

By Doralyn Rossmann
and Scott W.H. Young

AS WITH OTHER LIBRARY SERVICES,
IT IS IMPORTANT TO **BE INTENTIONAL**
IN YOUR APPROACH AND
PROACTIVE IN YOUR EVALUATION OF
SOCIAL MEDIA ACTIVITIES.

Using



THE QUESTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN LIBRARIES IS NO LONGER “SHOULD?” BUT “HOW?” Pew Research Center recently released a yearly update to its social media survey (pewinternet.org/2015/01/09/social-media-update-2014). It’s no surprise that results indicate an increasing usage of social media across demographic categories: 52% of all adults online used multiple social media sites in 2014, up from 42% in 2013. Pew studied five leading sites—Facebook, LinkedIn,



to Build COMMUNITY

Pinterest, Instagram, and Twitter—to demonstrate that social media use is growing both in total number of users and frequency of use. Such survey results reaffirm what many of us experience: Social media has become an essential communication channel.

As librarians, we view this national survey data and ask, “What is the role of the library with social media?” In responding to this question, we (at the Montana State University Library) asked a primary user group—students—what they thought of the library and social media. We organized student

focus groups around the topic of current use and expectations of social media. We wanted to learn what our students expected from libraries on major social networks. One student remarked, “Organizations are sort of notoriously bland on their social media.” Another student told us, “If you have a Twitter account, you have to give people a reason to follow you.” We took this advice and asked ourselves, “How can we avoid blandness? What interesting aspects can we provide as reasons people would join us on social media?”



After asking our students, we then consulted the library and information science literature. In *Computers in Libraries* last October, Hofschire and Wanucha (2014) discussed a survey of social media adoption in public libraries: “results suggest that social media ... will continue to grow, although the ways in which these technologies will be implemented are uncertain.” There is a rich conversation around the implementation and use of social media in libraries. Li and Li (2013) identified the marketing of library resources as “the most notable achievement of many libraries that have adopted social media. ...” Likewise, Sachs (2011) found that promotion and marketing was the only truly successful use of social media for her university library.

While both marketing and promotion represent primary goals of social media, Blakeman and Brown (2010) recognize that marketing on social media can achieve an even higher goal: building your community. A more recent study from Oh (2014) found that a sense of community—developed through social media—was positively associated with the life satisfaction of adult research participants. Taken together, the literature we read

pointed us in the direction of outreach and community-building—the effects of which could have far-reaching benefits for us and our library patrons.

After listening to our users and observing the direction of our literature, we identified one central goal and two key strategies for our social media: Fundamentally, we aimed to build a sense of community for our users, and we would employ strategies of personality and interactivity. People would follow us because we would bring an authentic sense of personality to our regular social media posts and interactions. From there, we would build a valuable and rewarding sense of connection and community together with our users. We identified an opportunity—expressed by our students and hinted at in the literature—to create a genuine, multifaceted personality that could be effective in engaging a target community of social media users.

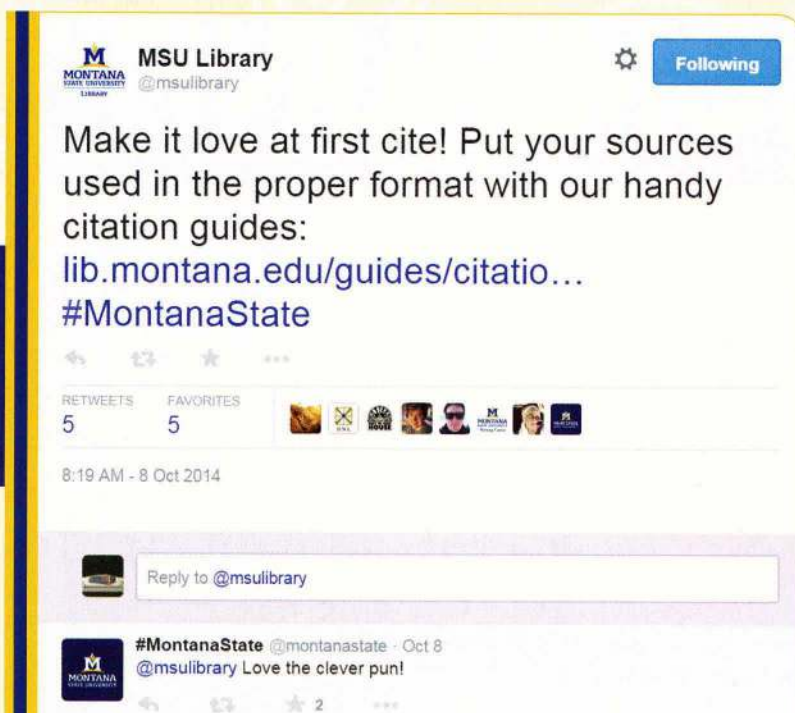
**‘MAKE A PLAN,
WORK THE PLAN.’**



Once we had determined our central goal and supporting methods, we needed to form an advisory group to coordinate, strategize, and monitor our social media activities. In May 2012, we created the



The Montana State University Library mascot, Rufus, in action



Creative promotion of a library resource



Interacting with undergraduate student around the event Paws to de-Stress event

Social Media Group (lib.montana.edu/about/social-media). This small committee—comprising three librarians and a library staff member—was tasked with providing direction, structure, and purpose for the library’s social media activity. This programmatic initiative allowed us to produce a focused outreach and community-building strategy for our library social media. To document our strategy and goals, we created a Social Media Guide (lib.montana.edu/about/social-media/#guide). We used it to direct our efforts and also to communicate our work to others within our organization and campus community. In short, creating and following our Social Media Guide allowed our social media to flourish. As one of our committee members is fond of saying, “Make a plan, work the plan.”

Research Method

A year after we established our social media plan, we decided to evaluate our work before and after it went into effect. As with other library services, it is important to be intentional in your approach and proactive in your evalu-

ation of social media activities. Prior to the implementation of our Social Media Guide, our activity on social media had largely been on autopilot. We commonly cross-posted Facebook updates and blog posts to Twitter. Even then, our activity was sporadic. However, after the implementation of our Social Media Guide, our activity changed drastically. We produced tailored Twitter posts and Facebook updates, more regularly and with more personality. Previously, we had viewed social media as a one-way broadcast platform, so we shifted our perspective toward it being an interactive community space.

The Social Media Guide represented a turning point for our work. It allowed us to study two distinct approaches to social media community-building. Our central research question asked how this change in approach affected our community. To answer it, we studied our user populations and interactions on Twitter, before and after implementing our Social Media Guide. This analysis required downloading and categorizing Twitter user data. We first established custom user types, and then

placed our followers into those distinct groups based on their individual Twitter bios, tweet content, and campus directories. Examples of user types included business, student, faculty, librarian, and alumni. Similarly, we established

**‘HOW CAN WE AVOID
BLANDNESS? WHAT
INTERESTING ASPECTS
CAN WE PROVIDE AS
REASONS PEOPLE
WOULD JOIN US
ON SOCIAL MEDIA?’**



custom types for our tweet content, and then placed our own tweets into distinct groups, such as workshops, databases, student life, and local community. From this data, we created a metric—interaction rate—to track the percentage of our Twitter posts that received an interaction from a Twitter user. For the purposes of our study, an interaction on Twitter was marked by a favorite, retweet, or reply. Periodic review of the latest data can inform whether efforts are still on track with the goals and intentions as outlined in the Social Media Guide. A snapshot of our research approach and findings can be found in a poster developed as a part of the 2014 American Library Association’s (ALA) Assessment in Action program (apply.ala.org/aia/docs/project/5451).

Results and Discussion

Our analysis suggests that libraries will benefit from going beyond marketing to include community-building in their social media goals. We initially had a large business following on Twitter and a small undergraduate student following, with low interaction rates for our tweets. The results of our study demonstrate that after implementing our Social Media Guide, our community of followers shifted significantly from businesses to students. Before our guide, businesses represented 50% of

our followers, while students represented just more than 5%. After our guide, business followers decreased by nearly half, while student followers increased threefold. The key to this shift in community was not only due to our changing attitude and approach, but also our

POSITIVE, ATTENTIVE



INTERACTIONS WITH USERS BY THE LIBRARY VIA SOCIAL MEDIA EXTEND INTO AN OVERALL FEELING OF COMMUNITY.

changing content. Prior to our Social Media Guide, we often posted about library workshops and library events—half of all our tweets were about workshops and events. Our research showed that these tweets received low interaction rates, indicating that this content was of low interest to our community.

In contrast, after our Social Media Guide, we often posted about students and their day-to-day activities and interests. These student-focused tweets received comparatively high interaction rates, indicating that this content was of interest to our community. Our study showed us that a shift in approach and

content can generate a shift in community. In fact, when comparing all our tweets from the periods before and after our Social Media Guide, we noted an overall increase in interaction rate of 275%. Our research results suggest that we have made progress toward accomplishing our goal of building a community of active student participants on social media.

The big-picture takeaway from this research suggests that an intentional, personality-rich approach to social media—with relevant content and meaningful interactions—can transform community. In our case, the goal is to connect with students and build community and, in doing so, share relevant information with a strong sense of our unique character. Positive, attentive interactions with users by the library via social media extend into an overall feeling of community.

Concluding Thoughts

Social media is the same as any interpersonal situation: Your library needs to find its own voice and community. Take cues from your local community, and build a framework around your specific context. Document your goals and approaches in your own Social Media Guide. Scale your efforts around the platforms used by your

community and with regard to the time that staffers have available. Our work suggests that maintaining a commitment to social media interactions can grow your community; this, in turn, can generate real feelings of connection with your community both online and offline. If you are interested in reading more about our research study and our approach to social media community-building, a more detailed article is available in the March 2015 issue of *Information Technology and Libraries* (Vol. 34, No. 1).



References

- Blakeman, Karen, and Scott Brown. "Part II: Social Media: Essential for Research, Marketing and Branding." *Bulletin of the American Society for Information Science and Technology*. 37.1 (2010): 47–50. Wiley Online Library. Web. Feb. 5, 2015.
- Hofschire, Linda, and Meghan Wanucha. "Public Library Websites and Social Media: What's #Trending Now?" *Computers in Libraries*. (Oct. 2014): 4–9. Academic OneFile. Web. Feb. 6, 2015.
- Li, Xiang, and Tang Li. "Integrating Social Media Into East Asia Library Services: Case Studies at University of Colorado and Yale University." *Journal of East Asian Libraries*. 157.1 (2013): 23–36. Print.
- Sachs, Dianna E., Edward J. Eckel, and Kathleen A. Langan. "Striking a Balance: Effective Use of Facebook in an Academic Library." *Internet Reference Services Quarterly*. 16.1–2 (2011): 35–54. Web. Feb. 5, 2015.
- Oh, Hyun Jung, Elif Ozkaya, and Robert LaRose. "How Does Online Social Networking Enhance Life Satisfaction? The Relationships among Online Supportive Interaction, Affect, Perceived Social Support, Sense of Community, and Life Satisfaction." *Computers in Human Behavior*. 30 (2014): 69–78. Web. Feb. 6, 2015.

RECOMMENDED PRACTICES

Use these guidelines to help explore and experiment with your own social media community:

- Create and document a plan for engaging on social media.
- Listen to your community.
- Adapt your plan as you learn.
- Provide personality-rich content that invites two-way interaction.
- Make your content easily shareable with social media optimization (acrl.ala.org/techconnect/?p=4062).
- Create a social media mascot that represents your library's unique character.
- Use analytics applications such as Twitter's Analytics to provide insights (analytics.twitter.com).

Doralyn Rossmann (doralyn@montana.edu) is an associate professor and head of collection development at Montana State University. Her interests include topics such as citation analysis, ROI, public budgeting, and, most recently, research into community-building through social media.

Scott W.H. Young (swyoung@montana.edu) is an assistant professor and digital initiatives librarian at Montana State University. He specializes in user experience research, website development, and social media community-building.