campaign length, etc. In addition, Facebook has regularly introduced new features for advertisers which provide further options to enhance the effectiveness of advertisements.

The following sections will present the results of HKBU Library’s exploration of some different approaches to Facebook advertising:

1. Sponsored stories
2. Wide targeting
3. Advertising library services other than the Facebook Page

In each section, an account of the rationale behind each approach will be provided, together with a brief description of the setup process. Then the campaign results for each approach will be presented and discussed.

Sponsored Stories

Sponsored Stories are a specific type of advertisement designed to leverage the social nature of the Facebook platform. Unlike regular advertisements, which contain image and text chosen by the advertiser, Sponsored Stories are existing posts (referred to as stories) created by users that the advertiser has paid to highlight to that user’s connections on Facebook. For example, when a user likes a Page, this automatically generates a story that is posted to the user’s News Feed, where it can be seen by their friends on Facebook. However, this story will only appear once, and may not be noticed by all of their friends given the amount of content that passes through the News Feed of the average user. The Sponsored Stories advertising option allows the Page owner to highlight the fact that the user has liked their Page, and repeatedly display the advertisement to that user’s connections on Facebook. Implicit in this approach is the

idea that users who see that their friend likes something may also be inclined to like it.

To test the efficacy of Sponsored Stories compared to regular Facebook advertisement in attracting fans to the HKBU Library Facebook Page, a two month advertising campaign was run during the first semester of the 2011-2012 academic year. A single sponsored story advert was created that would highlight the Facebook Page to the friends of current fans. Targeting options were set so that only HKBU students who were not already connected to the Page would be exposed to the ad, as illustrated in Figure 1 below:



Figure 1 - Sponsored Story advertisement preview

To make the comparison with regular advertisements, two were prepared. Both consisted of a photograph and accompanying text, as shown in Figure 2 below:



Figure 2 - Regular advertisement previews

The results of this campaign are presented in Table 1 below:

| Advert Name | Impressions | Clicks | Connections (new fans attracted) | Spent (US\$) | Cost per connection (US\$) |
|----------------------|-------------|--------|--|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| Sponsored Story | 463,607 | 146 | 64 | \$61.97 | \$0.97 |
| Learning Event Photo | 72,038 | 54 | 11 | \$11.89 | \$1.08 |
| Reference Desk Photo | 177,907 | 57 | 8 | \$22.26 | \$2.78 |

Table 1 – Sponsored Stories campaign results

It is immediately apparent from the results that the Sponsored Story was far superior in generating new fans for the page, accounting for 64 new connections. This represents more than three times the combined total of the two regular adverts. In terms of value for money, the sponsored story adverts were also the cheapest, with the cost of each new fan working out to just under one US dollar. The advantage of the sponsored story in this area was less clear cut, as the regular advert featuring a learning event photo achieved a similar cost per new fan. However, there was a clear difference when compared to the reference desk photo advertisement, which ended up costing US\$2.78 per new fan. Also important is the obviously higher conversion ratio of the Sponsored Story. Approximately 44% of those who clicked on the advertisement became a fan of the page. This compares with 20% and 14% for the two regular advertisements.

Overall, the results for this campaign suggest that sponsored stories are quite effective and cost-efficient in attracting new fans to a Facebook page, especially in comparison to regular advertisements. However, it might simply be the case that the regular advertisements prepared for this campaign were simply not attractive to the target users. A different image accompanied by different text could well have been just as effective (or perhaps even more effective) than the sponsored stories. The large gulf in cost-effectiveness between the two regular adverts in this campaign certainly highlights the importance of experimentation so that the best combination of image and text for regular Facebook adverts can be found.

Wide targeting

As previously discussed, the targeting of advertisements is a key Facebook Adverts feature for academic libraries, as it ensures that adverts are only shown to the parent institution's students. However, Facebook relies on users voluntarily providing information about their educational status, and simple arithmetic suggests that most HKBU students do not do so. Although the enrollment at HKBU is approximately 8,400, the adverts application in Facebook provides an estimated potential target population of only 1,800 when HKBU students are specified. Even assuming that only half of students have a Facebook account (which is an extremely conservative assumption judging from anecdotal observation), there are at least several thousand Facebook users that have not indicated their affiliation with HKBU to Facebook. In an attempt to reach this category of student, an advert was designed that would target friends of existing fans. The rationale here was that friends of existing HKBU Library fans would include a large number of HKBU students. Of course, students have lives outside of university, so a further restriction to only those aged between 18 and 19 was made. This still resulted in a potential target population of over 43,000 – or more than five times the number of current HKBU students. The wording of the advertisement thus had to be changed to reflect the uncertainty that the viewer was indeed an HKBU student. The setup options are shown in

Figure 5 below:

The screenshot shows the 'Advert Preview' and 'Targeting' sections of a Facebook advertisement setup. The 'Advert Preview' section displays a thumbnail image of a building and the text: 'Hong Kong Baptist University... Are you an HKBU student? Keep up to date with the Library's events and services by liking our Facebook page! You like this.' Below the preview are links for 'View on site' and 'Create a similar advert'. The 'Targeting' section is titled 'This advert targets 43,200 users:' and lists three criteria: 'who live in Hong Kong', 'exactly between the ages of 18 and 19 inclusive', and 'who are not already connected to Hong Kong Baptist University Library (HKBU Library)'. It also includes a fourth criterion: 'whose friends are already connected to Hong Kong Baptist University Library (HKBU Library)'. The suggested bid is listed as '\$2.90-3.69 HKD'.

Figure 3 - Wide targeting advertisement setup and preview

The campaign was allowed to run for approximately one month, from 8 February to 9 March 2012. For comparative purposes, a sponsored story advertisement was run alongside the wide targeting advertisement. The sponsored story used a more standard targeting model, i.e. shown only to those Facebook users declaring themselves to be HKBU students. Table 3 shows the results of the campaign:

| Advert Name | Impressions | Clicks | Connections (new fans attracted) | Spent (US\$) | Cost per connection (US\$) |
|-----------------------|-------------|--------|--|-----------------|----------------------------------|
| Wide Targeting Advert | 713,794 | 220 | 36 | \$70.21 | \$1.95 |
| Sponsored Story | 169,604 | 37 | 17 | \$15.25 | \$0.89 |

Table 3 – Wide targeting campaign results

The wide targeting advertisement certainly generated a large number of clicks and impressions, and attracted almost twice as many fans as the sponsored story. However, this came at a clear cost, as only a small proportion (16%) of clicks on the advert were converted to new fans. This can probably be attributed to the fact that the advertisement was exposed to a number of Facebook users who were not HKBU students. The cost per connection was thus much greater than that of the sponsored story, although the absolute number of connections produced was higher. It can therefore be suggested that wider targeting of advertisements has the potential to attract fans more quickly, but the required financial cost will be greater.

Promoting Library services other than the Facebook Page

HKBU Library's prior experiments with Facebook advertising had focused on attracting more fans to the Library Facebook page. However, Facebook advertisements can be used to promote links and resources beyond the Facebook system. By linking to an external URL,

advertisements could potentially bring Library services to the attention of users that do not frequent those channels regularly used for marketing the library (in HKBU Library's case, this includes the library website and the University's e-announcement system).

To explore the efficacy and value of this approach, a campaign was organized to support the launch of the Library's new mobile website in January 2012. Two different advertisements were prepared. The first featured a modified version of the graphic prepared for posters promoting the mobile website, plus a small amount of text inviting users to try the new product. Instead of linking to the Library Facebook page, clicking on the link directs the user to a library announcement page containing a short promotional video. This advert was targeted only to those who were already fans of the Library's Facebook page. The reasoning here was that it would be more cost-effective to promote the service among those who had already expressed an interest in the Library. The appearance and targeting options of this advertisement are presented as Figure 3 below:



The screenshot displays the Facebook Ad Manager interface. On the left, under the 'Advert Preview' tab, there is an advertisement for 'HKBU Library Mobile' with the URL 'hkbu.edu.hk'. The ad features a graphic of a smartphone displaying the library's mobile website and the text: 'Try out the Library's new mobile website - search the Catalogue and renew your books, all on your smartphone!'. Below the preview are links for 'View on site' and 'Create a similar advert'. On the right, the 'Targeting' tab is active, showing that the advert targets 1,040 users. The targeting criteria are listed as: 'who live in Hong Kong', 'between the ages of 18 and 25 inclusive', and 'who are connected to Hong Kong Baptist University Library (HKBU Library)'. The suggested bid is shown as '\$2.82-3.69 HKD'.

Figure 4 - HKBU Library Mobile advertisement preview

The second advertisement took advantage of another Facebook Adverts feature, namely the ability to promote Facebook Page posts. In a similar manner to sponsored stories, a page post advert allows a page owner to promote an item that they have posted to their Facebook Page to give it greater exposure. Targeting was originally also only to focus on existing fans. However, since this advert provided a link to the Library Facebook Page, there was an opportunity to attract new fans as well. Therefore, targeting was set to all those Facebook users who had indicated that they were HKBU students. The setup options for the page post advert are shown below in Figure 4:

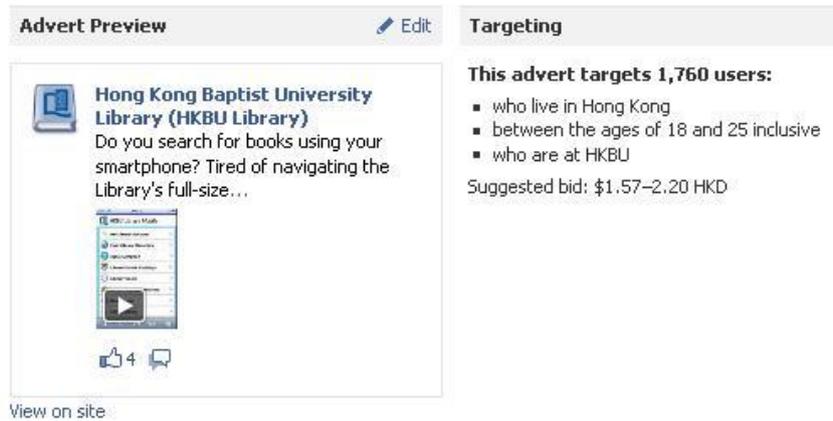


Figure 5 - Page Post advertisement preview

Unlike previous campaigns, the duration of the HKBU Library Mobile campaign was intentionally made to be quite brief. The adverts ran for three weeks, from 10 January to 31 January 2012. The results of the campaign are presented below in Table 2:

| Advert Name | Impressions | Clicks | Connections (new fans attracted) | Spent (US\$) | Cost per click (US\$) |
|-------------------------------|-------------|--------|--|-----------------|--------------------------|
| HKBU Library Mobile Advert | 42,278 | 14 | 0 | \$5.19 | \$0.37 |
| Page Post Advert | 179,041 | 87 | 12 | \$19.96 | \$0.23 |

Table 2 – HKBU Library Mobile promotion campaign results

For this campaign, the connections statistic is less relevant in assessing performance (indeed, because of the targeting settings used, it was impossible for the first advert to generate new connections). Clicks are a better indicator in this regard than impressions, as users who click the advertisement will generally be consciously aware of the content. In aggregate, the campaign generated about 100 clicks. Relative to the publicity generated via regular non-Facebook channels (library website, university e-announcement), this might be considered a little disappointing. According to our web analytics data, the HKBU Library Mobile announcement was accessed about 280 times via non-Facebook sources. Nevertheless, the amount of publicity that was generated by the Facebook campaign was quite good value, given the trifling amount of time and money (about US\$25) expended.

As in the previous campaign, there was a wide difference in performance between the advertisements used. In hindsight, it may have been a mistake to restrict the poster graphic advertisement to existing fans only. This again highlights the need for advertisements to be well-targeted and attractive in order to achieve their maximum potential impact. As a welcome

side-effect, the page post advert generated 12 new fans for the Library Facebook page. This is of some interest as these users will have likely been exposed to the previous campaigns designed to attract fans to the page, yet did not decide to become fans at that time. It can be speculated that these particular users may have found the Library's mobile website to be of interest to them, and thus the content of the advertisement may have appealed to them in a way that the Library's previous Facebook advertisements did not.

Conclusion

From the above discussion of the three campaigns, it is clear that experimentation with advertising on Facebook is important in order to establish which approaches are most successful. The best strategy may vary from organization to organization. It does seem clear that advertisements that employ social features such as Sponsored Stories fair better than regular advertisements, although it may just be matter of identifying more attractive images and text to use for those regular advertisements. Both types were able to attract new fans to the library's Facebook Page. As for the efficacy of using SNA to promote a specific library service, the impact of the campaign was less than might have been hoped. However, it can be asserted that the modest amount of attention and publicity generated came at a miniscule cost.

Indeed, the cost-effectiveness of SNA is probably the most important general theme to arise from the results of this study. Libraries should certainly not shy away from SNA for financial reasons. After all, it is not unusual to see libraries offering gadgets such as iPhones and iPads as incentives to complete surveys or as prizes for competitions. The cheapest version of the latest iPad costs about US\$500. For this price, a well-targeted campaign of attractive Facebook advertisements has the potential to bring 500 new fans to a library's Facebook page. In the long run, this type of network could be invaluable in the marketing and promotion of library services.

This study has assumed that having a Facebook Page with a large number of fans is beneficial to an academic library's marketing efforts. While this makes intuitive sense, it has not yet been conclusively established. Future studies might try to evaluate the actual impact that a Facebook Page has in terms of promoting library services. This could be achieved through the analysis of the usage data provided to Facebook Page owners, and perhaps also by surveying the library's user population. If it were found that having a large number of fans was extremely beneficial, the case for libraries paying for SNA would be further bolstered.

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