



## Social Networking Strategies for Professionals

SOCIAL  
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LIBRARIES.

Library professionals have always engaged with associations and communities to share experiences and information. Going back through the earliest times of the profession, librarians have interacted through conference meetings, professional publications, and a variety of other venues. These in-person and print-based interactions continue as important avenues of professional development but have been supplemented by social networking media. Social networking brings a new dimension to the professional lives of those involved with libraries, collapsing the latency of information exchange from months or years to almost instantaneous impact.

I would not like to imagine a day when library professionals no longer gather for in-person meetings and conferences. I continue to find great value in the ALA annual and midwinter conferences, Computers in Libraries, Internet Librarian, and the many other local, regional, or national meetings. Yet it's also hard to imagine keeping up with current trends and technologies without the continual infusion of up-to-the-second information possible through social networking sites.

Although interest in any given social networking facility may rise or fall over time, the concept will almost surely endure. The success of any web-based venture defies prediction, especially given the tenuousness of sustainable business models. While I wouldn't want to become too invested in any given commercial destination, social networks provide great opportunities for collaboration once they achieve a certain critical mass among the library community.

### Focus on Facebook

Back in September 2007, my column focused on Facebook as the most promising social networking tool for libraries. While Facebook continues to gain an ever wider and more diffuse audience, I see quite a diminishment in the professional content exchanged in this medium. While huge numbers of library professionals participate in Facebook, it's evolved to focus on much more recreational activities.

### LinkedIn for Career Building

LinkedIn stands as another worthwhile social networking destination for library professionals. It fulfills its own specialized role as a career-building network. It's great for establishing contacts within your area of specialization. Through a network of your current professional associations and introductions made by your online colleagues, you can continually expand your network of professional contacts. LinkedIn finds its most valuable return during a job search. The introductions and recommendations made over the course of time find tangible payoff when it comes time to apply for promotion or new employment.

If you are doing research on a given company or organization, LinkedIn can help turn up some of its top leaders as well as rank-and-file individuals. In fact, some organizations may discourage their professionals from setting up profiles on public sites such as LinkedIn, lest their competitors poach their personnel.





## Twitter and Up-to-the-Second News

Especially for those of us involved in technology, it's important to be aware of new developments as they emerge. I want to know when a new book or article has been written within my areas of interest, when new software tools or technologies emerge, and when someone in the field comes up with a new or interesting idea or project.

I have a lot of personal and technical mechanisms in place so that I'm aware of what's going on in the field of library automation. I've got a battery of alerts set up in Google and other search engines, and all the companies in the industry go out of their way to be sure that I'm among the first to know of their noteworthy activities. So whether it's in the category of mergers and acquisitions, new products, or major customer contracts, I have a steady influx of information. From my view it's all raw data. Everything that comes in also goes out in some way. All press releases get aggregated through Library Technology Guides, fed out through the website and its RSS feeds and monthly email summaries. I selectively post items I consider especially interesting on Twitter. Those that need some additional context may result in a longer blog post.

This raw data also supports the writing that I do for external print media. I have commitments to develop news stories and columns each month. From this stream of incoming raw data, I have to select one or two of the most significant developments, perform extended research to draw out the context and details, and wrap it into some perspective of trends in the larger library automation environment.

In the past year, I have found Twitter to be one of the best sources for the tidbits of information about current happenings that spark my reading, writing, and research. Although it's been around for longer, it's only recently that participation by those involved in libraries has reached the critical mass.

**Twitter basics**—Twitter, a micro-blogging service, gives its members the ability to broadcast messages no longer than 140 characters, called "tweets." Social groups consist of the individuals who want to read someone else's tweets; those who read your tweets are your "followers." Tweets are primarily read by those who have selected to follow you, but they become available to everyone on Twitter, at least for a while, as people search words and topics. Hash tags—informal, de facto controlled terms—identify messages about a given topic or event.

If you come across anything interesting that you want to pass along to your followers, you retweet, prefaced by the "RT" designation. Retweeting extends the conversation. If a tweet is of particular interest to you, passing it along can expand its audience. It's through retweeting that the most important and interesting bits of news ripple more broadly through the medium. Twitter etiquette requires this form of attribution when forwarding the tweets of others.

Many tweets summarize or excerpt a news article, website, blog entry, or other resource along with its URL. Since you don't want to waste a single character when you must say something coherent within the allowed space, URL shortener services, especially bit.ly, find ample use.

For those on Facebook who have not yet explored Twitter, imagine stripping away everything other than the newsfeed. It's just a stream of comments, ideas, and tidbits of news and gossip.

Twitter excels as a tool for staying current in your areas of interest. So whether you want to stay in tune with your favorite stars in pop culture or developments in an obscure academic field, you'll find an incredible amount of raw information. I once found that I often learned about new developments in the field through someone mentioning it on Facebook. No longer. Today, Twitter prevails as the medium for up-to-the-second news within my areas of interest.

You'll also find an enormously high volume of irrelevant information on

Twitter. Many use Twitter as an expressive medium to document their daily life. It's not unusual to hear personal details that you don't care about or maybe don't want to know. Effective use of Twitter involves shaping a body of profiles that you follow that result in a stream of information you find interesting and useful.

Twitter lends itself to a mobile society. It works just as well on a mobile phone as it does on a laptop or desktop. While it's possible to perform some activities on sites such as Facebook through mobile phones, the full complement of features require a web browser. Twitter's ability to thrive in the mobile arena opens it up to an incredibly wide audience.

**Cultivating Twitter followers**—

There are lots of levels of involvement on Twitter. Some use it more passively as a source of information. Not unlike email-based lists, a majority of the members lurk in the background reading what others write but rarely posting themselves. I see many profiles on Twitter that follow dozens or even hundreds of others but have hardly any of their own followers or tweets. Twitter would be pretty dull without those that actively post, and there's no shortage of those. It's fine to be a listener in the conversation. But it's even better to have a voice.

Few would bother to post on Twitter without interested readers. On Twitter, you aim to cultivate a cadre of followers who choose to read your tweets. Your followers tend to be those who know you, who know about you, or who find what you say in your tweets to be interesting. Your followers are a self-selected group that will include many sharing your areas of personal or professional interest. Celebrities in popular culture may attract hundreds of thousands of followers.

As I write today, I see that 787,155 people follow David Pogue, tech columnist for *The New York Times*. Pogue recently completed a book compiled from the most clever and original tweets of followers who responded to his daily themes and questions. Twitter has become a vehicle for politics and social



change. For example, almost 2 million follow Barack Obama. Daily headlines illustrate the incredible strength of social networking, with Twitter as the leading brand for disseminating information relating to a given cause even when official channels have been blocked.

Library use of Twitter does not quite have the impact of international politics, but it's now a well-established tool of the trade. Those of us in the library niche tend to deal in comparatively modest numbers—building a network of a few hundred followers is great in our little corner of Twitter.

**Organizational Twittering**—I notice an increasing volume of institutional Twittering. Social media has found its way into the public relations efforts of many organizations. Having a well-managed Twitter feed can be a very effective outlet for getting an organization's message to its customers. Given the prominence of the use of Twitter by the customer base of most organizations, not participating would be a serious omission in a company's media strategy.

Many libraries have launched Twitter feeds. It's one of the multiple channels of media that a library can use to increase its exposure to its patrons and to keep them informed about current programs, new additions to collections, or any other notable developments.

An increasing number of library automation companies and other library-focused organizations that I track now have Twitter feeds. The content of these feeds tends to be notifications regarding press releases, product announcements, new customers, or recognition of staff members.

The key to effective institutional use of Twitter involves a disciplined approach of regular, relevant messages that will be of interest to the organization's clientele. It's easy to set up a Twitter account and put out the first tweet or two on behalf of your library. It requires a commitment of resources to ensure a steady stream of interesting content over a sustained period.

**Twitter as a professional tool**—Just like Facebook, many people view Twittering mainly as a personal and recreational activity. However, Twitter can help you professionally—it can help you stay on top of your work-related interests, can be a source of information to solve problems, and can help others know of your ongoing activities and accomplishments.

To make Twitter effective as a professional development tool, it helps to apply some discipline to the topics you choose to tweet about and to the selection of whom you follow. These tactics will lead to a growing number of followers representing colleagues with similar interests.

I've found that being somewhat selective about whom I follow makes a huge difference in the quality of incoming information I gain through Twitter. Indiscriminate selections result in a very high proportion of irrelevant information. Even with careful choices, there may be dozens of tweets of no real interest to you for every one that you care about. Amassing too large a group of profiles to follow and trying to glean bits of useful information can be like drinking from a fire hose. It helps to turn down the volume so that you can be a more effective consumer of the media. I choose to follow those that I consider the smartest, best informed, and most active contributors to the profession within my areas of interest.

Everyone brings his or her own personality and perspective to how and what he or she chooses to tweet. Many use it as an expressive medium, chronicling their thoughts and activities of the day. Some mention major activities; others give a much more granular recounting of their daily activities.

I might gently suggest that you keep your online persona in tune with your professional position. There's nothing about Twitter and other Web 2.0 applications that requires grown adults to sound like teenagers. Sure, there are lots of common expressions in text-speak that cross generations. The 140-character limit imposed by Twitter should fos-

ter tight, concise statements that still reflect the voice of a professional. Twitter makes me write in tight prose with a parsimony of words that would also improve my writing in other media.

For those using Twitter professionally, it's the place to let others know what you're thinking and reading and some of the interesting things that you're working on. It's great to mention interesting articles and reports, as well as other literature that crosses your screen. Let your followers know what you're reading and your thoughts and reactions. I'm pretty busy, and I really appreciate knowing about these reports as they are released. Comments on Twitter often help me know which ones I need to take the time to read. On the tech side, it's a great way to learn about what software others find helpful, such as programming tools, multimedia utilities, browser plug-ins, and the like. I'm always delighted when someone posts a link to an article that I might not have discovered otherwise or passes on a bit of gossip about one of the companies or automation products that I track.

I take a fairly focused approach to what I cast into Twitter. The content of my tweets corresponds pretty closely to my professional niche. You won't necessarily be bothered with a lot of personal activities other than the occasional installment of my ongoing travelogue (I get to go to a lot of interesting places). When I find out something interesting, Twitter tends to be the place I share the news first. If you want to be among the first to know what I consider the more interesting and important developments in the realm of library automation, follow me on Twitter at <http://twitter.com/mbreeding>. ■

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SOURCE: Comput Libr 29 no9 O 2009

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