Engaging with Students through Social Media: The University of Toronto Mississauga Library integrates new ways of communicating

Opportunity

Given the importance of social media in the lives of students, the University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) Library wanted to explore its possible role on social media and how interaction with students would best be accomplished. The first step was a six-month study, resulting in recommendations for development and assessment of a social media presence.

With the support of an Ontario College and University Library Association's New Librarian Residency Award, in September 2011, Eva Stepanian became the Social Media Librarian, tasked with developing and implementing a social media strategy for the library, as well as creating tools to measure the impact of the project.

The research study had stressed the provision of information as the key role for social media, but it was quickly discovered that students preferred ongoing interaction in which they both learned about the library and were able to offer comments and suggestions.

Innovation

The pilot study recommended Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube as the best platforms on which to connect with students.

Facebook is the most popular platform for students but it is constructed as a personal space and it was difficult to find an active role for the library. The library does have a Facebook page, which provides information and updates, but the level of engagement with students through Facebook is quite low. Research has shown that students do see and appreciate the information provided on Facebook about library hours, resources, and workshops, and so it is useful for delivery of content.

Twitter has proven to be much more successful for student engagement. Short and frequent messages on Twitter bring in student responses and students initiate messages about noise and overcrowding in library, useful resources and workshops, and helpful or unhelpful staff. The optimal tone for messages on Twitter mirrors the more casual tone taken by the students, accompanied by a mild sense of humour. The messages, such as

the example shown below, are faceless so the goal is to make the library itself more approachable, comfortable, and responsive to student needs.

> **UTMlibrary** @UTMlibrary   3 Oct
> Wondering if the library is busy? Yea...we're somewhere between
> very and extremely. #fyi
> Collapse   ← Reply   ⇄ Retweet   ★ Favorite

Twitter is also used as a link to encourage the use of YouTube, especially tutorials on using specific databases and tools. For example, through communication with professors, tweets can be sent about YouTube tutorials on using the Biomed database to coincide with assignment due dates.

The library has also established a presence on Tumblr, which is predominantly a multimedia blog. Developed as an antidote to exam stress, the library blog features photos, quotes, and images to give student some encouragement and perspective. Student response to it, as a way of alleviating pressure, has been very positive.

Feedback sessions are held – face-to-face and through Twitter – to talk about library services and environment. The feedback sessions are also used to gather information about the users – what platforms they are on, how they found out about the event, what tools they use, do they follow the library on Twitter, do they respond, and what do they think of the library messaging.

Outcomes and Benefits

The feedback on Twitter results in the improvement of library services in response to user comments. Students are often more candid on Twitter than in person, as well as more immediate. Problems can be raised and addressed very quickly. Students struggling with assignments can be directed to helpful resources; timing and content of workshops and help/study hours can be modified; and the library atmosphere can be improved with issues of overcrowding addressed by recommending other sections of the library for quiet study.

The social media presence is designed to make the students more aware of the services in the library, have a greater sense of ownership, feel more comfortable, and be encouraged to ask for help and support. In turn, the library receives valuable and ongoing input about its services and how they might be adapted to better suit student needs. The social media presence is working to reduce the distance sometimes found between the students and

the library staff. The graph below illustrates the growth in the number of students 'following' the library on Twitter over a three month period.
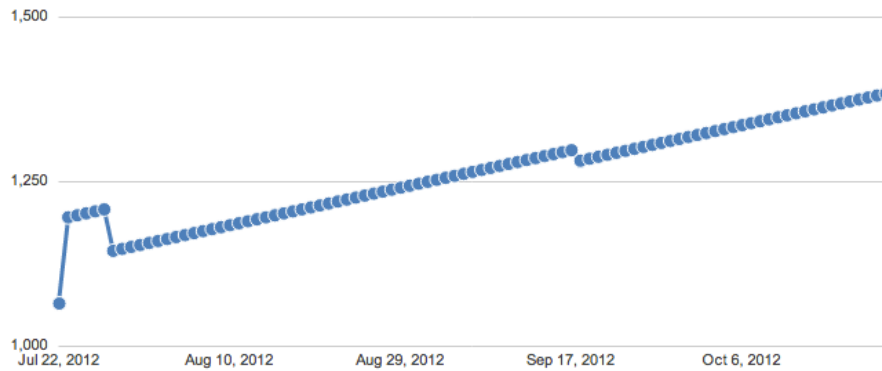

Table One: Number of students following the library on Twitter

The library provides essentially the same services as before the introduction of social media, but now the services are promoted and offered in new ways and reach new and increased numbers of students. Social media engagement also means that student reactions to, and suggestions for events and services, are accessible to library staff – so the library can better respond to the needs of the students.

Challenges

Academic institutions are accustomed to communicating with their students through their more traditional methods and social media demands that they learn how to communicate in media that students dominate. The value of social media has to be proven. At UTM, Eva Stepanian provides practical application of the student input by conveying it to staff so services can be improved.

The gathering of relevant information to convey to students can be challenging; the best approach seems to be through personal communications with staff rather than formal information gathering.

Twitter demands immediate attention – a response sent the next day indicates to a student that their message, particularly their complaint, has been ignored. Social media involvement demands time and resources as it has to follow the rhythm of the students, not the institution.

Potential

Eva Stepanian describes the critical step in her role as social media librarian, "I realized I had to step out of the academic library and into marketing and PR as I recognized the success of the messages aimed at individuals rather than at just providing information". She has found that the value is engaging with the students in their space and on their media.

Broadcasting of information is helpful, but the focus on engagement brings greater benefits for the students and the library. Social media can make the students feel that the library is a place where they can be comfortable and helped. It can reduce the intimidation factor, making them more likely to connect with staff on-site.

Ms. Stepanian is very happy to share her experience in defining, implementing, assessing, and improving social media in an academic library.

For Further Information

Eva Stepanian
Social Media Librarian
HMALC Library
University of Toronto Mississauga
Eva.stepanian@utoronto.ca

Twitter: @utmlibrary