

Budgets Stretched, Staff Stressed, Usage Stalled...Something's Gotta Give!

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Budgets Stretched, Staff Stressed, Usage Stalled...Something's Gotta Give!

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Abstract:

With increased costs of library resources and evidence of decreased usage though vendor supplied statistics, researchers developed an online survey instrument seeking information on our students' knowledge of library resources, how they access these resources, and their use of mobile technology and Web 2.0 tools. With this information we hope to develop new marketing strategies for our library to increase usage of valuable library resources.

Introduction

The economic climate in which libraries operate has seen significant change over the last several years. Due to the struggling economy, libraries have had an increasingly difficult job balancing budgets and providing adequate support for students, faculty and patrons. While most serials and e-resource vendors were able to hold down subscription and renewal costs through 2009, prices of subscriptions for journals and electronic databases began to rise drastically in 2010, requiring serious decisions concerning retention and cancellation of resources. With diminishing resources, the library faculty and staff now experience more challenges while assisting students with resources no longer available. During this same period, vendor supplied statistics, for Shenandoah University Library, showed that there was relatively low usage for many of our resources. This information led us to ask the following questions:

- Are our current students aware of the resources we offer?
- Which technologies are students using?
- How can we help our students access the resources we provide?
- How can we market our resources differently?
- How can we use social media for marketing?

As we asked these questions, we also examined our university environment to place our research in context with our user community. Shenandoah University is a private university, located in the northern most county in Virginia. It has a population of approximately 3600 students, with a nearly an even division of graduates and undergraduates. Shenandoah University offers over 80 programs of study.

The University Library consists of the main campus library facility and a branch health sciences library. The library currently offers access to all electronic resources through the library website and Blackboard[®]. In addition to providing resources, library faculty and staff engage in face-to-face interactions with library users.

This research study was designed to discover what our students know about library resources, how they access current library resources, and to determine how they use social media and mobile technologies. We anticipate that the results of this survey will provide us with information about student behaviors that will assist us in planning and implementing new marketing strategies utilizing available Web 2.0 tools and mobile technologies. The ultimate goal is to increase usage of library electronic resources, which account for most of the annual materials spending.

Methodology

In order to gather information about our student population, we chose to use an online survey. We adapted our *Library Resources and Technology Use Survey* instrument from a questionnaire posted by Char Booth through the Creative Commons. In spring 2010, we tested the instrument by asking 15 library work-study students to complete our initial questionnaire. We asked them to comment on questions that were unclear, the length of time it took to complete the survey, and to share any other problems they encountered. After several revisions, the final 35-question student survey was administered through Survey Monkey in September 2011 for a two-week period. Links to the survey were made available through Blackboard[®], the library website, the library's Facebook page, and the cam-

pus e-newsletter. Several supportive faculty members also provided information to their students about the survey and encouraged participation.

Results

We have reported the survey results using seven general subject areas. These subject areas represent the types of questions contained in the instrument.

Demographic information:

During the two-week period, only 58 out of approximately 3,600 students responded. This represented slightly more than 1.6% of the total student population. Most learned about the survey either through the notice posted in Blackboard[®], the Sun-e campus newsletter, or from their instructors. Of the respondents, 76% were 17-22 years of age; 80% were undergraduates and 38% were first-year students.

Knowledge and use of the library and its resources:

Results indicate that 78% of students physically visit the library during the regular semester with almost a third of them using it several times a week. Approximately 58% use the library tab in Blackboard[®] to access library resources and 61% visit via the library website during the semester. Students reported using the library website to search for articles or books through the online catalog. While in the library students use their laptop, listen to music, study alone and socialize on a daily basis. Access of library resources is primarily through computers followed by iPod, cell phone, iPad and PDA.

Student research behavior:

Results indicate that students are using Facebook, checking email, and using IM. Ninety-three percent of students use personal computers (desktop and/or laptop) to access library resources. When beginning research, more than 75% are likely or extremely likely to start with Google, followed by Google Scholar, the online catalog, the article databases, and Wikipedia in that order. When beginning research for an assignment, students would rather ask an instructor, friend, or family member before asking a librarian.

Online information habits and preferences:

Thirty percent of students reported spending between 11-20 hours a week online; 28% reported spending between 21-30 hours a week with 26-50%

of that time on school-related activities. Most respondents had access to high-speed wireless (81%), followed by broadband (8.6%), then dial-up and high-speed (3.4%). The majority of survey participants indicated that they use new technologies at the same rate as everyone else, while less than 20% tend to consider themselves technologically advanced. While studying, most students multi-task using Facebook, texting, and mobile phones simultaneously.

Social media and mobile technology tools:

Mobile technologies owned by students include laptops (100%), iPods (69%), digital cameras (60%), PDAs (31%), iPads or Netbooks (22%), and e-book readers (5%). Browsers most preferred by students were Firefox and Safari followed by Google Chrome with Internet Explorer being the least used. Forty-five percent of respondents customize their web browser with add-ons, extensions, plug-in or toolbars; 12% have used the library's plug-in. Students use mobile phones and iPods for texting and sending email, and they check Facebook several times daily. However, according to their responses, they would be very unlikely to use these types of devices to ask a librarian a question, check renewal notices, or renew library materials.

Library resource questions specific to Shenandoah University Library resources:

The primary uses of library services through Blackboard[®] are to search for articles and books. Most respondents are unlikely to ask a librarian to chat and prefer to receive library information through Blackboard[®], the library website, and through Facebook.

Open-ended questions for optional comments:

While responses to the three open-ended questions varied, there were several reoccurring themes:

1. A quiet place to study
2. Longer hours both during the week and on weekends
3. Friendly service from librarians
4. More group study rooms
5. Furniture that is conducive for studying and working on projects

6. Additional software for student use on library computers such as Pro Logic, Photoshop, Illustrator, etc.

Discussion

Although the sample size is small, the survey results provided an informative snapshot of our undergraduate students' use of social and educational technology. What we did discover was that the majority of respondents were between the ages of 17-22 and that they are definitely using mobile technology and social media. Responses indicate they are using social media simultaneously while working on class assignments or doing library research. Based on survey responses, the social media our students use regularly included: Facebook, YouTube, Skype, and Twitter. Students are using mobile technology such as laptops, PDAs, iPods, and iPads or Netbooks to send text messages, email, instant message, check Facebook, watch videos, and listen to music.

Despite a clear understanding of the resources and services offered by the library, the majority of students at Shenandoah University, who responded to the survey, use Google as the starting point for their research. Only 18% are likely to ask a librarian for help. Eighty percent of students would rather ask faculty or a family member for help when beginning the research process. These statistics indicate a need for discussion among library faculty and staff about how we can assist students as they begin their research for a paper or other assignment.

When asked, students clearly indicated that they prefer to receive library information through Blackboard[®], the library website, and Facebook; some were interested in Twitter. We recommend marketing resources through Facebook and Twitter as a priority; preferably information would be posted several times a week and, ideally, on a daily basis. Many of our resources currently have mobile sites/apps available for student use. Increasing student awareness of these resources would be beneficial. While 75% of students visit the library there are still 25% who do not. Almost 40% report that they never use the library website or library tab in Blackboard[®] to access the library. This is a significant number of students, and discussions should be

held among librarians and library staff on new ways to reach these students.

Conclusion

Our research project provided a wealth of information about our student's at Shenandoah University, indicating clear direction for designing and implementing new marketing strategies. We realize the importance of optimizing the use of our Facebook page, updating information regularly so students will remain engaged. We recommend exploring opportunities to promote library resources and provide instructional services through YouTube, Twitter, and Skype.

We plan to repeat this survey next year. Based on respondents' comments, we will need to revise the survey instrument by re-examining the length of the survey and the redundancy and clarity of some of the questions. Making these changes will hopefully increase the response rate. As a follow-up to this survey, the authors plan to offer a focus group or groups with undergraduate and graduate students and with faculty. This would provide an opportunity to gather more qualitative and in-depth information about student behaviors and opinions concerning technology, social media and library resources.

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