

12-3-2013

Twitter in special libraries: a distributed social media strategy

Ilana Stonebraker

Purdue University, stonebraker@purdue.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/lib_fsdocs

Recommended Citation

Barnes, Ilana. "Twitter in special libraries: a distributed social media strategy." *Public Services Quarterly* 10.1 (2014): 62-65.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Special Libraries, Special Challenges Column

Special Libraries, Special Challenges is a column dedicated to exploring the unique public services challenges that arise in libraries that specialize in a particular subject, such as law, medicine, business, and so forth. In each column, the author will discuss public service dilemmas and solutions that arise specifically in given subject libraries while drawing links to how such issues affect librarianship in general. Special or subject-matter librarians interested in authoring a piece for this column are invited to contact Ilana Barnes at ibarnes@purdue.edu.

This column is written by the column editor, Ilana Barnes. Ilana Barnes is Business Information Specialist (Assistant Professor of Library Science) at Purdue University.

Twitter in Special Libraries: A Distributed Social Media Strategy

Introduction

It is a truism that social media continues to be an ever present method of getting information about your library out to your patrons. There are numerous examples of success. Columbus Metropolitan Library has approximately 31,000 likes on Facebook (Dowd, 2013). Other libraries such as the Library of Congress, New York Public Libraries and the Smithsonian Institution have very successful Twitter and Facebook pages (Kho, 2011).

This column chronicles a summer 2013 pilot project establishing a Twitter account for the Parrish Library of Management and Economics at Purdue University. This is by no means the glowing success of Columbus or the Library of Congress, but shows how special libraries can distribute social media duties for increased success and longevity by aligning it with existing duties across a special library.

Include Staff and Students as well as Librarians

72% of online adults are social networking site users (Center, 2013). As social media is often perceived as an individual activity, it can be tempting to assign one person to handle the social media presence of an institution. However, special libraries should consider having a distributed social media strategy, meaning that different levels of the organization tweet different things. For example, at Parrish Library, students and staff tweet library hours and lost and found items, whereas librarians tweet about resources and research tips. A library is more than its librarians: distribution allows for many different voices to be included in the project and also extends training to many different stakeholders. That way during staff or librarian turn over, there are still people trained on the social media strategy. A wide range of employees contributing to the feed will also lend itself to more and varied content. Staff members bring with them a view of the library that librarians often do not have. Librarians interact with high touch patrons but workers sitting on circulation desks often interact with patrons who use library spaces and services in other ways. They can often suggest content that the librarians simply would not have considered.

Find Your Customers and Tailor Your Message

© Ilana Barnes

Address correspondence to Column Editor Ilana Barnes, Business Information Specialist, Assistant Professor of Library Science, Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN. E-mail: ibarnes@purdue.edu

As special librarians, we are no strangers to tailoring our message to specialized groups. When considering your target groups, also consider their preferred social media avenues. For example, according to Pew, 20% of adult users use LinkedIn, whereas 67% use Facebook. Twitter tends to have an older user group than sites like Tumblr. Special libraries should also consider the types of content they would like to showcase. Art collections work well on sites like Tumblr, whereas the Twitter micro-blogging platform fits well with short research tips and “Database of the Week” segments.

Listening

Participating fully in social media as a special library means listening to your patrons and other organizations. We often get so “broadcast-centric” we forget that social media can be a treasure trove for best practices (French 2010). Follow other libraries for good social media modeling. At Parrish Library we followed other Purdue organizations such as the Career Center and the Krannert School of Management. Following database vendors can also help you know about new features to communicate to your stakeholders.

Having a presence on social media can also attract comments from your user base, both positive and negative. It is important to respond to complaints in the same professional manner you would use to respond to those complaints in any other medium. A full-time person should be delegated the duty of responding to questions, complaints or compliments so users feel valued. This shouldn't be a person whose whole duties are responding to Twitter posts, but rather a person who is generally available daily, perhaps someone who responds to email reference or other library correspondence.

Create a Schedule and a Style Sheet

Distributed social media models require accountability and specified roles. At Parrish Library, we set up a weekly schedule. For example, on Mondays I retweet Twitter posts that pertained to the library. The staff member in charge of booking rooms would tweet interesting or large events happening in our space. Here's an example of a schedule.

Monday- Retweet Monday, Hours, Lost & Found
Tuesday- Research Tip, Hours, Lost & Found
Wednesday- Business Statistic, Hours, Lost & Found
Thursday- Management or Purdue Today News, Hours, Lost & Found
Friday- Database of the Week or Weekend Event or other database fact

Style guide are also important for users who may feel less comfortable either with social media or with marketing. Below is our short style guide we agree upon:

- If the event/person you are tweeting has a twitter, remember to mention them (@their twitter). An example would be if you mention @PurdueKrannert, Purdue Mechanical Engineering (@PurdueME) or Businessweek (@bw)
- Hashtags used: #infolit, #purdue, @lifeatPurdue
- No sarcasm
- Exclamations points are okay, no caps.

Set Goals and Assess

Special libraries have many different priorities on their time, so it's important even in a pilot to define success. Special libraries have small sets of users, so 20,000 followers in six months may not be attainable by all libraries. At the same time, they should expect some progress. Look at similar libraries and organizations while considering your goals. Similarities and differences in user base may affect the way each organization uses the social medium and their relative success. Benchmark your goals against similar libraries and organizations.

I hoped to get 100 followers in six months on our account (@parrishlib). At the time of this writing, there are 62 new followers for the account. This may not be impressive compared to the 1,220 followers on the Purdue Libraries main Twitter, but it is compared to the 31 likes on the Roland G. Parrish Library of Management and Economics Facebook page, a page created before the advent of the new distributed social media strategy.

It is also important to assess what content is most successful, and tailor your style guide and content strategy towards that content. We found that research news and content were the most successful posts, especially new resources of which patrons may not be aware.

Conclusion

In many ways, special libraries are ideally suited to become social media destinations. They already curate specialized content to the benefit of targeted patron groups and stakeholders. A distributed social media strategy can budget both librarians and staff in a manner which spreads duties across the various levels of the organization while still maintaining a single message. My short pilot shows how one special library used a distributed model, with some measurable success. It is my hope that distributed models like these can make social media projects like the Parrish Library Twitter account successful, sustainable and engaging for both librarians and patrons.

Works Cited

- Center, P. R. (2013, August 5). *Pew Internet: Social Networking (full detail)*. Retrieved November 29, 2013, from <http://pewinternet.org/Commentary/2012/March/Pew-Internet-Social-Networking-full-detail.aspx>
- Dowd, N. (2013, May 7). Social Media: Libraries Are Posting, but Is Anyone Listening?
- French, Bill. "Listening: The Fast Track to Social Networking." *Information Outlook* 14.3 (2010): 15–17.
- Kho, N. D. (2011). Social Media in Libraries Keys to Deeper Engagement. *Information Today*, 31-32.