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Technology Left Behind -- Making Friends Online: Library Use of Social Networking Services

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In her article “Balancing the Online Life” in the January 2007 issue of American Libraries, Meredith Farkas defines social software as “applications that enable the formation of online communities at the grassroots level.” Farkas highlights a number of ways in which people are using social software to build relationships online, mentioning activities such as “building spaces that allow others to comment on or even edit our content,” “networking and communicating with friends, colleagues, and patrons, online, both synchronously and asynchronously,” “producing audio and video content and making available to the masses,” and creating “profiles of ourselves, lists of the music we listen to on our iPods, collections of our photos for people to comment on, spaces where we share our thoughts and more.” She goes on to mention a variety of social software technologies that facilitate the building of online communities, including blogs, wikis, instant messaging, including some discussion of how librarians are using these technologies to reach their patrons.

Social networking services, briefly mentioned in passing by Farkas, can also facilitate the creation of online communities. Key to the success of a social network is the ability to make connections with people in your network. While different social networking Websites call connections by different names (MySpace and Facebook both use the term “friend”), the general idea is to link your profile to the profiles of your friends, colleagues, co-workers, etc., building an online community with which you can interact. Social networking Websites bring together under one umbrella a variety of relationship management tools in an easy-to-use, free interface, allowing users a variety of methods for keeping in touch with each other. Common features include:

- profiles that allow users to describe themselves and their interests,
- the ability to upload pictures, music, and/or video content,
- an internal messaging system allowing users to communicate within the social networking framework,
- a utility to post messages to all of your ‘friends’ at one time, and
- the establishment of groups bringing together users with common interests.

There are a large number of social networking Websites, many catering to a specific audience. Each one offers slightly different functionalities and allows users varying degrees of customization. As young users flock to these sites to build their own online communities, libraries are increasingly turning to social networking sites themselves to connect with their patrons and with each other. For the purposes of this discussion of social networking services and how libraries are taking advantage of them, I will be focusing on two specific social networking web sites, MySpace and Facebook.

MySpace

MySpace, billed as a ‘place for friends,’ defines itself quite simply as “an online community that lets you meet your friends’ friends.” (http://www.myspace.com/Modules/Common/Pages/AboutUs.aspx) New MySpace users create profiles of themselves, with as much or as little detail as each user prefers. A profile could include information about the user, his general interests, hobbies, taste in music, education, and employment. Profiles can also be customized with graphics, music, video, and pictures. The MySpace interface provides a number of networking tools in a simple and relatively self-explanatory interface, including facilities that enable users to send messages back and forth to each other, blog, post bulletins to friends, leave comments for other MySpace users, and instant message.

Many libraries have seized upon the networking opportunities MySpace affords, building their own profiles and connecting with users. A quick search of the MySpace site using just the search term ‘library’ reveals a large number of libraries, both public and academic. I contacted a few of the libraries I came across on MySpace to see what prompted them to build a MySpace page, how they are using the profile, and what the reaction has been from patrons.

Beth Evans, Electronic Information Services Specialist at Brooklyn College Library (BCL), was inspired to create a BCL MySpace page by her then 15-year-old daughter Nell, whom Evans describes as MySpace-addicted. BCL officially launched its MySpace page in December 2005. Through some concerted efforts on the part of two interns and a student worker, by May 2005 BCL had over 1700 friends on its MySpace page, the vast majority of which were Brooklyn College students. BCL’s total number of friends as of March 2007 is over 3,200.

BCL uses the MySpace blog feature to post messages about events and collections at the library. Evans feels that students primarily use the BCL MySpace page to receive such announcements. She has found that very few reference questions come through the library’s profile page. Evans also notes that BCL students have sometimes used MySpace’s internal email and commenting functions to carry on discussions. Overall, the feedback on the BCL page has been positive.

Robin Chan, Sr. LTA and Government Documents/Ask A Librarian at the University of Central Florida Libraries, maintains the UCF Ask A Librarian MySpace page, which was created in April 2006. Similar to the BCL page, the UCF Ask A Librarian page provides information about the UCF Libraries’ services and collections, highlighting popular resources and tutorials on how to use the library. Chan and a colleague at UCF entered the MySpace arena and built the UCF Ask A Librarian profile with the goal, says Chan, of creating “a promotional tool that would create awareness among our patrons who have profiles on MySpace.” Chan went on to say, “Even if they denied our friend request, we would hope that they at least took a cursory look at our profile and saw what services we made available and then sought us out in the future (not necessarily through MySpace).”

Demonstrating that MySpace can be used to connect with people beyond a patron base, Beth Hoefgen, Branch Youth Services Facilitator at the Public Library of Mount Vernon and Knox County/Ohio, created her MySpace page primarily as a vehicle for a presentation to the Ohio Library Council entitled, “Using the Web to Support YA Services.” She says, she “also wanted to network (reach other librarians with similar interests) and help educate librarians who are just getting started with Web 2.0 services for teens.” Her page, which has been live since August 2006, has been viewed a little over 600 times, and she has accumulated over 300 friends. (Beth added me in March 2007, and I now count myself amongst her MySpace friends.) Like Evans, Hoefgen has also made use of the blog feature, providing an outline of her upcoming presentation to the Ohio Library Council, as well as information on a variety of other topics.

It is important to note that academic libraries are not the only libraries using MySpace to connect with their users. Stoneham Public Library (SPL) in Stoneham, Massachusetts launched its MySpace page in April 2006. The pages creator, Theresa Maturevich was inspired to build the page after hearing news stories about the negative aspects of social networking and at the same time observing a number of the teens and ‘tweens in her library using MySpace. (Note: Maturevich has since left Stoneham, but still maintains the SPL MySpace page in the interim.) Says Maturevich of the initiative, “I thought it would be a great opportunity to both tap into...
a new trend in technology to publicize the collection, programs, and services and use it as a conversational tool to address Internet safety concerns with my young patrons.” SPL’s MySpace page was introduced in conjunction with two library programs about social networking, demonstrating how MySpace pages can be integrated into library programming. One program catered specifically to teens, demonstrating some of the fun things that could be added to MySpace pages (layouts, slideshows, etc.), also touching on techniques for making offline and online activities more safety-conscious. The other program was an Internet safety presentation geared towards adults, focusing on understanding and reducing the risks for children and teens online.

Facebook

As a social networking Website, Facebook is very similar to MySpace. Like MySpace, Facebook users create profiles of themselves by posting pictures, providing information about their musical interests, education, and other factors. Also similar to MySpace, Facebook offers users the ability to message each other, post messages to a bulletin board-type feature, blog, and join groups. Although, MySpace allows users a greater degree of customization in terms of the appearance of the profile, actual functionalities do not vary to a great degree across most social networking Websites.

One of the principal differences between MySpace and Facebook is the primary audience. Facebook was originally built as a social network for college students. While Facebook has recently opened itself up to other organizations and age groups, the vast majority of Facebook users remains college age students, making it an ideal interface for college and university libraries looking to connect with their patrons. Bloomsburg University Library (BUL) has taken advantage of this opportunity, creating its own Facebook Group in the Fall semester of 2006. The BUL Facebook Group page is managed by David Magolis, Reference Librarian and Webmaster at BUL.

Magolis says the idea for a BUL group grew out of an online class he was teaching. As the instructor, Magolis found his students were somewhat isolated both from each other and from him because of the online nature of the class. As a result, says Magolis, “I tried to devise a way where students could have a degree of personal contact similar to a face-to-face classroom but in a virtual environment. Therefore, I required the students to sign up for a Facebook account and we used this communication medium throughout the semester.” The Facebook experiment proved very effective for the online class; student interaction increased and the student feedback Magolis received was positive. Consequently, he “decided to create a group that was open to the university where students could access a librarian on their time and place but most importantly in their environment where they are comfortable.”

At this time, the BUL group is geared predominately toward BUL students, but Magolis is willing to provide library services to anyone who contacts him, regardless of whether or not the individual is a Bloomsburg University student. The BUL group page does not generate a great deal of traffic, a fact that Magolis attributes this to the discussion board format of the communication. He notes, “I think that patrons might be intimated by the discussion board nature of the group where individuals can go back and see what questions have been posted.” However, Magolis has seen a significant increase in the traffic to his email address. He says, “I get the sense that patrons see my email address attached to a help site and proceed to use it as a means of connecting with a librarian. The questions that I now receive via email have increased by 60+ percent.”

Does Your Library Need Its Own Social Network?

David Magolis indicates that the Bloomsburg University Library Facebook Group page has been well-received and students are excited about the new avenue of communication with the library. He says that he “would encourage libraries to offer this easy, user-friendly, and most importantly FREE service to our patrons!”

If you are interested in creating an online community for your own library using a social networking Website, you are not alone, and there are resources out there to help you get started. Wikipedia provides a fairly robust list of social networking Websites (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_social_networking_websites), including a very brief description of the focus of each site. If you are interested in one particular social networking site, I would suggest contacting the libraries and librarians that are already using that site. The libraries and librarians I contacted regarding their Facebook and MySpace profiles were very willing to share information about their pages, how they are using their profiles, and how they promote them.

For libraries just getting started using MySpace, Robin Chan at UCF manages the Libraries on MySpace Group, which has been set up as a resource to aid libraries and librarians who are interested in creating pages on MySpace. The site acts as a forum for libraries to discuss their successes and challenges. The page also provides links to several sites that offer MySpace editors or pre-made MySpace layouts for users that would like to have a customized page without having to spend the time creating it themselves, allowing even the most technically unsavvy users to edit and customize their pages.

Beth Evans at Brooklyn College Library wrote a helpful article, “Your Space or MySpace?,” for netConnect outlining some of the ways that BCL and other libraries have used their MySpace pages to connect with patrons and promote services. (See the list of references for the complete citation.)

I highly recommend giving social networking Websites a closer look. All of the librarians I contacted about social networking reported receiving positive feedback from their patrons and users, and as David Magolis points out, the sites are easy-to-use and free of charge. You have nothing to lose and only ‘friends’ to gain.

Websites and Profiles of Interest

Facebook — http://www.facebook.com
MySpace — http://www.myspace.com
Brooklyn College Library — http://www.myspace.com/brooklyncollegeilib
UCF Ask A Librarian — http://www.myspace.com/ucfaskalibrarian
Ohio YA Librarian — http://www.myspace.com/ohioyalibrarian
Stoneham Public Library — http://www.myspace.com/stonehamlibrary
Bloomsburg University Library — http://www.myspace.com/bul
American Library Association — http://www.myspace.com/atyourlibrary

Resources


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