


Chapter 5

Assessing Social Media Use in Instruction and Marketing

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ABSTRACT

Assessment is increasingly important for libraries to address, as it speaks to justification for funding and support from the larger university. Many university budget models now require departments and colleges to be self-funding, whereas the library does not have traditional revenue sources. Statistics, including retention impact, encourage faculty and staff to promote library use to their students and encourage departments and colleges to support funding the library. This chapter explores best practices for assessing social media use in the context of instruction and marketing. It outlines the reasons for implementing an assessment plan as well as the steps necessary to successfully assess social media use, starting with outlining the specific goals for social media use, all the way through review and modification of the social media plan.

INTRODUCTION

The frequent use of social media, especially among traditional age college and university students, typically defined as 18-24 year olds, is all but assumed, though specific networks and modes of use continue to be redefined. A recent study conducted by Pew Research Center found that 88% of 18-29 year olds use some form of social media, and that number only drops by 10% for the next age cohort, 30-49 year olds (2018, p.4). Social media has become an information source, and as such, the library as an educational institution has a duty to embrace social media use in order to continue serving these patrons to the best of their ability. A study by Yan, Zha, Yan, and Zhang (2016), which sought to explore students' self-efficacy in the use of digital libraries and databases, recommends that, "If students can begin to use digital libraries upon entering universities with the help of librarians, their self-efficacy in getting information would gradually develop... with the results that users can reap significant rewards...(p. 1105)." It stands to reason that a similar effect would be achieved if libraries made it a priority to include social

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media in library instruction and other aspects of library services. Though students may have been using both digital libraries and social media prior to attending university, they would benefit from guidance from librarians to strengthen their skills, especially in judging information veracity and applicability.

The way that libraries choose to embrace this technology, however, can vary from institution to institution. Some libraries use social media as a marketing tool; some use social media as an instruction tool. Some libraries may even do both. An analysis of publications on the topic of libraries and social media conducted by Gupta, Dewan, and Pp. (2014), found that libraries use social media for a range of activities, including, “customer services, news and updates, content/collection promotion, [disseminating] research output, [making] provision of educational tools and resources, and [building] relationships both within and outside of the institution (p. 9).” However, whatever way they embrace it, these projects can have varied levels of success. This is in part because many libraries approach social media without a defined plan. Other libraries do not have the appropriate personnel infrastructure in place. Still more libraries do not have the appropriate tools to administer assessment effectively, or knowledgeable personnel in place to analyze the results.

This chapter outlines the need for an assessment cycle as it pertains to social media use, and suggests best practices for tailoring assessment to specific social media networks, tools, and program goals. With a plan in place, a direction to move in, and someone to lead the charge, academic libraries can have success with social media.

BACKGROUND

To begin, social media is defined as, “... the means of interactions among people in which they create, share and exchange information and ideas in virtual online communities and networks” (Fang, Wen & Prybutok, 2014, p.336). This is an extremely broad definition of social media, which not only encompasses familiar public networks, such as Facebook and Twitter, but also learning management systems such as Blackboard and Canvas, that may include chat, instant messaging, and discussion board features. It also includes early internet features such as message boards.

Why, then, is social media important now? Previously, such networks had limited access, whether it was due to a lack of access to technology (such as the expense associated with the first personal computers) or due to the networks themselves restricting access. After all, even Facebook was originally restricted to college students only (Rosmarin, 2006). When that major network went public, and other similar networks arose to compete with it, use of social media spread. At the same time, computers were becoming smaller, cheaper, and more use-friendly. Cellular phone technology also played a role in the rapid spread of social media use. The ubiquitous nature of social media fundamentally changed the concept of information exchange and consumption. The ability for everyone – or nearly everyone – to be connected with each other at any given time has created a rapid fire exchange of information. This rapid exchange of information can lead to problems of information overload, and the spread of misinformation. Savolainen (2015) found four barriers associated with information seeking behavior, of which information overload was one. The other barriers were, “unawareness of relevant information sources, low self-efficacy, [and] poor search skills (Savolainen, 2015, p. 619).” Libraries in general, and academic libraries specifically, have positioned themselves as experts in the field of information – as is evidenced by the title given to most departments that teach library science: the School of Library and Information Science. Librarians already assist students in overcoming the barriers of awareness, skill-

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