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E-JASL: The Electronic Journal of Academic
and Special Librarianship

Summer 2007

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Mack, Daniel; Behler, Anne; Roberts, Beth; and Rimland, Emily, "Reaching Students with Facebook: Data and Best Practices" (2007). *E-JASL 1999-2009 (volumes 1-10)*. 85.
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Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship



v. 8 no. 2 (Summer 2007)

Reaching Students with Facebook: Data and Best Practices

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Abstract

This paper presents data on Facebook inquiries one librarian received over the course of a semester at Pennsylvania State University and discusses best practices for Facebook use as an outreach tool. We discuss ways to reach out to our users through this Social Networking Community [SNC] and encourage reference questions and requests for research consultations. We recommend that library professionals whose positions require them to interact with undergraduates seriously consider making use of Facebook.

Introduction

Facebook is a Social Networking Community [SNC] used by millions of students to connect with one another and as a forum for self-expression. It is similar in concept to a print yearbook, where users can place a photo of themselves on their page and include personal bits of information about their interests and hobbies. Facebook, however, is far more sophisticated than a print yearbook. It allows users to create online networks of friends and join and create groups of likeminded individuals. Users can write notes to one another and post entire albums of photos online. The site was started in February 2004, and at present has over 13 million registered users.

According to their web site, Facebook is the seventh-most trafficked site on the web and is the number one photo-sharing site. Registration for Facebook used to require a university email address. This meant that anyone affiliated with a university, whether they were faculty, staff or students could sign up and use Facebook. That restriction has been lifted however, and now Facebook is open to anyone the way the other social networking giant, MySpace, has been all along.⁽¹⁾ Even so, Facebook is much more populated with college students than any other constituency and has far more college-age students than MySpace. A recent Pew Internet and American Life Project study found that “More than half (55%) of all of online American youths ages 12-17 use online social networking sites.”⁽²⁾ MySpace attracts more high school students and also appears to be more commercially based than Facebook. Undergraduates are the largest users of Facebook. According to Frederic Stutzman in his article, “An evaluation of identity-sharing behavior in social networking communities”⁽³⁾ ninety percent of undergraduates surveyed and twenty-two percent of graduates surveyed at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill reported using Facebook. If librarians truly wish to be where students are, Facebook is an effective way to reach them.

One of the reasons librarians might choose not to create a Facebook profile is a concern about privacy. Librarians also seem to be very concerned about student privacy in online SNCs. In fact, students are far less concerned with privacy than many librarians assume they are. Librarians have been champions of patron privacy in the face of the Patriot Act and other potentially invasive laws and have made ourselves known in the popular media as real advocates for privacy. This concern with protecting privacy is a potential hindrance to our ability to provide and effectively utilize tools that students need and want to connect with others, share information and learn. As McDonald and Thomas point out in their article, “Disconnects between library culture and millennial generation values,”

Most library information systems and discovery tools are not easy to customize and remain substantially limited by an enduring obsession with individual privacy and copyright. Our services and policies are equally limiting, seemingly guided more by fear of litigation than by any other factor ... Emerging communities of research

library users have demonstrated strong preferences for exactly the kinds of networked trust-building, collaboration, resource sharing, and creativity that library technologies and policies discourage.(4)

One of the challenges librarians face is that, while students are willing to share a great deal of personal information on these public sites, they still seem surprised to find out that professors or potential employers visit the sites as part of a pre-employment screening(5). In a survey done at the University of Dayton, researchers found that “40 percent of employers say it’s OK to use Facebook when making a hiring decision; only 19 percent of the students agreed”(6). In a 2006 survey by Hewitt and Forte at the Georgia Institute of Technology(7), one third of the students surveyed, “did not believe that faculty should be present on the Facebook at all” (pg. 1) since they view Facebook as a social site for students. However, there are several methods librarians can employ to increase the likelihood of acceptance into virtual communities, thereby increasing the amount of student contact via these tools. We will discuss several of these methods in this paper. Librarians can effectively use Facebook to reach out to students to “be where they are.” At present, student use of SNCs is as ubiquitous, if not more so than the use of chat, text-messaging and IM. We will address the most effective ways to reach students using this medium, and compare usage statistics of various resources such as Facebook, chat/IM and in-person requests for information.

Review of the Literature

Many articles discussing wikis, blogs, SNCs like Facebook and other user-generated content have appeared in newspapers and other popular sources. The library literature, however, shows little research in this area and most of the articles are anecdotal. The current literature has focused on giving background information on Facebook, and explaining to librarians why we should care about it. One of the few items located that contained quantitative data was a thesis from a Master’s student at Kansas State University completed in 2006.(8)

Of the literature that is available related to Facebook, Brian Mathews’ article in *College and Research Libraries News*, “Do you Facebook? Networking with students online”(9) is one of the few that discusses personal experience of a librarian with using Facebook for communicating with students. Mathews sent email to students in his assigned liaison department through the Facebook interface to let them know of his presence there. He received 48 responses of a total of 1,500 email messages sent, a three percent response rate. While this response rate is small, he says that he did receive reference questions, especially regarding software availability in the libraries and he was added as a “friend” by some of the students, “a sign of acceptance”. Mathews states that “Overall, the effort effectively helped me to expand the goal of promoting the library and my role as a subject librarian” (p. 307).

Andrew Richard Albanese's September 2006 article in *Library Journal* (10) points out that Facebook and MySpace "represent a new opportunity for libraries." In this article he mentions a comment by Stephen Abram of SirsiDynix that is most telling. Abram said at ALA that "No one comes to libraries to search. Users come to us for learning, community, and other services". While this statement is controversial and hopefully not entirely true, there is arguably some substance to it. This is one reason why some libraries are moving to a learning commons model, and why we need to rethink the library's role and explore SNCs as one way to communicate with our users.

Rachel Singer Gordon and Michael Stephens' article, "Online Cool on a Budget" (11) discusses ways libraries can keep current and make use of the latest tools available. In this article, Gordon and Stephens point out that any service with a large number of users deserves to be looked at more carefully (p. 49). They emphasize that libraries and librarians need to think "outside the web site box" and try to integrate ourselves into the online community because that is where our patrons are. Another important point noted by Abraham in his article, "What can MySpace Teach us in Special Libraries?" (12) is that "MySpace and Facebook combined are reported to cover more than 85 percent of all students in high school through college. They are connecting to each other-and not just casual connections but sustainable, global connections for life" (13)

A thesis by Boogardt in 2004 (14) is one of the few sources to present quantitative data related to Facebook use. Boogardt's study "sought to measure the level of effect students engaging in online communities has on their involvement and social connectedness to their physical world communities" (p. 14). He found many positive correlations between Facebook and student social satisfaction in terms of feelings of connectedness. According to his study, "students who use Facebook feel more connected to campus." (p. 58). The only negative correlation he found with Facebook was that between heavy Facebook use and a lower GPA.

One concern raised in a *Chronicle of Higher Education* article was that Facebook encourages distraction in the classroom and multitasking. The article notes that Facebook is:

a Janus-faced symbol of the online habits of students and the traditional objectives of higher education, one of which is to inspire critical thinking in learners rather than multitasking. The situation will only get worse as freshmen enter our institutions weaned on high-school versions of the Facebook and equipped with gaming devices, cell phones, iPods, and other portable technologies." (15)

Despite the concerns some in higher education have raised about the value of Facebook, an article in *Educause* (September 2006) stated that;

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.”(16)

In addition, an article appeared recently in *American Libraries* about Facebook supporting these sites as another way to reach out to our patrons, “It makes sense to look at what social networking sites our patrons frequent and how we can provide services there.”(17) The article notes that some libraries are even beginning to embed into their profiles ways for students to actually do research, such as links to the catalog or to databases.

Since the library community has done so little research on Facebook, this paper will investigate how librarians can effectively use this site to communicate with users and colleagues.

Why Should Librarians Bother?

Librarians are busy, and our time is stretched thin by reference, instruction, outreach, and research. It stands to reason that we might question the practicality of and reasons for spending even more time focusing on a social networking tool. After all, it is one more thing to learn and keep track of, and this begs the question of whether adding Facebook to an already full docket of activities is worth our time. Librarians at Penn State have found that Facebook is actually a tool that can help to more effectively and efficiently accomplish many of these already established tasks. Creating a profile is a quick and easy task that can be completed in minutes.

A Facebook profile is an excellent mechanism for communicating with our students because it allows us to go where they already are; it is an environment that students are already comfortable with. Librarians joining and participating in Facebook have the power to be just as significant to today’s students as meeting them for coffee or lunch was to previous generations. Facebook enables users to post messages to one another’s walls much like a message board, or to send messages to one another via an internal mail system. Because students are already actively using these messaging systems, perhaps even more frequently than they use traditional email or instant messaging, our presence in the social network environment makes library services and librarian assistance extremely convenient. In addition, the Facebook profile allows users to provide content, including contact information, in that social environment.

When librarians provide this information, it encourages students to make use of it. A profile takes only minutes to create and has the power to open hundreds of doors. Once your face and name are there, students will be more likely to view their librarian as another human being and as someone who can help, rather than as a stuffy stiff librarian who has more time for books than for people. Librarians at Penn State have found that since they have created and promoted their own Facebook profiles during instruction sessions and reference interactions they have seen increased research assistance traffic in not only their Facebook message boxes, but also in their institutional email and even in person.

One Librarians' Semester-Long Experience with Facebook

During fall semester 2006, a librarian at Penn State([18](#)) documented the number of reference and research questions he received over the course of the term. These statistics include transactions by email, telephone, instant messenger, Facebook, and in person during office hours. The figures do not include questions received while working at the reference desk, nor do they include personal communications, requests for library acquisitions, or questions about library policies. The following table shows the number of inquiries received in each category by week.

Table 1.

	Email	Phone	IM	Facebook	In person	Totals
4-Sep	10	0	4	9	1	24
11-Sep	8	1	3	5	3	20
18-Sep	8	1	6	9	5	29
25-Sep	14	0	5	10	3	32
2-Oct	8	2	6	12	8	36
9-Oct	11	0	4	9	11	35
16-Oct	7	0	6	8	7	28
23-Oct	7	1	5	11	12	36
30-Oct	8	2	4	10	17	41
6-Nov	7	1	7	11	16	42
13-Nov	4	1	8	9	13	35
20-Nov	9	0	3	5	2	19

27-Nov	11	0	5	6	5	27
4-Dec	6	2	2	9	6	25
11-Dec	4	1	1	3	3	12
Totals	122	12	69	126	112	441

While the researcher did not formally track patron type in each category, he does offer the following points regarding this data:

- Email inquiries were received from undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and community patrons.
- Phone inquiries were received from faculty and community patrons only.
- All instant messenger and Facebook reference questions were received from undergraduate students.
- Most in-person questions were received from undergraduates; a few were from faculty and graduate students.

The librarian promoted Facebook in several ways throughout the semester. During this period he conducted forty subject-specific library instruction sessions; of these, twenty were geared entirely or partially toward undergraduate students. During sessions for undergraduates, the librarian explicitly stated that he often provided reference and research assistance via Facebook. He also showed his Facebook profile to students during these sessions, which were held in technology classrooms. In addition, the librarian included a statement that he was available for consultation via Facebook on all handouts he prepared for these classes. As seen by these figures, questions received via Facebook significantly outpaced those from instant messenger and telephone. Among undergraduate students, Facebook inquiries also were more common than those received either in person or via email. This preliminary data suggests that, at least among some undergraduate students, Facebook is considerably popular as a means of seeking asynchronous reference and research assistance.

Creating Your Facebook Image

When creating a Facebook profile, it is important to include several basic elements. First and foremost, the profile should include professional contact information. List an office address and phone number in the appropriate fields, as well as the email address students can use to send reference questions. The 'Website' field should include a link to the profile owner's professional web site, the web site for the librarian's department within the library, a library research help page, or the library home page. The purpose of the profile is to let students know what their librarians do, both professionally and for good clean fun, so that they might begin to identify their librarians as

approachable individuals. It is also important to include fun pictures that accomplish the same end—let students know that you have a cat named Snowball, and that you love to vacation in Rome. Often these small offerings of personal information turn into door-opening conversations. However, in order to prevent sending mixed messages it's important to present oneself in a professional manner—students may use Facebook to post anything and everything about themselves, but it is important to present yourself as the professional that you are. Since Facebook is publicly accessible and many professionals are starting to use it, count on peers seeing the information, as well as students.

Once you have your Facebook profile set up and you're ready to go public, what are some best practices for using it effectively; in other words, how do you market it? Fortunately, Facebook makes this easy. Each Facebook profile has a static URL which makes providing a link to your profile very handy. Include it on anything you use to promote your services: handouts, directories, email signatures, within course management software, your homepage, business cards, etc. Facebook even has a feature called a profile badge that lets you create a type of mini business card that is based on information from your profile and can be added to web sites. The badge is dynamic so it is customizable and updates when your profile changes.

Another way to market yourself using your Facebook profile is to simply show your profile during instructional sessions. If you don't have a venue to show your profile or run out of time during a session, at least mention to your students that they can "Facebook" you. Mentioning your Facebook profile demonstrates to students that you are accessible, and that they have a variety of ways to contact you.

Of course, a few caveats should be considered as you begin publicizing your Facebook profile. While it might be tempting to seek out some of your students and add them as your friends on Facebook, it is our experience that this is not the best approach. It is great to be where our users are, but let them decide when and where they need you. Encroaching too much on what they perceive as their space may be intimidating to many students and scare them off.[\(19\)](#) Another pitfall to avoid is the temptation to create a profile for your library, the physical place, rather than one for you personally. Facebook requires that profiles be associated with a real person and does not allow entities to have profiles. If you create a profile of this type, Facebook administrators will eventually ask you to modify the account, with the consequence of having the account deleted if changes are not made. It's Facebook's way of building in accountability for users' actions.

Creating and joining groups is one way around this limitation of Facebook. Creating a group of supporters or friends of your library is a fun and easy way to find out who your library fans are out there. Facebook groups are another way to: find really

interesting people, (e.g. ‘Kansas Enthusiasts’ or ‘Band Geeks Who Turned Out Cool’), show your support for causes you care about (e.g. ‘Support Breast Cancer Awareness Month’ or ‘Joe Paterno is the toughest man alive’), or feel like you are part of a global community (e.g. ‘Americans for Alternative Energy’ or ‘Addicted to Grey’s Anatomy’). Professional library-related groups are popping up more and more so you might try searching for some of the professional associations (ALA, SLA, etc.) you are affiliated with and getting to know your colleagues. And if one doesn’t exist yet—create it!

A few other pointers you might find helpful as you get started with Facebook:

- If someone stopped by your office to talk, you wouldn’t ignore them, would you? Likewise, if someone writes on your Facebook wall—write back! Wall-writing is a great way to strike up conversations both with students and your co-workers and learn something new about them.
- You might be hesitant to use SNCs because they have made some unfortunate headlines involving identity theft and stalking. However, you are not obligated to divulge personal details in your profile. If you don’t want to include information about your political views or your birthday for example, you don’t need to. At the same time, listing nothing about yourself will seem impersonal or even suspicious. Try to find a balance that makes you comfortable.
- Post items that help students with their information and library needs. Feel free to include links to your subject guides, podcasts, or tutorials. For example, if you think Steven Colbert’s ‘Wikiality’ on Comedycentral.com clip offers is a teachable moment about information literacy, you can even incorporate these types of media clips into your profile.

Hopefully, you will find, as we have, that setting up a Facebook account leads to opportunities to promote the libraries, offer support to students, and get to know your colleagues. If you’re using Facebook effectively, you may find that it provides you with a new, undergraduate-friendly medium for asynchronous communication.

Recommendations

Because of the apparent willingness of undergraduate students to communicate with librarians by means of Facebook, we recommend that library professionals whose positions require them to interact with undergraduates seriously consider making use of this service. The recommendations above provide some basic guidelines for setting up a Facebook page, and offer some basic Facebook etiquette. We also recommend that librarians explore the use of MySpace, Xanga, and other SNCs as tools for providing reference services and research mentoring to undergraduates. Promising areas of research in this field include analysis of statistical data regarding use of

SNCs; examination of information-seeking behaviors and SNCs; and longitudinal studies in both areas.

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