Facebook for Libraries

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ABSTRACT

Libraries are looking for ways to reach patrons. Facebook is a Web site that students visit regularly. Opportunities exist to enhance our communication with our users, to promote our libraries, to increase information literacy, and to network with persons inside and outside our primary networks. Libraries should be finding ways to incorporate Facebook, reaching students where they are.

Facebook is one of the most popular online social networking sites to emerge in the twenty-first century. Mark Zuckerberg and his roommates founded the site as students at Harvard University in 2004. Originally for Harvard students only, it spread quickly to a group of select colleges. Soon afterwards it opened to anyone with an .edu address and then to high schoolers. By 2006, Facebook was available to all users, regardless of affiliation.

Facebook members belong to networks. Most persons associated with academic institutions list that college or university as their primary network. Everyday users generally choose to make a regional network their primary network. Persons may join only one regional network; however, the network may be changed occasionally and in compliance with Facebook guidelines dictating the frequency of changes. Joining a network is now optional.

Facebook users send and accept friend requests to build their own networks of acquaintances. All requests to become friends must be accepted by the other party before an individual appears in one's friends list. Customizable settings allow a Facebook user to control the content friends are able to see, the applications appearing in site feeds, the content members of one's networks are able to view, and one's visibility to the entire Facebook community. A recent Facebook change allows users to assign their friends to groups and control whether or not persons in these groups can determine their online status.

What are the implications of this online social networking phenomenon for libraries and librarians?

One writer observed:

> Any technology that is able to captivate so many students for so much time not only carries implications for how those students view the world but also offers an opportunity for educators to understand the elements of social networking that students find so compelling and to incorporate these elements into teaching and learning. (7 Things, 2006, par. 12)

Librarians need to utilize Facebook and other online social media to reach their users. College students visit Facebook more frequently than they do the library's Web site. Our library Web sites have a static look and feel to them. Updates are hidden on sub-pages such as databases, subject guides, and resource links. Students feel something new has happened every time they log into Facebook and see new items in their feeds. (Axelsson, 2008) A library's or librarian's Facebook presence can increase the library's visibility and increase students' awareness of new databases and resources of interest to them. Students generally respond more rapidly to a message sent in Facebook than to one sent via e-mail. (Powers, Schmidt, & Hill, 2008) At Carson-Newman College, recent graduates needed to be contacted to make sure that their bound honors projects would be mailed to a current address. Since email accounts of graduates had recently been purged, the library decided to try to reach them via Facebook. A librarian located all twelve persons and had responses within minutes from several of them. All persons contacted had responded within a couple of days. College students are not averse to academic uses for Facebook. They are open to using Facebook for course discussions and assignment reminders. (Chu & Meulemans, 2008) Creative librarians will find opportunities to reach users.

Some people see Facebook as a distraction or a waste of time. This is largely a matter of interpretation and depends on the individual user. Librarians do many things on a daily basis that could potentially be distractions or time-wasting activities (e.g. reviewing publisher's catalogs or reviewing Web sites).

Others cite privacy concerns for themselves and for students. Each year Carson-Newman College students in the Information Technology Applications course are asked to "Google" themselves or their families to see what types of information can be located. They are also asked to check publicly accessible

online government databases which include property assessments, licenses possessed, criminal records, and various other personal information, depending on what local and state governments have placed online. It is usually an eye-opening experience. Most are amazed by what is available. Some are bothered by what they find; others are not. Their findings and observations become a springboard for discussing online privacy. The instructors are careful to tell students to speak in broad terms about their findings rather than specifics so that their privacy is not compromised in the classroom discussion or written summary. In recent years, another element has been added to this assignment. Students are asked to check their privacy settings in Facebook. They are encouraged to find someone who is their Facebook friend and have that person show them how their page displays and also to find someone who is not their friend to see what personal information, if any, can be viewed. Several students report that they have made adjustments to their privacy settings after being assigned to do this. Prospective employers are checking Facebook to determine if a person might be a good fit for their company. Some individuals have been denied employment based on their Facebook profiles. Even colleges and universities have been known to discipline students involved in illegal activities on campus when photos have been posted to albums on their profiles. Libraries and librarians can play a vital role in educating the campus community about online privacy.

Another concern is that college students prefer to communicate with professors via email. (Chu & Meulemans, 2008) This is a valid concern. In one class at Carson-Newman College, students were told by a professor that they could expect a more timely response if contacted via Facebook. Most students still used either the email feature in the course management system or the professor's campus email. Many students wait until the end of the semester to add a professor as their friend. While it is not necessary to be friends with someone to send them a message, doing so means that the recipient will be able to view the sender's profile for a period of time. Many students are not willing to share their profile with their professors. Students are sometimes more open to adding librarians as their friends. The Carson-Newman librarians with the strongest Facebook presences report receiving reference requests from students who need assistance, even when they are at home in their pajamas. Most of the questions are pretty simple requests which can be answered quickly. If a request is more involved and the library is open, the librarians will refer that person to the librarian on duty. If the library is closed, they will encourage the student to stop by when it is open or will attempt to answer it, depending on the circumstances, nature of the question, and resources needed to resolve it. These librarians believe that they are creating a better image for the library by being available when and where the students need assistance.

How are libraries using Facebook?

Creating a group or fan page for the library on Facebook is one of the most popular and easiest things to do. Groups may be limited to those in a certain network. The group administrator controls the contribution level of persons joining the group. Groups may be open so anyone may join, moderated so that persons join pending approval, or by invitation only. At one time, many librarians were creating a person to represent their library. This was a violation of Facebook's policy that all users had to be real people. Many accounts were deleted by Facebook. Pages allow the library to post things such as their hours, contact information, photos, selected resources, and even to offer other tools for research such as an "Ask-a-Librarian" feature.

Some libraries have created restricted Facebook groups for library student workers. Librarians use it to communicate information that student workers need to know. Students use it to find substitutes for shifts in which they are unable to work, often having the problem resolved in as few as five minutes.

Facebook makes it very easy to create APIs (Application Program Interfaces). They released the code to developers at http://developers.facebook.com/. Since that time libraries have added a number of useful

applications to their pages. Facebook users can now search online databases such as PubMed, JSTOR, and WorldCat within Facebook. Some of these require proxy settings for authorization purposes. Several libraries have also added the ability to search their online catalogs from these pages.

Many libraries are using some of the bookshelf applications such as Visual BookShelf and GoodReads to showcase recent additions to their collections. These applications allow the cover of the book to be displayed. Some librarians go the extra mile, creating reviews, comments, and ratings of the new items, so users are provided with additional information.

Communication is an important aspect of library use of Facebook. Interaction with other Facebook users is possible through the Chat and Message features. Some libraries also add links to other messenger services. Many libraries are adding RSS feeds to their pages. It is easy to have library blog feeds and podcasts automatically appear on the library's Facebook page. Some libraries are using the wall creatively by providing short updates about resources available in the library. It is important to have the library's hours and changes to them posted. Libraries may also wish to promote "crunch-time" help during periods when many papers and projects are due.

Information literacy is another category in which Facebook is useful. Many libraries have added research guides to their Facebook group pages. LibGuides is one of the more popular tools used in creating these resources. Libraries using these must sign up with Springshare at http://www.springshare.com/libguides/ and pay an annual licensing fee. Others add information on topics such as using Interlibrary loan services or using digital archives and collections to their pages. A few libraries sponsor weekly trivia contests with prizes for the first correct answer or a drawing for a winner from all correct answers. Facebook's Links and Notes features make it easy to highlight resources or to provide more in-depth coverage of resources.

Facebook can be a wonderful tool in marketing one's library. It is very easy to create events. When Facebook was open only to college communities, there were network pages which made it very easy to market the event to the entire campus community. Carson-Newman College's library had one of the most successful events as a result of this. When people showed up at the "Mystery in the Library" event, they were asked how they found out about it. Even though posters and flyers had been placed all over campus, most of those who came said that they had seen it on Facebook and that it sounded like fun. Network pages are a thing of the past, but the opportunity for promoting events is still there. Libraries must now rely on a viral marketing strategy. At Carson-Newman, librarians, library staff, student workers, and even some faculty members invite all of their friends and encourage them to invite their friends to the events. While it requires a little more effort, the results are still good. For some events such as the annual book sale, persons in regional networks are also invited.

Facebook is the number one photo-sharing application on the Internet, surpassing even Flickr. (Krivak, 2008) It is very easy for libraries to add photos of librarians doing their jobs and to tag these. Comments may be added telling more about the librarians and their jobs. It helps the students recognize the librarians and perhaps even know a bit more about them. Photos of events can also be uploaded although many librarians are hesitant to do so without permission of those photographed due to privacy concerns. Some libraries choose not to tag photos with individual's names for these event photos.

Libraries have also created virtual library tours for their Facebook pages. Sometimes these are links to interactive maps and tools on the library's Web site. Other times they are links to YouTube videos.

Networking is one of Facebook's greatest assets. Librarians have the opportunity not only to build relationships with students and faculty at their own institution, but also in the greater library community. Many professional

groups such as the Association of Christian Librarians, the American Library Association, and the Association of College and Research Libraries have pages where members can share in discussions. There are also interest groups available such as the Library 2.0 Interest group where librarians interested in certain topics can share with one another. Government Documents librarians in Pennsylvania created a group specifically to share their needs and offers lists with one another. (Adamich, 2008)

Libraries are champions of customer service. A strong library presence is needed on Facebook because of its popularity in the campus community. Communication patterns are changing because of online social networks. If libraries and librarians want to reach students where they are, they will seek ways to reach them through Facebook and other social networking tools. Libraries are currently using Facebook for communication, public relations and marketing, information literacy, and networking. Facebook makes it easy for developers to create new applications. As more library applications become available, our potential for outreach will be even greater. ✚

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