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Engaging Students Through Social Media

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Abstract

Students use social media to seek out, collaborate, and obtain information from their classmates and academic peers. Even if students are not currently interacting with the library using social media, they are open to doing so. Social media sites also have uses for organizing research and sharing it with others. Enabling and fostering that use is an ideal role for libraries. However, social media is not considered an appropriate information source for research.

In this day and age of oversaturation of marketing messages on social networking sites, it could be worthwhile for a library to explore smaller social networks.

Survey: Undergraduate and Graduate Student Use of Social Media

Social media is such an intrinsic part of the way students interact, it is natural that academic libraries would consider making services available through these communication channels. For the benefit of academic libraries, ProQuest commissioned a study by Hanover Research to gauge the current and potential uses of social media for academic research. We present the findings here, along with some top-line recommendations to assist libraries in executing an effective social media strategy.

The survey was conducted online in August 2012. It reached 600 students at degree-granting universities both large and small, representing a broad mix of academic disciplines. Approximately 300 students each were enrolled at Canadian and American universities, respectively, with a nearly equal mix of undergraduate and graduate students (54% undergraduate, 46% graduate). The study segmented the students in several different ways, in order to uncover potential differences that might guide libraries in devising a targeted, maximally effective strategy.

Among universities based in the US and Canada, there are relatively few differences that are statistically significant enough to mandate a different approach for academic libraries in either country. Likewise, there are few differences when

looking at students pursuing various academic disciplines.

The most significant gaps in acceptance of social media are between undergraduate students and those pursuing graduate degrees, and, for that reason, much of this paper presents those statistics separately. Overall, there are more similarities than there are differences between the two groups; but the differences are such that we present some special recommendations for engaging graduate students via social media.

Students use social media to seek out, collaborate, and obtain information from their classmates and academic peers. Even if students are not currently interacting with the library using social media, they are open to doing so. Social media sites also have uses for organizing research and sharing it with others. Enabling and fostering that use is an ideal role for libraries. However, social media is not considered an appropriate information source for research.

Use of Social Media in General

Nearly 30% reported visiting social media sites 4–6 times per day, and undergraduate students are generally more likely than graduate students to be heavier users of social media.

Virtually all students, both graduates and undergraduates, use Facebook. Half of all undergraduates and somewhat fewer graduates

use Twitter. Graduate students are more likely to use Google+ and, especially, LinkedIn. Among the “Other” category, there are a handful of responses that mention specific social media sites for file sharing, or public- and school-hosted sites devoted to academics.

Attitudes Toward Use of Social Media for Study and Research

The study asked, “Do you use social media for research or study purposes?” Thirty-nine percent of all respondents said they do use social media for these purposes, while 61% said they do not. However, as the rest of the study findings will reveal, asking more-specific questions uncovers higher use than indicated here.¹

The most-cited reasons for not using social media for research and study are largely related to its use as an information source. There is far less resistance to using social sites for communication and collaboration. Students are drawing a line as to which uses of social media are academically appropriate.

The degree to which students use various social media sites provides direction as to where libraries should focus their efforts. Among students who use social media sites for academic tasks, Facebook is by far used the most frequently. Social media channels are used more often for contacting and sharing information with peers. Currently, they are used relatively less often for gathering data or organizing research.

Irrespective of the sites used, students were asked if they would likely use social media for specific tasks. Outreach to and communication with peers is the likeliest use, followed by workspace collaboration, gathering and organizing content,

¹ It appears that the responses to this question were highly dependent on how one defines “research or study purposes,” and what sorts of sites or services constitute “social media.” If the respondent took the question to mean, “Do you cite Facebook as an information source in your research?” the answer (except for sociologists researching the uses of Facebook) would naturally be no. When students were asked about *specific* research- and study-related activities and social media sites, a different picture emerged.

and finally posing questions to faculty and librarians. In general, undergraduates are more likely to use social media than graduate students for each purpose, although there are a few exceptions.

Students use social media channels relatively less often for reaching faculty, instructors, and librarians. The reason could simply be that those individuals do not routinely communicate through social sites, but through other means. Indeed, the “Other” category which includes e-mail, live chat, university-hosted tools, and niche sites for supporting academic pursuits, which many of the respondents characterize as social media, are mentioned nearly as often as Facebook for some purposes. Those purposes include posing questions to instructors and librarians. So it is important for libraries to consider their existing communication channels when they evaluate adding social media to the mix.

Students were asked to indicate their interest if their library did provide certain services via social media. Undergraduates are generally more interested than graduate students, but both groups express at least some interest. None of these items have negative scores; that is, more expressed interest than expressed disinterest in each of the services mentioned. While the likelihood scores indicate that use of social media to ask questions of librarians is an unlikely use at present, many students would be interested if they offered real-time response.

Training in Social Media Use

Students were asked if they have received training on use of social media for research purposes. Only 5–6%, or one in 20, have received such training.

Students were asked if they know where to find training on using social media for research. Only 14% of graduate students and 8% of undergraduates know where to get such training.

Recommendations for Libraries

Academic libraries considering social media should evaluate potential services in three distinct areas:

1. Contacting and communicating with classmates, other students with similar academic interests, and with faculty and librarians.
2. Collaborating with others by using sites to organize and share research.
3. Collecting data for research; that is, using content in social media sites as an authoritative information source.

The first recommendation presents the greatest opportunity for student adoption, and libraries should embrace it, since communicating via social media tools is such an intrinsic part of how students interact. The second has the greatest relevance, and is a perfect fit for libraries in the digital age. The third is not mainstream-ready, and there are reservations about the credibility of social sites, but libraries can play an educational role as part of their information-literacy initiatives.

Conclusions

Use of social media is second nature to students, and libraries can secure their place in the academic life of the institution by using these tools and platforms to engage students in relevant ways. While our survey uncovered some skepticism about use of social media for academics in general, the fact is, students are using these communication channels for some academic purposes and will adopt them if they are promoted and offered. Proactive libraries will act on the recommendations that are most appropriate to their students and engage using the communications channels that students find most useful in their lives.

Finding Your Niche: Using a Smaller Social Network to Make a Bigger Impact

It is common nowadays for libraries to utilize Facebook and Twitter to connect with users. Less common is the use of smaller social networks, such as Instagram or Tumblr, by libraries. One reason for the narrow focus might be because library employees have a limited amount of time to dedicate to social media efforts, so they decide

to focus on the big fish in the sea. Another reason could be that librarians are less familiar with smaller social networks and find it difficult to evaluate the potential for reaching users. In this day and age of oversaturation of marketing messages on social networking sites, it could be worthwhile for a library to explore smaller social networks. For example, Powell Library, the main undergraduate library at the University of California, Los Angeles, has had more success connecting with students on Instagram than on Facebook, Twitter, or Pinterest.

Instagram is a mobile app (iOS and Android) that allows users to instantly turn their mobile snapshots into visually appealing images, which are then shared with others on the network. The images can be shared to other social networks, as well, including Twitter, Facebook, Tumblr, Flickr, and Foursquare. Instagram launched in October 2010, was purchased by Facebook in April 2012, and currently has approximately 150 million monthly active users.² On June 20, 2013, Instagram added the capability to post short videos, a response to the growing popularity of Vine, a 6-second video app owned by Twitter.

Although Facebook and Twitter still dominate the social media category in terms of reach, the level of attention a target demographic pays to a particular network will influence the degree of success an organization has in the space. Instagram is currently the third most popular social network used by U.S. college students;³ however, it appears to have a higher level of engagement than the leading social network, Facebook. According to Melanie Shreffler of Smarty Pants, a youth and family market research firm, teens and 20-somethings are spending less time on Facebook and more time on niche social networks like Instagram.⁴ Evidence from Piper

² Instagram Press Center. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://instagram.com/press/>

³ Crux Research. (2013, June 13). *2013 re:fuel College Explorer Findings Released*. Retrieved from <http://blog.cruxresearch.com/2013/06/13/2013-refuel-college-explorer-findings-released/>

⁴ Drolet, D. (2013, May 01). *Millennials migrate to niche social networks*. Retrieved from <http://totalaccess.emarketer.com/Interview.aspx?R=6001077&dsNav=Ntk:basic%7cInstagram%7c1%7c,Ro:12>

Jaffray's annual "Taking Stock with Teens" market research report also supports this trend: In fall 2013, only 23% of teens considered Facebook the most important social network, down from 42% a year ago.⁵ During the same period in time, Instagram and other niche social networks rose in popularity among teens.

Powell Library's experience certainly reflects the trends noted above. A late adopter to social media, Powell Library initiated a social media strategy in October 2010 that consisted of Facebook and Twitter. A few months later, they joined Pinterest. The library found that social media is a valuable means to connect with the community; however, it continued to experiment with different platforms in an attempt to reach more users. The Library's ability to connect with students grew exponentially when it created an

Instagram account in response to the heavy activity they observed from students using the tool inside the library.

After Powell Library joined Instagram, it grew organically with little effort. The Library's social media manager observed that the user base was steadily growing and that followers seemed to be more engaged than on other networks. Over the course of several months, the Powell Library social media team gradually shifted the amount of time they spent on Facebook and Twitter to allocate more time to Instagram, a move that has paid off with better-quality interactions with students. The Instagram audience is young, diverse, and urban—a demographic that reflects UCLA's undergraduate student body. Knowing your audience and experimenting in different arenas is a wise strategy when it comes to social media.

⁵ Jaffray, P. (2013, October 10). *Taking stock with teens: Fall 2013*. Retrieved from www.emarketer.com