2-21-2019

Snap Judgments: Using Snapchat to Challenge the Stereotypes and Assumptions about Academic Libraries.

Courtney M. Block

Indiana University Southeast, coblock@ius.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/libphilprac

    Part of the Library and Information Science Commons

Snap Judgments: Using Snapchat to Challenge the Stereotypes and Assumptions about Academic Libraries.

Courtney M. Block
User Engagement Librarian
IU Southeast

Abstract

This paper explores the potential for Snapchat to act as an advocacy tool for academic librarians. Snapchat is a social media app that allows users to send videos, drawings, images, and more. The researcher, a User Engagement Librarian at an academic library, was curious about the potential to use Snapchat as an advocacy tool, a tool to gauge current library attitudes, stereotypes, and perceptions, and an opportunity for feedback. In an attempt to challenge the assumptions about academic librarianship, the author used the app to engage with followers through a series of shared videos and images depicting a variety of library-related topics, and utilized a pre and post-test. Answers provided will provide insight into the general perception that Snapchat users have regarding academic libraries, and can provide librarians with key areas of advocacy on which to focus.

In the fall of 2017, the librarian-researcher set out to examine if Snapchat can be a useful tool in reducing librarian stereotypes, and as a way of raising awareness of librarians and library services. Snapchat was specifically selected due to its more recent arrival to the social media scene. The goals for my research were two-fold: to investigate whether this social media platform could allow librarians to enhance library awareness and reduce library stereotyping. Secondly, researchers hoped that the data gathered from the pre and posttests could identify areas in which the IU Southeast Library was doing well, and areas it could improve.

Keywords: Snapchat, advocacy, library stereotypes, user engagement, social media

Introduction: Why is Advocacy Important?

To begin, some may question why a particular focus on a library's advocacy efforts is important. While most of what is defined here as advocacy efforts falls under what some may coin marketing or public relations, these terms are too closely aligned with different sectors, so for purposes of this paper, advocacy is used. The advocacy philosophy of the current researcher is driven by a very simple creed: poor perceptions lead to perceived irrelevance. In other words, librarians should be concerned with how

users perceive and understand them not only so that they can ensure that they are meeting their needs, but so they can ensure that they are having positive user experiences while interacting with us. A positive perception will not only enhance your library's overall perceived relevance and the state of user experience, but it could perhaps help make library users more confident in your services, a part of which includes personnel and librarians.

These are all the personal philosophies of advocacy harbored by the researcher, but other scholars discuss the very real benefits of engaging in advocacy efforts. Nancy Marshall put it best when she wrote "a positive public image is vital to…overall success."[i] She drives this point home further by saying that a positive public image is necessary "for the continued financial and emotional support that will lead to…ongoing growth and success."[ii] By engaging in advocacy and paying particular attention to the state of user experience happening in your library, we can actually become better advocates not only for our profession, but also for our users. By listening to what our users want, engaging with them in meaningful ways, we become advocates for them.

Amanda B. Albert from St. Louis University describes advocacy efforts best when she describes that to really be effective, advocacy must involve the following three things: "vulnerability, transparency, and most of all, good, solid relationship-building."[iii] Albert goes on to discuss that with the publication of ACRL's Value of Academic Libraries report, academic libraries became increasingly concerned with assessment. This was a step in the right direction in terms of advocacy, but Albert states what is still often missing is communicating library impact.[iv] Communicating library impact and value is important because quite often we want to communicate this to library stakeholders. On an academic campus, these are administrative personnel like Chancellors and Vice Chancellors, who are the very people who 'own' the library building, and who can make decisions regarding spaces if it is perceived that the library is not relevant. Furthermore, Albert points out that engaging in this type of communication shows that you are "fully committed to accountability, transparency, and collaboration,"[v] and that in turn "build[s] trust and interest in library services."[vi]

In order to communicate library impact, however, librarians must interact with patrons and understand their needs and current perceptions of library resources – including library faculty and staff. These interactions are not quite the typical definition of a needs assessment, but relationship-building enables your patron base to be more confident in revealing what it is they need, which can in turn inform the direction of your programs and services, and this is exactly what I hoped my Snapchat study would reveal – areas on which to focus in terms of perception and awareness of services.

I would like to end this brief discussion of the importance of advocacy with another point by Amanda Albert. She reminds us that "librarians have a background in providing compassionate service to patrons"[vii] and that as nonprofits, the way we market and brand ourselves is inherently different because we are marketing our services and relationships and building from that compassionate service that we are so familiar with in order to build trust and interest in library services. Being open to the perceptions and needs of users, what Albert refers to as understanding your audience,[viii] is a key component to building your brand and communicating your value.

Library Stereotypes & Social Media's Effect on Awareness & Perceptions

For purposes of the current study, the librarian-researcher was more concerned with the stereotypes surrounding the library as an institution itself versus the stereotypes surrounding the individual librarian. A hypothesis was that the majority of patrons are not aware of the full range of services available to them inside libraries. As such, the researcher wanted to investigate if users understand the different services the library provides and the many different ways they can use the library and was less concerned if they genuinely believe that librarians are cardigan-wearing, bun-sporting cat ladies. The point to emphasize here, though, is that the goal was to gauge their current understandings of library services, and their current attitudes towards the librarians. In other words, do they think the library is just a warehouse of books, or do they know that we have individual study rooms, personalized research appointments, 500 plus databases, multicultural events, and what do they think of their specific librarians?

Interestingly, Eric Jennings of the University of Wisconsin Eau-Claire warns librarians of paying too much attention to beliefs in librarian stereotypes.[ix] Jennings reminds us that stereotypes are social perceptions that are always going to exist, be they in relation to lawyers, car salespeople, or even librarians. He urges the profession to instead focus on the quality of our service models instead of wondering what our users think of the profession.[x] While I understand the emphasis Jennings places on being concerned about the quality of your patron experience, I personally think we can (and should) do both. First understanding the misconceptions our users have about us provides a clear director (or at the very least a starting point) for our advocacy efforts. However, let me stress again that I used this study to investigate primarily the stereotypes that they had about libraries as institutions, because I think therein lies the real change that we can affect.

How, then, can social media play a role in addressing library stereotypes and enhancing advocacy? The most profound way, perhaps, is by allowing librarians to meet their users where they are.

Our society is attached to technology, so we shouldn't we take advantage of this to help boost those relationship-building efforts among the library and our users? Social media apps are free, they are easy to learn, and offer a wide range of ways to interact with users. The ability of social media to allow us to quickly reach users where they are is the most immediate benefit of incorporating it into advocacy efforts, but there are other benefits to social media in terms of cultivating a positive user experience.

Dominique Daniel, a Humanities Librarian at Oakland University, reviewed a larger study of librarian approachability and found that gender, race, and age of librarians impacts perceived approachability.[xi] Perhaps not surprisingly, female librarians were viewed as more approachable than male counterparts, and the review calls for enhanced diversity initiatives.[xii] Social media, including Snapchat, could be one way (included in a larger diversity initiative, of course) to introduce librarians previously viewed as less approachable in new ways, thus breaking down those barriers of approachability.

Additionally, in a 2016 study, researchers discovered that the ephemeral nature of Snapchat "provided clear benefits to participants [and that] the interactions were associated with positive mood [allowing] them to reaffirm connections."[xiii] Furthermore, the researchers claim that Snapchat is a "space for exchanging small [yet] context-rich moments,"[xiv] and compared it to the social and emotional benefits one gets from exchanging small talk with acquaintances or making eye-contact in public.[xv] One suggested reason for this is the ephemerality of Snapchat, which requires a particular and temporal focus on the snaps a user engages with.[xvi]

Methodology

Convenience sampling was employed to obtain survey respondents. The librarian-researcher marketed the study heavily on the library's mobile markerboard in the lobby, but also had significant help marketing the study from the Dean of First Year Experience. This partnership helped immensely, and though the researcher did not ask students to reveal their year in school, it is suspected that the majority of respondents were first year students.

In regards to survey questions and responses, the researched used Qualtrics to create the survey itself, and crafted a custom URL for ease of marketing purposes to link respondents to a fifteen-question survey regarding their opinions on a number of statements, and which asked them to rate their opinion according to a Likert scale. Questions included such things as, "Libraries are just places where I can find books," and "I am confident the IU Southeast Librarians are information experts." Further questions asked about library anxiety such as, "Using library resources makes me anxious." Still more

questions asked about their awareness of search techniques and the library as a facilitator of research: "I know how to find databases on the library's website," and "If I need research held, the library is one of the first places I think of." All questions remained the same, of course, in the pre and post tests.

During the two weeks, thirty-one (31) students started the survey, but only seventeen (17) finished. While I wish I had garnered more survey respondents, this does equate to a 54% completion rate. The pre-test was made available the week from September 25 through October 1, 2017, and the official study began October 1, 2017. The post-test was made available on October 17, 2017.

Discussion

As a result of marketing efforts surrounding this study, followers of the library's Snapchat started increasing in mid-September. As the librarian-researcher noticed that the library was gaining followers, they started making regular snaps just to ensure that they had something to look at in the meantime. The official study began on October 1, 2017 and a wide variety of snaps were posted, many of which focused on putting a human face to the library. For example, the researcher included an informal interview with the library's director, as well as with the Course Reserves Manager**.** The researcher also included snaps that highlighted the many different resources available at the library, such as the Book a Librarian service, the availability of group study rooms, and the quiet study floor. Additionally, also included were snaps that discussed how to use library resources and perform research, such as video demos highlighting how to find things on the library's website, or snapshots of the library's website with text instructions.

You may be asking yourself, then, what the data revealed. As stated earlier, one of the goals was to determine if perceptions of librarians and the library changed as a result of interacting with us on Snapchat for a couple of weeks. To answer that question briefly, yes, their perceptions of both librarians and libraries shifted. For example, when asked if they envision an older woman wearing a cardigan and glasses when they think of the word librarians, 70.5% of respondents agreed in the pre-test. This is in comparison to zero percent in the post-test. Our library faculty comprises a range of ages and genders, so my goal when asking this question is to hopefully get them to realize who we are and again, to put a human face on the library. Interestingly, on the pre-test, 41.1% of respondents somewhat agreed that librarians like to shush people, and another 41% were neutral on this opinion. This compares to 88% who disagreed and the remaining 12% who remained neutral on this question during the post-test. The goal here is that they started to literally see the librarians talking and acting in a variety of ways above and beyond just a 'gatekeeper,' if you will, at the desk.

Regarding their preconceived notion of libraries as institutions, when asked if "libraries are supposed to be quiet places," 94.1% of respondents agreed in the pre-test, compared to 64.7% who agreed in the post-test. This is a pretty significant 30% decrease, hopefully indicative of enhanced awareness of the library as a mixed space – that is, library as social space, collaborative space, and as traditional quiet study space.

Regarding their confidence and awareness of library services and personnel, the data revealed some interesting facts. Perhaps the most unsettling thing that the data revealed (and something for the researcher to keep at the forefront when considering social media engagement and personal engagement at the Reference Desk or in the classroom), is that 41.1% of respondents only somewhat agreed that the IU Southeast Librarians are information experts. This is clearly a targeted area for future advocacy efforts.

One beneficial component of this study is that it revealed areas in which the library is doing well. For example, 76% of respondents disagreed in the pre-test that libraries are just places where one can find books. This compares to 94% of respondents who disagreed in the post-test, however, three-quarters of our respondents clearly know that you can do other things at the library than just get books. Another perception that was already firmly established was the library as a key player for obtaining research assistance. Ninety-four percent of respondents in both the pre and post-test agreed that the library is one of the first places they think of when they need research help. These are the two areas in which I think we excelled prior to any social media intervention, and this is always helpful information as it can help inform the direction of future advocacy efforts. Knowing what you do well is just as beneficial as knowing what needs work.

Speaking of work, there are a few areas in which this study revealed weakness. Most shocking, as mentioned above, is that only 41% of respondents somewhat agreed that they are confident the IU Southeast librarians are information experts. This could indicate a decent level of mistrust or lack of confidence in librarians' abilities as information professionals. While the researcher is not certain where this perception comes from (as maybe it is simply due to a lack of any significant interaction with the librarians), it is nonetheless cause for concern, and is assuredly a targeted area for future advocacy initiatives.

Yet another area of concern is the amount of library anxiety reported from this study. In the pre-test, almost half (47%) of the respondents agreed that using library resources makes them anxious. In the post-test, however, only 17% agreed that using library resources makes them anxious. There was a 30% decrease in that amount of library anxiety, so while it does indicate that social media can have a

positive impact on library resource anxiety, it will remain a targeted initiative moving forward as almost half of the respondents indicated anxiety.

Other key takeaways from this study is that it helped to enhance librarian recognition and familiarity. For example, 29% of respondents in the pre-test said they would not be able to recognize a single librarian on campus. The post-test, however, revealed that 88% would recognize at least a few of us, and the remaining 22% would recognize all of us. This is a beneficial takeaway because it helps reinforce the human face of the library and can hopefully help mitigate any library anxiety users may have.

Conclusion:

Overall, the librarian-researcher found Snapchat to be an effective advocacy tool. It not only helped alleviate the amount of reported library anxiety, but it enhanced the confidence that users had in terms of using library resources and being aware of other services available at the library. Additionally, Snapchat also helped mitigate the stereotype of librarians as being older women with an affinity to wear cardigans. Furthermore, it helped alleviate institutional stereotypes about libraries as simply containers of books, and also helped to enhance the recognition of the IU Southeast Librarians. Moving forward, social media advocacy will continue to focus on alleviating the anxiety surrounding the use of library resources as well as establishing the credibility and expertise of campus librarians.

---

[i] Nancy J. Marshall, "Public Relations in Academic Libraries: A Descriptive Analysis," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 27 (2001): 116, accessed March 26, 2018, EBSCOhost.

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] Amanda B. Albert, "Building Brand Love and Gaining the Advocacy You Crave by Communicating Your Library's Value," *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning* 11 (2017): 238, accessed March 26, 2018, doi: 10.1080/1533290X.2016.1193413.

[iv] Ibid., 237.

[v] Ibid., 243.

[vi] Ibid.

[vii] Ibid., 244.

[viii] Ibid., 245.

[ix] Eric Jennings, "The Librarian Stereotype: How Librarians are Damaging Their Image and Profession," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 23 (2016): 93-94, accessed March 26, 2018, doi: 10.1080/10691316.2016.1134241.

[x] Ibid.

[xi] Dominque Daniel, "Gender, Race, and Age of Librarians and Users Have an Impact on the Perceived Approachability of Librarians," *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice,* 8 (2013): 74, accessed March 26, 2018, EBSCOhost.

[xii] Ibid.

[xiii] Joseph B. Bayer, Nicole B. Ellison, Sarita Y. Schoenbeck, and Emily B. Falk, "Sharing the Small Moments: Ephemeral Social Interaction on Snapchat," *Information, Communication, & Society* 19 (2016): 971, accessed March 26, 2018, doi: 10.1080/1369118X.2015.1084349.

[xiv] Ibid.

[xv] Ibid.

[xvi] Ibid., 971-972.