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# Optimizing Library Services--Enhancing the Competitive Advantage of Libraries Through Social Media Marketing

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# Optimizing Library Services — Enhancing the Competitive Advantage of Libraries through Social Media Marketing

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Simply put, social media is the media humans use to be social. Thus social media embodies how humans use emerging technologies to effectively reach out and connect to other human beings, create relationships, build trust, and be there for one another. The social media phenomenon represents a major shift in communication as it flattens the world and brings people together to be friends, interact or transact. The strength of the social media lies in the fact that social conversation is one of the most powerful communications in this generation. This explains why social media tools and techniques are remarkably and permanently changing the way information is created and passed across societies and around the world. Statistics indicate that people now spend more time on social media than any other media category; the overall time spent on social media continues to increase exponentially; social media has overtaken pornography as the prominent activity on the Internet; one of eight spouses in the United States first met on social media, and one of every five divorce cases have been blamed on social media. These scenarios demonstrate that social media continues to have an outstanding impact on personal and professional relationships, and in some cases has raised ethical and legal issues relating to information management and use.

One sphere of life where social media has had a remarkable impact is marketing, giving

rise to the concept of social media marketing, which is a form of marketing which utilizes social networking sites. Social media marketing works by drawing the attention of the interested publics to conversations which discuss the services or products being marketed. Social media marketing largely works in a subtle way and does not overtly promote services or products. It is also important to note that organizations or individuals marketing services or products promoted through social media are ordinarily members of the social communities they are promoting to. Membership of target social communities enhances acceptance and increases the chances of the promotional messages being received positively. Social media marketing takes time and is not a one-shot activity because social media is not just about marketing; it is about conversations. Social media marketing is powerful because most consumers trust peer recommendations; not advertisers. This shift in the decision making approach is more founded on the desire by people to benefit from the experience or competence of others, whom they view as trustworthy, than on mere marketers interested in making profits.

Social media marketing enables organizations to learn from their customers; target their marketing initiatives to specific potential clients in specific places using context-specific information and offers; increase traffic to their

online outlets; improve their search ratings; reduce overall marketing costs; develop new or strengthen existing business networks and partnerships; and enhance brand popularity. Social media marketing can also create brand awareness; generate a positive buzz; stimulate brand engagement; shift consumer expectations; influence opinion leaders; build a customer base; stimulate conversations and the formation of relationships with interest groups; facilitate social mobilisation; develop customer loyalty; enhance customer service; and educate customers.

Libraries can benefit greatly from social media marketing by creating awareness of their services and products, encouraging readership and attracting fleeing users back to the library. Libraries can use social media marketing to augment their user education programs by using the platforms and messages to create user support groups; facilitate collaboration between the users and between them and librarians to work together, communicate and share documents; provide platforms for user education demos and practice; and act as customer support channels. Through the emerging concept of infodemiology and infoveillance, librarians are able to detect and pick out patterns in conversations which indicate needs or failures and respond directly or in kind by creating a supportive environment which would address the implied need. Libraries can also use social media marketing to expand their reach beyond their walls as well as reduce barriers to the delivery of their services. Such barriers currently include limited opening hours, inappropriate physical spaces, inadequate collections, constrained human resources, the inadequate number of libraries, and inappropriate attitudes of librarians. Social media marketing can also enable libraries to deliver services on portable devices which are generally owned by individual library users. This reduces the need to come to the physical library or use its inadequate information technology infrastructure. Another associated benefit of library services on portable digital devices is enhanced accessibility. Libraries can also use social media marketing to create compelling brands with a clear, meaningful, unique message; an attention-grabbing visual identity; consistent use of identity cues; and an ongoing effort to keep the brand honest. An effective brand can have an immediate and emotional impact on the customer. The goal of library

*continued on page 61*

## Random Ramblings from page 59

interest such as film studies and social issues in literature.

### Concluding Remarks

What I have written above may not apply to all STEM subject areas since research and scholarly communication take many forms according to the culture of the discipline. Serving on a university-wide tenure and promotion committee provides a quick education on the dangers of judging a file based on your own discipline. Nonetheless, I hope that I've been reasonably accurate in broad terms. Email me to tell me where I need to modify my perceptions.

Overall, I'm content with my academic career. According to Google Scholar, as of

today, I have 158 papers with 426 citations. My articles get assigned to library science students. I've even had a few librarians tell me that they've made practical decisions based upon my publications. I know that my work is less respected by quantitative researchers and by those who are doing important fundamental theoretical research, but I made the conscious decision to be a columnist and popularizer. I do try to write at least one serious research piece annually. To return to the comparison with STEM researchers, I'm not going to have the glory of curing cancer, explaining why the dinosaurs disappeared, or finding conclusive evidence for the existence of some mysterious sub-atomic particle. Nonetheless, I'm happy enough with my life as a Humanities researcher. I plan to continue to write as long as I have something to say. 🌱

branding is to make library services distinct from the competition. Thus, social media marketing facilitates the rebirth and strengthening of the library brand as progressive, personable, liberal, user-centric, adaptable and engaging. Libraries can use social media marketing tools and techniques to co-create, communicate and deliver the brand promise in partnership with the users and relevant stakeholders. Similarly, social media marketing enables libraries to reveal their human side thereby appealing to more people. This appeal is largely because human beings desire to connect and listen to other human "voices." This enables libraries and their users to connect at a higher emotional level and create unique bonding which enhances their engagement.

There are endless social media marketing techniques that exist which libraries can utilize. Top among these is electronic Word of Mouth (eWOM). This involves passing messages orally and informally between people. Although word of mouth has obviously been a valuable marketing approach for a long time, its power seems to have increased in the recent past with the emergence of social media. eWOM communication exhibits unique characteristics which distinguish it from traditional WOM. First, unlike traditional WOM, eWOM communications possess unprecedented scalability and speed of diffusion. Second, the sharing of information in eWOM is between small groups of individuals in both synchronous and asynchronous modes. Third, eWOM communications are more persistent and accessible since most of the text-based information presented on the Internet is archived and thus made available for an indefinite period of time. Fourth, eWOM communications are more measurable than traditional WOM since the presentation format, quantity and persistence of eWOM communications have made them more observable. Fifth, eWOM information available online is far more voluminous in quantity compared to information obtained from traditional contacts in the offline world.

Libraries may also use Consumer's Online Brand Related Activities (COBRAs). These are the complex activities which consumers of services and products engage in through social media which intentionally or unintentionally support particular brands. The concept covers diverse forms of consumer-to-consumer, consumer-to-message and consumer-to-brand communications happening online. It encompasses consuming, contributing to and creating brand-related content passively or actively. COBRAs may also include posting brand-related videos on YouTube, photos on Flickr or comments on Facebook and status updates. Target audiences may consume the content passively, for instance, by watching brand-related movies, reading product reviews or brand-related comments. They may also contribute brand-related content by reviewing or rating products or brands, engaging in brand conversations, joining a brand profile on social media networking sites, or commenting on

brand-related content on social media channels. People who engage in COBRAs do so to gratify several needs which include entertainment, integration and social interaction, personal identity, information, remuneration and empowerment. Libraries can launch COBRAs in various ways. Academic libraries, for instance, can create interesting videos on library products and services which they can post on YouTube and invite students and faculty to watch, recommend or share. They can also announce new services or titles through tweets which the library users can consume and retweet for maximum impact. Public libraries can also share sound-bites of their music collections on SoundCloud and invite users to comment, rate and share the same in their own networks. Similarly, they can record videos of testimonials of satisfied library users and share the same on YouTube. The libraries engaged in COBRAs are likely to reach more new customers while retaining existing ones; enhance their brand perception and visibility; increase usage of their information services and products; enrich the information experience of their users; create strategic networks and communities of library users, stakeholders and librarians; understand and respond to customer complaints in a timely manner; enhance stakeholder participation in the development and sharing of library information services and products; understand the emerging trends and preferences of information usage; as well as detect and pre-empt negative buzz which may affect the libraries in an adverse way.

Content marketing is another social media marketing technique libraries may use to promote their services and products. It involves the creation and sharing of valuable and relevant content as a means of attracting, acquiring and engaging customers. Content marketing creates interest in a product or service through educational or informative material. Successful content marketing relies on providing consistent and high quality content which solves people's real problems. The content, if properly packaged, will not only attract the potential customers but will also engage them in activities which are beneficial to the organization. Content marketing has emerged to address the inadequacies of advertising as more users shy away from direct marketing. It is subtle and seeks to influence customer behaviour indirectly. Content marketing seeks to influence customer behaviour by making them more intelligent and informed about specific issues of interest to the marketer. Libraries are in the business of selecting (or creating), acquiring, processing, storing and disseminating relevant information. Therefore, they have a higher chance of succeeding in content marketing than profit-making organizations.

Libraries can also use social media advertising. They can use promoted posts in newsfeeds or sponsored video adverts on Face-

book; promoted tweets and trends on Twitter; self-advertising on Foursquare; sponsored photos and videos on Instagram; promoted pins on Pinterest; or banner adverts on social networking sites. Libraries can also latch onto trending messages by using popular hashtags to promote services and products; as well as using contests and other forms of gamification on social media platforms. It is important to point out, however, that direct advertising has less impact because it is considered to be intrusive. Nonetheless, libraries should strive to get as much benefit as they can from it.

To reap maximum benefit from social media marketing, libraries cannot treat the social media casually and still expect good results from it. Conversely, they should develop and implement effective social media marketing initiatives by creating suitable strategies, policies, teams and plans of action. Libraries should also take cognizance of challenges such as the unpredictability of social media; lack of control over social media content; resistance to change in library service marketing; inadequate content; time constraints; as well as the inability to measure social conversations and interactions. As libraries venture into social media marketing, they should be wary of mistakes such as not having a strategy; short-term thinking; inappropriate content; being non-responsive; spreading themselves too thinly; focusing on quantity rather than quality; and expecting results for doing nothing.

Libraries can benefit from social media marketing if they understand that tools are secondary and that the focus should be on strategy. Libraries need to adopt tools which are suitable for their individual needs, not necessarily the latest or best in the market. They need to understand that social media is about conversations; make efforts to listen to their users' conversations; create their own space, find their own niche and deploy services which are unique to their contexts and users. Overall, accept that building communities and conversations on social media networking sites takes time and patience. Make social media interactions memorable; and take time to talk to users to find out what works for them. 🍷

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**For more information:** View our article "Enhancing the Competitive Advantage of Libraries through Social Media Marketing," from the IGI Global title *Social Media Strategies for Dynamic Library Service Development*, <http://www.igi-global.com/book/social-media-strategies-dynamic-library/115508>.

