Crowd Control

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**Column Editor’s Note: Can the library crowd help me out? See the end of the column... —XA**

What do your customers think about you? Do you know? Libraries, vendors, and publishers all have a stake in pleasing their target audiences but have different methods and different success rates in asking these audiences what they think and what they would like to see. Are there new ways we can connect with customers that will bring in the opinions and ideas that we may be missing? Jeff Howe, a writer for Wired, invented the term “crowdsourcing” and defines it as “the act of taking a job traditionally performed by a designated agent (usually an employee) and outsourcing it to an undefined, generally large group of people in the form of an open call.” Crowdsourcing is not just for jobs or tasks, however, but can also be for gathering ideas or feedback.

A few weeks ago, I attended the Web 2.0 Expo in San Francisco and caught an interesting presentation at the Salesforce.com exhibit booth. The presentation was about using Facebook and Twitter in conjunction with Salesforce.com. Salesforce is a software company that makes Customer Relationship Management (CRM) products. CRM software allows a company to track their customer accounts, respond to customer problems and suggestions, and follow up on leads for new customers. Salesforce is using Facebook and Twitter as ways for their corporate customers to gather feedback and ideas from users and push out solutions to users as needed.

The presenter first talked about their new partnership with Facebook. The idea is to have a page in Facebook where users can submit ideas for a product or a company. Starbucks, the example used in the presentation, has its own Website for this purpose, where customers send in ideas for new types of coffee drinks, or other improvements to the brand. Other users can vote on ideas and the company uses the input to guide development.

While the Website has generated a fair amount of traffic on its own, moving the site to Facebook has some definite advantages. On Facebook, when a user adds content to a company page, such as an idea for Starbucks, this action is displayed to their friends as news. This means an application has a way to reach new users quickly. If you suggest through Facebook that Starbucks start serving pizza, your friends will see this suggestion, may have an opinion about your suggestion, and thus may be prompted to enter the Starbucks application and join the discussion. This is crowdsourcing — bringing together opinions and ideas, sometimes anonymously, from a large group of people.

How can we use this? We don’t necessarily need to bring together large numbers of suggestions in the same way as Starbucks but we do want to provide a place for dialogue about our services. A Facebook presence for a library or library-related company can be a less structured way to ask for feedback or to learn more about your users. When you have your users as “friends,” Facebook can also be a way to reach a wider group of potential customers as your friends interact with your Facebook page. Your posts and updates on Facebook reach your “friends,” but any time they comment on your updates or any time a new person becomes your friend, their wider group of friends is notified. This way your presence or your request for feedback can spread through your potential customer base.

The use of Twitter discussed in the Salesforce presentation was equally interesting. With Twitter use ramping up in the last few months, the site has become a place to find information, network, and comment on products. Salesforce has partnered with Twitter to pull comments (or “tweets”) about a company’s products directly...
Who just up and volunteered adventures in retirement she will still be around for us to hear about her cloud, North Carolina’s Tarheels ago) and didn’t stick around for long, sort of...