



If You Build It, Will They Come?

Social media strategies for law libraries

By Elizabeth Farrell

“The library should have a Twitter account! It will be a great way to communicate with our patrons,” a colleague excitedly tells you. A month later, your library’s new Twitter account is updated sporadically and has garnered only a few followers, most of whom seem to be fellow law librarians.

Does this sound familiar? Substitute Facebook or blog or Second Life for Twitter, and it becomes a painful refrain among law libraries wanting to leverage the awesome power of social media tools but ultimately falling flat.

Why do these efforts fail? To connect with users, law libraries create Facebook pages, blogs, wikis, nings, and accounts on services like Twitter, Delicious, and YouTube. Similar to that famous line from the movie *Field of Dreams*, librarians may ask, “The law library built this online presence—why won’t they come?”

librarians may already have a good understanding of the preferences of the target audience. Depending on the group, helpful investigative strategies might include observation, an informal focus group, or chats with users at the reference desk. This information will assist the library in deciding what kind of social media tool will be most effective in helping to reach its goal. For example, a walk around the carrels in a law school library may reveal a significant number of laptops with a browser window open to Facebook. If a considerable number (or very few) of the target audience are

undeniable when discussing social media tools for libraries. Curiosity alone may bring a few people, but delivering valuable content regularly encourages users to come back and let others know about the library as well.

While enthusiasm and novelty may fuel content development in the early stages of using a new social media tool, to sustain the delivery of valuable information, it’s helpful to create some guidelines for creating content. These guidelines can be suggestions for what kind of information to communicate and how often updates should be made.

public relations

It’s easy to blame the technology, or even the users, but these disappointments often stem from a lack of strategic planning for using social media tools. The good news is a small investment in thinking and planning will result in a much more successful launch of social media tools for the library.

This planning can be distilled into five manageable steps: articulate the goal, research the target audience, explore available tools, decide on content, and publicize it.

Articulate the Goal

What does the library ultimately want to accomplish? These can be small or large goals and may require more than just social media tools to be accomplished. For example, some goals might be: inform and drive students to the library’s research instruction sessions; increase awareness about new acquisitions or databases; or market the research expertise of the librarians.

Create a clear and actionable statement about what the library hopes to achieve without focusing on the social media tools (that will come later). Because the rest of the process will build on this goal, this is the most important step.

Research the Target Audience

With the goal in mind, who does the library want to reach? Describe this target audience in specific language. Instead of broad and unhelpful terms like “users” or “patrons,” the library’s target audience may be “first-year law students,” “new faculty members,” or “senior associates.”

Investigate what social media tools the target audience may already be using, as well as how this group prefers to receive information. A large-scale investigative study isn’t necessary, and

already users of a particular social media tool, that should factor into the library’s decision to utilize that tool to meet its goal.

Explore Available Tools

It’s not until step three of this planning process that the attention turns to the tools themselves. The rationale is that the interaction between the library and users should be the focus—social media technologies are merely tools to facilitate these interactions. With that foundation, a library can quickly and more effectively adapt when the next popular social media tool catches users’ attention.

As mentioned earlier, it’s important to note what tools the target audience is already using. A social media tool already used by many provides a much lower barrier to forging connections with users, since a few clicks to invite, follow, or friend are all that are needed. Creating a successful presence for the library with a social media tool that’s not widely used is not impossible, but it will be more challenging to promote. The library will not only need to persuade users to create an account with a new social media tool but also convince them to keep coming back.

It’s tempting to pick a tool that is already popular with the target audience. Indeed, it may be the best choice, but only after it’s also determined to be an effective way to deliver on the original goal. If the goal is to promote the research expertise of librarians, a wiki may be more promising than a Facebook page. Likewise, if the goal is to provide another venue for students to ask reference questions, Twitter could be more appropriate than a blog.

Decide on Content

The expression “content is king” is

For example, if the goal is to promote the library’s research instruction to law students by using a Facebook page, guidelines might suggest that librarians post reminders about research instruction sessions a few days prior and links to instruction materials afterwards, and encourage the librarian instructors to post research tips to the page on a rotating basis.

The guidelines can serve as a jumping-off point for contributors to create other content or help sustain the library’s presence on a social media platform when things get busy. When necessary, the guidelines can also inform contributors about any important “dos or don’ts” for using the tool.

Publicize It

The final part of this process is to publicize the library’s social media presence to the target audience. The best approach is usually multi-pronged: send e-mails (or messages) to existing members on social networks; create signage in the library; and tell potential users whenever there’s an opportunity. If possible, launch the effort in connection with an event, giveaway, or contest, and encourage users to tell others. Most important, when publicizing a social media presence, tell them *why* they can benefit from friending/following/joining the library on those tools. Whether it’s just a way to be informed about candy giveaways in the library or a new forum to get research help, users will always want to know what’s in it for them. ■

Elizabeth Farrell (efarrell@law.fsu.edu) is research/instructional technology librarian at Florida State University College of Law in Tallahassee.