Reference Services Review

Emerald Article: Students tweet the darndest things about your library - and why you need to listen

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Students tweet the darndest things about your library – and why you need to listen

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Abstract

Purpose – Twitter is an important communication tool with college students. This article aims to emphasize that, while Twitter is useful for sharing information about the library, more can be learned from using it as a digital listening post.

Design/methodology/approach – This is an essay style viewpoint.

Findings – The paper reveals that Twitter is an important vehicle for disseminating information about a library to its community and as a means for maintaining good customer service.

Originality/value – The paper provides useful information on an important communication tool for libraries.

Keywords Twitter, Social media, Communication, Libraries

Paper type Viewpoint

"Can't remember the last time I was actually in the Paley Library"

When the conversation among librarians turns to Twitter the question asked is typically "Is your Library on Twitter?" It is a good question because Twitter is primarily perceived as a vehicle for disseminating information about the library to its community. To encourage the use of the library and the collections, contemporary librarians know it is important to use any and every communication tool at one's disposal. To what extent our students use Twitter we are uncertain, but we do know there are enough of them conducting conversations there to suggest Twitter is a communication channel we can ill afford to ignore, no matter how we might personally judge its value. The more important question though is "Are you listening on Twitter?" Even if an academic librarian posts not a single tweet about his or her library, if Twitter is being ignored all together then a golden opportunity to connect with members of the library community is going to waste.

"The computers in Paley Library still run Windows XP. Temple needs to *get with the program*"

Digital listening post

While Twitter is used for every possible type of communication, from the serious to the sublimely silly, there is a recognized category of tweet that garners the attention of organizations: the complaint. One of the best known Twitter complaint storms occurred in February 2010 when a Southwest Airlines flight attendant asked Kevin Smith, the well-known movie director, to leave a flight just before takeoff, claiming his excessive weight presented a safety concern. Smith complied but then immediately turned to his nearly two million Twitter followers and began a barrage of criticism

against Southwest for its treatment of overweight passengers. Southwest, with millions of its own Twitter followers, has a reputation for great customer service and communication with their customers. Although it initially took a misstep in its response by trying to make light of the situation, Southwest then engaged in a Twitter dialogue with Smith that ultimately defused the situation while giving itself a chance to explain its policies.

Corporate communication experts point to the episode as a case study in the importance of paying attention to Twitter, not simply as a listening post for the occasional complaint but in establishing a rapport with customers that can lead to improved relationships and loyalty building. When community members tweet complaints about the library, the important thing is to demonstrate that someone is listening. The exact response matters less than showing that librarians are paying attention to the community, and care about the problem or situation. If librarians think Twitter is a waste of time and purposely choose to ignore it, which means ignoring what community members are saying about the library in the Twitter space. When that happens the signal the library sends is "We don't care."

In a 2011 study of Twitter communication, the customer experience and communications consulting firm Maritz Research (2011), found that only 29 percent of organizations responded to a consumer's twitter complaint, while 50 percent of the consumers expected a response to their complaint. Among those who did receive a response to their tweet 86 percent said they liked or loved hearing from the company, while 86 percent of those who did not receive a response said they would have liked or loved getting one. This data reinforces the importance of monitoring Twitter for chatter about the Library. A good deal of it can be easily ignored, but it is the small percentage that demands a response that requires our attention.

"In a committed relationship with Paley Library"
Who should listen
Once a library staff concludes that Twitter is a necessary technology for staying connected to its community, any number of strategies may help to start the engagement. In many libraries, the default staff member for social media-related activity is the new-to-the-profession librarian. That might be your recent library school graduate or your Millennial generation employee. This strategy is based on a "They know how that stuff works" mentality that unfortunately signals a "Please don't ask me to learn something new" attitude from other staff. Instead, to help promote success, consider getting multiple staff from across the library departments engaged with social media. Even if starting a library Twitter account is the first venture into the new social space, think of it as just one part of a library's broader social media communications plan.

Early on, think about how using Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Foursquare, blogs and other social communication tools can fit into a library's overall strategy for community engagement. The plan can provide clear guidelines for how social media is used and who is involved in its use. As with most institutions, at my own the initial forays into the social media landscape were somewhat haphazard and unpredictable, but have since resulted in a best practices policy along with an organized a team of what we call "social media journalists" (SMJs). SMJs are responsible for both disseminating information across social media platforms and monitoring for mentions of our library. Our plan reads:

Social media accounts will be established and maintained by library social media journalists (SMJs), individuals from any Temple University Libraries department and/or campus who have an interest in participating in current and future social media activities. Under the guidance of the Social Media Group, the SMJs will regularly post and share relevant content to their respective accounts, monitor traffic by replying to messages and comments, and periodically assess impact and influence.

Establishing a social media group provides the library with a coordinated and comprehensive approach to social media communication.

"Just lovely, Paley library. you totally want me to succeed closing at 7pm"

It's all about the "re" – respond; retweet; rethink

Effective monitoring of Twitter and other social media is made possible by technology that allows for passive monitoring. The easiest approach is to use Search Twitter (search.twitter.com) to construct a search that retrieves tweets about your library, and then save that search as an alert that can be read within your feed reader (e.g. Google Reader). The more complicated part is when and how to respond to tweets about your library. Responses to direct complaints or questions, even ones as simple as "What time does the library close?" are typically well received. If possible, an off-Twitter response may be appropriate. My own e-mail messages in response to student complaints or to clarify misinformation transmitted in tweets, results in appreciative feedback. Be alert to alternate channels within Twitter that require monitoring. For example, our students created a hashtag called #TUproblems. They use it to complain about university services that are broken, and we need to know if there are mentions of the library. One student tweeted "Why do interlibrary loans take so $@##** long here?" Clearly no mention of our library by name, but a complaint we want to acknowledge just the same.

Retweets can be a powerful force in promoting positive messages, but there may be more perils. For example, a colleague retweeted a student's positive tweet about noticing many new computers in the library. When someone applauds our Library, we want to spread the word. However, in this case the original tweeter later asked why the library was retweeting her message, and then tweeted "I'm honestly kinda creeped out" about having the Library retweet the message. It clearly gave a distinct "Big Brother" vibe, as in, they are watching us. We need to think carefully about what and when we choose to retweet.

With respect to the information we disseminate we have less knowledge about how it is received. We do know that our Student Library Advisory Board, which includes representatives from student government and graduate studies, supports our social media activity. They do not think our participation is lame, wasteful or creepy. They appreciate that we proactively leverage social media to connect with students, and they tell us so. By engaging in this dialogue with our constituents about what we hear on Twitter, it allows us to work collaboratively with our community members to constantly rethink the services and resources we offer. Think of it as a low threshold assessment method; not scientific but another probing device we can use to measure the climate of our community. What we get is raw, honest feedback that, if consistent enough, could help us re-imagine better modes of service.

"I love your library and want to marry it"

Beyond good customer service

It is no longer enough to simply provide service with a smile as another mundane transaction is completed. The spaces where we connect with members of the user community have expanded beyond the walls of our domain. Twitter demonstrates this is where the community members engage with each other and converse about us. If we want to design a holistic library experience that achieves great service wherever the community and library connect, we need to learn from them by paying attention to what they say. Their tweets can provide valuable intelligence in improving what we do and how we do it. It can help us repair what is broken or build something new and better. Twitter has emerged as an important touchpoint where the library can establish a social connection. Why wouldn't we want to use it to design a better library experience?

Reference

Maritz Research (2011), "Twitter study", September, available at: http://maritzresearch.com/~/
media/Files/MaritzResearch/e24/ExecutiveSummaryTwitterPoll.ashx

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