

DOING SOCIAL MEDIA SO IT MATTERS

A Librarian's Guide

LAURA SOLOMON

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AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION

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INTRODUCTION

Social media is like teen sex. Everyone wants to do it. Nobody knows how.
When it's finally done there's surprise it's not better.

—AVINASH KAUSHIK, ANALYTICS EVANGELIST

PROOF OF CONCEPT

On June 19, 2009, at approximately 4 p.m., the world changed for public libraries in Ohio. The Ohio governor made an unanticipated announcement, proposing a 50 percent cut to funding for public libraries. Previous to the announcement, Ohio was known as having some of the best public libraries in the nation. Considering that the vast majority of public libraries in the state received a good amount of their operating budgets from the state, this proposal would have decimated, or even closed, many of Ohio's libraries.

If the future existence of your institution is in doubt, what do you do? You do what library supporters in Ohio did: you mobilize. Many libraries mobilized their patrons, using their existing patron databases to send urgent e-mails asking them to call their legislators. Some libraries set up dedicated computers where patrons could send messages directly to the governor and the local representative. Others posted signs on their doors, stating their library would be permanently closed if the funding cut went through. These methods were invaluable in getting the word out.

Still other supporters turned to social media, which had the potential of reaching Ohio residents who were not active patrons of their local libraries. These channels moved a great deal faster than almost any traditional form of communication and helped to mobilize tens of thousands of people who might otherwise not have been aware of the crisis.

Within an hour of the governor's announcement, the story was on Twitter. I created a Twitter hash tag (a way to categorize Twitter messages), #saveohiolibraries. The conversation collated around the hash tag, and it became one of the top forty most

popular topics on Twitter. A Facebook group, Save Ohio Libraries, was started. It had over 50,000 members in less than three weeks. Mandy Knapp, a librarian from Worthington Libraries, began a website at www.saveohiolibraries.com, where she tracked the latest developments on the issue and where people could leave their own stories of why they needed their library. (And there were many stories!) Some patrons even put videos in support of libraries on YouTube. The social media movement was strong enough to garner support from such notables as author Neil Gaiman and celebrity blogger Perez Hilton. The Ohio library funding crisis had hit the national stage.

Between social media and other efforts put forth by libraries and their supporters, the Save Ohio Libraries movement made a huge impact at the State Capitol. Thousands of phone calls were made by patrons on their libraries' behalf, forcing state officials to add additional staff to handle them. Most legislators received between 37,000 and 45,000 e-mails in a one-week period, resulting in such a volume that an automatic response was put on the servers to try and keep the electronic traffic moving. Legislators commented to Lynda Murray, the director of government and legal services for the Ohio Library Council, that they had never seen anything like it at the Capitol.¹

Although it was not possible to save all of the funds for Ohio's public libraries from the chopping block, a huge reduction in cutbacks was made; more than \$147 million in state funding was saved, preventing the complete devastation of Ohio's nationally known libraries. As of this writing, despite the outpouring of support from Ohio's residents, many libraries are still struggling with the financial cuts. But things would have been much worse if the governor's proposal had come to full fruition.

IT'S NOT THE TOOL, IT'S THE WIELDER

Without social media, the reach of the campaign would have been more limited and much less effective. However, what many fail to understand is that social media doesn't just "happen." In our case, the social media efforts were primarily managed by a few people who were already very active in social networks and knew how to optimize their presence. These people understood core principles that make using these networks worth the work. Without these individuals, it's very likely that Save Ohio Libraries would not have had the impact in these online communities that it did. Many librarians and libraries simply did not have a presence in social media, or at least one that was influential enough to have any effect.

Many libraries do not understand that using social media successfully takes more than just having an account. Social media is a lot like the strategy game Othello. It's incredibly easy to learn but can take a long time to master. However, the minute-to-minute pace of social media does not allow for a long learning curve before claiming mastery. Many libraries take this to mean they should jump into the roaring river of online interaction, but by doing so they miss key concepts of how best to utilize the incredible tool at

their fingertips. They waste time, resources, and opportunities to connect with the very people they want and need to reach.

Unlike traditional media, social media has few barriers. It's no longer a question of budget or acquiring the necessary tools; the vast majority of social media applications are free, and participating in social media is far easier than trying to produce a television commercial or print advertisement. The real need is for experienced social media staff in an arena where many mistakenly assume that having the tool is equivalent to having the expertise.

This book is my attempt not only to answer common questions libraries have about using social media but also to explain and demonstrate how libraries can be doing social media more effectively. There are many ways for libraries to enter the social media space, and there are pitfalls along the way; I know, I've seen almost all of them.

It's time to step up to your computer and to learn how to do social media so it *matters*.

NOTE

1. Lynda Murray, e-mail message to author, January 8, 2010.

GETTING A (BETTER) GRIP ON SOCIAL MEDIA

The world, as it was, no longer is.

—ERIK QUALMAN, AUTHOR OF *SOCIALNOMICS*

THE TOOLS ARE EPHEMERAL

When it comes to discussing anything online, it's hard to argue with the fact that change is constant. How often have you or your coworkers complained that keeping up with everything new on the Web is nearly impossible? There's no doubt that the frenetic pace of online innovations can be daunting. Nevertheless, the pace is not likely to slow. Websites come and go as fast as the social media tools that empower them.

It's not hard to understand that *all* of the current social media tools are, at best, ephemeral. Accepting this idea of constant and immediate change may be hard for libraries, which historically act to preserve information. At the time of this writing, the popularity of MySpace is declining, and Facebook usage is expanding. What's popular today may be irrelevant tomorrow. Twitter may be replaced by something completely different a year from now. In order to be successful in online communities, libraries need to accept this fast pace of change and begin to move with it.

Unfortunately, some shortsighted individuals misconstrue the changing nature of online tools to mean that social media is a fad or something that libraries should avoid entirely. One of the most common questions I hear is, How do I convince my director that social media is important? To help answer that, I'll be introducing some methods to make your efforts more effective.

BOTTOM LINE

Social media sites will change. Concepts will not. Be flexible.

UNDERSTANDING THE LIBRARY'S PLACE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Librarians may know about the various social media tools and may even teach their patrons how to use them. They may also have some vague idea about using them to promote programs or collections. Most, however, are truly stymied when it comes to understanding how best to use these tools to their benefit. Even more critically, they may fail to understand basic social media concepts, such as how to build trust and reciprocity (social capital), resulting in the library being effectively irrelevant in a particular online community.

It's easy to get a free account on any of the hundreds of social media sites that currently exist, but social media is not about coverage or even necessarily about numbers. It's about making *connections*. That might seem like a touchy-feely way to gauge its value, especially if you're an administrator, but part of learning to handle social media interaction appropriately is to understand that numbers are not the primary consideration. It's true that metrics are something that should be tracked as part of a library's social media work, but social media's goals are quite different from those of traditional advertising media. In fact, I would argue that social media isn't particularly effective for pure advertising. So why participate in a social media community at all?

Simply using the tools to proclaim, "Come to our library's cool program!" won't fly online. Social media is not a one-way broadcast; it can act as a unique bridge that has never been available to libraries before. Social media can do something no other medium can: directly engage and connect our patrons—to the library and to each other. Knowing how to use Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, or the next "it" social media site is just the beginning. Effective social media takes some thought, a lot of time, and, yes, some careful planning. Until you unlock the potential of online social media, it might seem that it is just a stream of consciousness of the masses and, as a communication method, largely pointless.

Librarians often envision the role of the library as a community center. Social media allows them to put this philosophy directly into practice. Think carefully about what the word *community* connotes: a place where various people communicate and interact with one another. If a library uses social media only as a broadcast medium to get the word out, it is not participating in a community but rather using a version of a bullhorn to promote itself to a crowd.

When a library involves itself in social media, it first and foremost has to understand that it's going to be expected to *interact*. To do otherwise is to fail. Let me say that again: To do otherwise is to fail. By failing to participate in conversations and relationships, the library is essentially declaring that it will simply maintain its traditional role as a depository of knowledge.

Libraries are for the people and of the people, to borrow a phrase. Social media is no different. In other words, even though a library is an organizational entity, once it enters the social realm it is perceived as a *person* and will need to act and speak accordingly.

BOTTOM LINE

Interact with people in social media, or risk becoming irrelevant.

LETTING GO OF THE MESSAGE

The successful use of social media requires companies and organizations to “let go of the message.” This means that there has to be an inherent understanding on the part of the institution that the staff in charge of public relations no longer has control over what is said about the organization. In many cases, an organization’s social networks may act as an informal PR department. For better or for worse, many conversations are happening about businesses (and libraries) online, and these interchanges are not controlled by any “official” entity.

Library administrators have to understand that *patrons* now control the message. This can be even harder yet to comprehend in the context of social media. There is no longer a one-to-many broadcast model for a message. Now, each person participating in a social media site’s service constitutes a node on a network that serves many-to-many communication. There is no “official” voice or moderator. Theoretically, all participants have equal standing in these communities, regardless of what positions they might hold in the offline world. This means that people who don’t work for your library have as much (some might say more) say as the library does as to what gets said about it.

There is also a tendency for administrators to think only of what they perceive to be “worst case scenarios”: What happens if someone makes a negative comment? What happens if the library gets a bad review? The fact is, people have always had not-so-flattering things to say about libraries. The channels for *hearing* those comments, however, were not so wide open or publicly accessible as they now are. This is our twenty-first-century reality: conversations have moved to the online realm and have, therefore, broadened the scope of their audiences. It’s likely that the possible size of the audience and the speed at which news can travel via social media are what makes many administrators nervous about embracing it.

Although it’s possible that negative commentary will have repeated airings, it’s crucial to remember that, under most circumstances, the number of positive remarks will almost always outweigh the negative ones. People want to take ownership of the library’s “brand” and want to be able to brag about it, just as they likely do with organizations they are a part of or products or performers they admire.

Bluntly speaking, there is no practical way to control what is or is not said about a library. Libraries that choose to participate in social networks have to internalize this truth. Patrons are no longer just at the receiving end of communications. Patrons now receive *and* send. Some will inevitably say something the library won't agree with; this is the nature of conversation after all. Just keep in mind that social media involvement allows the library to build one-to-one relationships with patrons that can result in more loyalty and possibly advocacy later on.

BOTTOM LINE

*Giving up control is hard, but the worst case scenario rarely happens.
Even if it does, it is far outweighed by the potential reach
a library can have via social media.*

GETTING ADMINISTRATIVE BUY-IN

Social media might be old hat to you. Maybe you already participate in a social networking site and want to know how to maximize your time in these conversations. Or, perhaps you're in the all-too-common position of having to convince a library administrator that social media is not a fad or a waste of time. In libraries, knowing how to do social media well isn't enough; you also need a social media foundation that is determined by two factors:

1. Competency of the staff actually in charge of the social media presence of the library
2. Amount of support provided by the library's administration for social media

This is an unfortunate reality for library staff who may have the expertise but not the backing. Social media efforts will likely end in failure without a director's buy-in. At some point, no matter how adept you might be at navigating the social media terrain, you are going to need backup. How will your administration expect you to handle negative comments? How does the director want questions answered that come in via social networks? At the very least, you will need to invest time in building social capital. How much time will your director support?

The first step, of course, is to show that social media has a direct benefit for your library. Administrators can often be industry-insular; in other words, if the staff cannot point directly to another library where a social media endeavor has already been a success, administrators may be reluctant to consider anything else as a legitimate. Also, much of the library profession tends to be traditional in its approach, and administrators can be inherently reluctant to examine strategies from other types of organizations. This can be very self-limiting and rarely leads to real innovation or change.

I am often asked for specific examples of libraries using social media well, and I seldom can cite any. More often, I point to other types of nonprofits or even large corporations that “get it.” “Getting it” doesn’t mean jumping on the Web 2.0 bandwagon. What it does mean is that these organizations or companies understand that online communication has moved beyond just transmitting a message to a largely receptive audience. Successful social media means that the organization is ready to have two-way conversations online, even if they are negative or uncomfortable. The organization understands that it is involved in building a long-term relationship, not just in completing a quick, anonymous transaction. Companies such as Dell and Zappos.com are famous for their customer relations via social media channels, primarily because they engage directly and consistently with their customers online and under public scrutiny.

Not every social media tool is for every person or every library; some libraries may not even have a demographic that uses this type of communication yet. However, for those libraries that are aware their patrons are out there on social networks, it’s critical that they also understand how social media will enhance the library experience. Those patrons have expectations for the members of their online communities. These patrons want their social media connections to act like real people, talk like real people, and not always put themselves first. If your library’s director will not allow you to act in accordance with those expectations, it’s likely that your future efforts will be rejected.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

How do you convince the reluctant director? There’s no magic wand here, but the following sections present some avenues to explore.

Education

An education campaign has to be part of your exertions; facts are important.

Put Information in Front of Them

Find brief, entertaining articles or blog posts that not only explain social media but also showcase examples of how social media provided a concrete benefit. Print them out and send them to the director with a sticky note: “Hi, thought you would find this interesting.” Printing something out shows more effort on your part and is less likely to be totally ignored than an e-mail. The sticky note gives it a more personal touch, too. Be sure to tell them you’ll follow up so they know you expect them to glance at it.

Tell Stories

I find myself telling personal stories when I’m explaining social media. Anecdotes provide a human perspective and make interesting hooks for people new to the concepts. (After all, social media is all about people.) I often tell the story of how I

was introduced to Twitter: upon first inspection, I honestly thought it was the dumbest online tool I'd ever seen. Once I saw it in use as a way to have informative conversations during conference sessions (a conference backchannel) though, the light bulb went on, and now I can't live without it. I also tell stories about how other aspects of my life have been affected by social media. My husband and I reconnected with the best man from our wedding because someone I met at a conference started following me on Twitter. I have a friend who met his wife via a virtual world. This kind of thing happens all the time. Social media is making the world smaller, and people are connecting to one another in new ways. Show the personal impact to bring your point home.

Highlight the Facts to Diminish the Fears

Does your administrator believe no one will want to interact with a library? A study published by eMarketer in 2009, "Social Network Marketing Expands Sphere," showed that more than half of the users of social networks have followed or become a fan of a brand online.¹ If someone is going to become a fan of local restaurants on Facebook, they may also want to be a fan of their library. Is the director afraid that people will say negative things? The same study found that users are much more likely to rave than to rant. For nearly every concern, there are facts, figures, and case studies to address it. Check the bibliography for some resources to help you.

Downplay the Tech

This is not about any cool technologies or your enthusiasm for them. Your director is looking at the big picture. Ultimately, it will come down to whether or not social media is good for the library. Technology becomes less relevant than what the library potentially will get out of it: more potential support at levy time and advocates who will call their representative when funding comes under fire. These deliverables may mean more to an administrator than the technology.

Explain What Happens If an Outsider Hijacks the Library's Name

The practice of taking someone/something else's name online is called *brandjacking*, and even if your library isn't in social media space, someone could grab its name. If that were to happen, it would be incredibly difficult to shut down the culprit. Meanwhile, there's no knowing what damage might have been done to the library's reputation. Claiming an identity on social networks is just as important as buying domain names for your library. Even if your director isn't eager to start posting status updates, the library should at least go through the steps of claiming the library's name by setting up accounts on popular networks. Once your library is there, it will likely start accumulating followers. At that point, you can emphasize to your administration that these fans are expecting some communication.

Keeping Up with the Joneses

If your director is a very competitive person, chances are good he or she will want to investigate what other libraries are doing. Find libraries in your region or state that are

already engaged in social media. Specifically, make an effort to find examples where the library is interacting directly with patrons and not just broadcasting promotions such as program announcements. Look for the libraries that are actually engaging in conversations in a public online forum with their patrons. These libraries are your library's role models. Send links or printouts to members of your administration with a brief note: "Look at what Example Library does. They're talking directly with their patrons online!" Your competitive director will likely be intrigued.

Show What's Already Out There

Search Google and all of the major social networks for your library's name. Check Yelp for reviews about your library, and location-based services such as FourSquare to see if anyone has posted any tips about your branches. Collate whatever you find and send it to the director. If your search is especially fruitful, you'll also turn up some not-so-flattering things as well as positive or neutral ones. Why is this kind of feedback a good thing? Because it clearly shows you can't effectively respond unless you're in the space with the person who posted it. If you don't find any negative items, it still is clear proof that people *are* talking about the library in social media spaces. The library needs to be in that social media space to listen and connect.

Recommend Something Else

If you've been pushing Twitter without results, consider moving to a push for Facebook. It could be the director has specific objections to a particular tool rather than to social media as a whole.

Hand Holding

In some cases, the administrator you are seeking to convince may be interested but not sure where to start. Being overwhelmed with all of the choices is not uncommon. Try to remember what it was like when you were a complete newbie and what you wished someone had done for you then.

Invite Them

Granted, it might be a bit awkward to "friend" your director on Facebook. But what about something like Twitter? Or LinkedIn? Most social media sites provide members with ways to invite nonmembers to join. Remember, it's a lot like a party—it's easier to go there if you already know someone. Again, follow-up is crucial to success. If your director doesn't respond right away, be sure to ask if he or she received the invitation.

Sit Down and Help Them

Sometimes, you just need to *be* there. Offer to spend an hour walking the director through the social network of choice and help in finding colleagues to connect with that you both already know. Show how to add apps to Facebook or LinkedIn accounts. Just be sure not to present too much information too fast.

Do Something Concrete

Sometimes, the best way to get buy-in is to show that using a social media tool will do something very specific. Look for something that will interest your library's administration, such as creating video tutorials for using the online catalog or getting feedback on a new service. But beware the "when you have a hammer, every problem looks like a nail" approach; don't let your enthusiasm for social media become a solution in search of a problem.

In-House Training

When I was in school, I always enjoyed the opportunities to go beyond the typical take-a-test/write-a-report assignment model. If you're training library staff, ask them to show what they learned by writing a blog post or making a quick video, or even by creating a photo slideshow that's posted to a site like Flickr or Picasa. Give them latitude to do something creative that also makes use of online tools and that they can share with the rest of the staff.

Conferences

No library can afford to send everyone to every conference. Introduce your director (and any attending staff) to Twitter hash tags. The staff going to the conference can send tweets with relevant points, marked with the hashtag for the conference; the director and other interested staff can follow them and other conference-goers on Twitter. By following the hash tag, people from your library will get a nearly real-time sense of what's happening at the conference, and more important, they'll also connect in a new way with their coworkers.

New Initiatives

Is your library about to do something new on a large scale? Self-check machines? Print management? New ILS? Whatever it is, an internal blog to track announcements, information, and feedback may be perfect for introducing new social media tools. It may also reduce the need for formal training time down the road. Not every blog needs to be forever; some have a limited lifespan or purpose. A blog (with comments turned on!) is a good way to experiment internally with some of the "feel" of social media. You also could open up the blog and comments to the public at large and get patron feedback on the new service.

BOTTOM LINE

Everyone has an "Aha!" moment when experimenting with new social media. I did with Twitter. It may be your director's aha is yet to come. Keep sending relevant search results and articles. Hang in there and be an advocate for social media, but be aware that people may be turned off if you become too zealous. Keep the enthusiasm but focus on facts. Getting buy-in from your library's administration may be challenging at first. Chip away at resistance, try different methods, but don't give up.

Getting Staff Buy-in

You may think you're ready to begin once you've been given the green light from your library's administrator. You'd be at least partially correct; getting administrative approval *is* absolutely essential. However, getting buy-in doesn't end with your library's director. Although it is possible to run a successful social media campaign without the approval of one's colleagues, it is considerably more difficult.

Coworkers who don't understand social media or the library's reason for wanting to engage in it can not only make your job harder but also damage your efforts. Library staff with negative attitudes can undermine you by refusing to provide needed content, creating delays, spreading rumors or gossip, or ignoring the library's social media policy. These staff become obstacles that you have to work around rather than sources of support.

How do you bring these staff members on board with the library's social media ventures? Fortunately, all of the methods you may have used with your library's director are just as applicable to other staff. Some of the methods described in the previous section may work better than others, depending on the person you're working with. Just as with your administrator, you may need to try different approaches to get the support you need. Following are some additional things to consider when getting backing from your colleagues.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Consider each staff person separately. It's unlikely that one person's objections to social media involvement are identical to someone else's. Find out what each individual cares about and address your efforts to those aspects. Are they worried that it will somehow add to their workload? Do they not understand the usefulness of Twitter or think that Facebook is still only for college students? Getting buy-in means proving to reluctant staff that social media is not only relevant to the library's needs but also to their individual needs and concerns. Make sure you have the data or policies readily available to back you up.

Never Assume

Many people who are resistant to social media may only have *heard* of some of the social media sites like Facebook or Twitter and may not have actually used them. Or, if they have tried them, they may have only used a site briefly and not understood that the benefits come after long-term participation. Don't assume that everyone is on a social site like Facebook and understands terms such as "friending," "apps," or "wall." By explaining site-specific terms and customs, you increase the chances of selling the benefits to staff.

Training Can Make a Significant Difference

In addition to educating staff individually, group training can help break down resistance. One of the most successful projects for doing this has been the 23 Things

project, originally created by Helene Blowers and launched with the staff of the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg County in North Carolina.² The 23 Things project is a discovery-learning program that helps staff become comfortable with social media technologies by asking them to try different online tools. It has become very popular in the United States and internationally as a way to train staff in the basics of using social media. Hands-on experience can bridge many gaps in understanding.

***Ensure That Staff Has Time to Learn before Social Media
Is Rolled Out to the Public***

Just as with any new initiative or resource at your library, your staff members will feel more secure if they see it in action before their patrons do. Even if they are not the ones doing the posting, seeing social media in action (as with the 23 Things program) can increase their comfort level with how social media works.

BOTTOM LINE

Staff buy-in isn't as critical as administrative buy-in, but not having it can make a social media coordinator's job a lot harder. Make a serious effort to educate and alleviate fears with information and hands-on training.

NOTES

1. "Social Network Marketing Expands Sphere," eMarketer, 2009, www.emarketer.com/Article.aspx?R=1007252.
2. Helene Blowers, "Learning 2.0," 2006, <http://plcmcl2-about.blogspot.com>.

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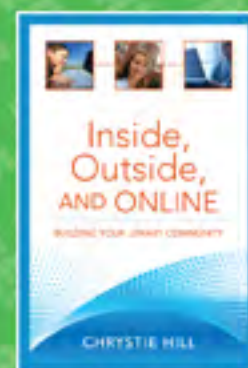
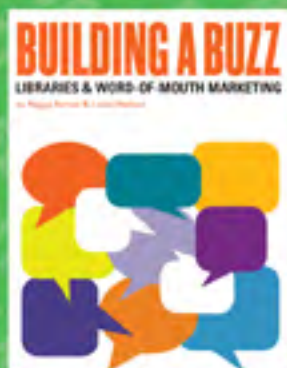
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- Provides context on the social media phenomenon
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