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Taking the Social Web to the Next Level

THE WAYS IN WHICH LIBRARIES MAKE USE OF EXTERNAL SOCIAL NETWORKING CONCEPTS AND HONE OUR INTERNAL TECHNOLOGIES NEED TO BE ORCHESTRATED TO MEET LARGER LIBRARY GOALS.

One of the ideas that I have been cultivating for the last few years involves taking the investment that libraries have made in social networking and other Web 2.0 technologies to a more sophisticated and mature stage. It's clear that social network concepts have taken strong hold throughout so many aspects of our world. Facebook and Twitter have propelled far beyond their narrow niche of tech- or media-savvy enthusiasts to the mainstream of society. From its early beginnings as a service for students from a few ivy-league universities, today, Facebook finds use by more than 400 million individuals, spanning all generations (www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics). Twitter claims about one-fourth as many users and pervades a wide range of interests from popular culture to big business. LinkedIn and hundreds of web destinations likewise bring together communities of individuals with common interests. Social networking isn't a passing fad—it now ranks as a fundamental characteristic of successful technologies. We're at a time when libraries need to move beyond ad hoc and informal uses of social technologies and make them an essential element of the way that libraries implement technology.

Toward Strategic Social Network Involvement

Since the emergence of the Web 2.0 trend, libraries have found many ways to use social networking to their advantage. It's great to see so many libraries offering blogs, creating Facebook pages and Twitter feeds, and providing myriad other activities that spark higher levels of engagement with their users. These methods have become part of the standard repertoire of almost any organization that seeks to promote its message, products, or services today. I think that libraries gain an enormous amount of positive exposure through these channels. Library outreach and public relations initiatives rightly include social networking as key promotional tools.

As a component of their marketing initiatives, social media provide opportunities for exposure to the library and funnel users into the services it offers. The net effect aims to spark increased activity for the library, either within its physical facilities or through its virtual presence. In my view, the key consideration involves ensuring that the vectors of activity always point inwardly, funneling users into the library's website. Naturally, it's important to avoid anything that results in a net drain of activity. How a library engages with any given external site should be executed in a way that results in an overall net gain in the use of its own resources and services.

A library's use of social networking sites should be well-coordinated according to this goal of strengthening interest and engagement by its users with its content offerings and services. Leveraging the tremendous

levels of activity on the major social networking sites, a library can attract the attention of segments of its clientele that it might not otherwise reach. For those users who might not regularly remember to make use of their library's resources, social networking sites provide important opportunities to promote the library's relevant content, services, and activities.

Delivering the User

The development of strategies involving social networking sites should take into consideration a balance between inbound and outbound pathways of traffic via the web. Creating a link to an external site provides a path that moves users out of your site. In some cases, the presence of outbound links serves as a magnet that attracts a net gain in visitors. That's the basic principle of search engines, which benefit from massive levels of use based on their ability to connect users with sites throughout the web. Likewise, a library gains strategic use based on providing access to high-quality content, often external to the library's own direct web presence. Anytime a library connects a user to an external full-text document, it successfully completes a transaction basic to the library's strategic purpose and reinforces the value of the library in the process. The library's role of delivering access to content through its website results in a positive increase in overall activity, even when it involves directing visitors to external resources.

The adoption of Web 2.0 utilities does not guarantee positive results. In recent years, for example, many libraries created blogs as part of their efforts to stay current with the Web 2.0 trend. A blog provides a venue for a library director or other employees within the library to highlight library services and activities. The content of a blog delivers current, continually changing content, providing a nice supplement to the library's static website. I've seen some blogs, however,

implemented in ways that do not necessarily maximize their contribution to the library's web presence. Links to an externally hosted blog can serve to jettison users away from the website, often abruptly terminating a user's session with the library's website. To compensate for the effect of the outward-bound use vector, an externally hosted blog should be rich with inward-bound links that connect users back into the library's essential services. By composing blog entries peppered with terms that attract search engine traffic and subsequently funnel visitors into library services, a blog can better fulfill its role as a successful promotional tool. But without consideration to the relative inward and outward traffic patterns, activities based on Web 2.0 concepts can just as easily hinder rather than help overall library goals. These issues likewise apply to other social networking applications.

LIBRARY OUTREACH AND PUBLIC RELATIONS INITIATIVES RIGHTLY INCLUDE SOCIAL NETWORKING AS KEY PROMOTIONAL TOOLS.

The ideal use of Twitter and Facebook as marketing tools also involves creating inward momentum of activity toward the organization's web presence and strategic services. The key challenge involves cultivating a critical mass of interest on the social networking site that can be leveraged for marketing and promotion. One element of the strategy may involve creating badges within the library's web

presence linking to its Facebook page or inviting Twitter followers. But the greater intent surrounding the activity on these sites should then be planned in ways that result in a net gain in traffic back to the library.

Assessing Performance

The effectiveness of the way the library uses Web 2.0 techniques for promotion should be measured and tuned to maximize their impact. Tools such as Google Analytics provide detailed reports on website use, including specific information on the sources of the traffic. You will likely see that the amount of traffic coming into the library's website from social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter is a small fraction of what's driven by Google and the other search engines. But don't be discouraged early on. Look for patterns of increasing performance and for spikes associated with any given posting or activity. These spikes provide important clues on the kinds of content that spark the most interest and can help tune the use of social networking in ways to increase its impact.

Also consider other methods for measuring the success of social networking initiatives. URL-shortening services such as bit.ly, essential for working within the 140-character limit for Twitter, include built-in metrics that also serve as valuable tools for measuring the interest of each item posted. I use bit.ly for the links that I post through Twitter to my Library Technology Guides site. It's very interesting to watch the number of click-throughs for each link, revealing the topics that attract the most attention. I also pay attention to retweets, where something that I post is forwarded to someone else's followers. A high number of retweets reflects strong interest, amplifies the number of readers for the tweet, and increases the number of potential visitors to any referenced links. In general, it's helpful to exploit all

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possible avenues to gain insight on the relative success of your organization's social networking activities.

Extending Library Infrastructure Through Social Networking Concepts

Another major aspect of moving forward with social networking involves better integration of its concepts into the fabric of the technical infrastructure that supports the library. Most library automation software has been constructed with rather static notions of how the software deals with users. As social networking pervades the broader realm of technology, it's important that library software likewise become transformed toward more dynamic engagement.

I see only a few examples of library software created in concert with social networking concepts. Bibliocommons is a relatively new library discovery interface that engenders a user community that contributes to a system that goes beyond basic collection searching toward one that creates reading recommendations. By taking advantage of information generated by readers as they interact with materials, Bibliocommons adds an interesting dimension of social information to the resource discovery process. This product's basic principles seem to me quite consistent with the ever-building trend to blend user-supplied data with static factors to create interesting value-added services.

The bX Recommender service from Ex Libris leverages use data to produce a recommendation service for scholarly articles. Based on voluminous data extracted from OpenURL resolver logs across hundreds of institutions, the service reveals relationships among articles not apparent from standard search techniques. As users select different articles within a session, the patterns of association accumulate within the resolver logs that can sub-sequently be leveraged by the recommendation service. I think that bX provides an interesting example of taking advantage of use data to enhance the capabilities of the overall system.

TOOLS SUCH AS GOOGLE ANALYTICS PROVIDE DETAILED REPORTS ON WEBSITE USE.

Add-in products such as Library-Thing for Libraries and ChiliFresh allow libraries to supplement their existing online catalogs with a layer of externally provided social data. LibraryThing for Libraries overlays tags and reviews generated by the broad base of LibraryThing users onto any library's online catalog. ChiliFresh provides a somewhat similar service for book reviews. These add-in services also point out the absence of such capabilities in traditional library software and the levels of engagement that fall below a threshold that achieves a sufficient critical mass to sustain its own universe of user-generated content.

Products such as Bibliocommons, bX, LibraryThing for Libraries, and ChiliFresh stand out against a large body of library software that tends to take a quite static view of user interactions. Library automation software tends to exist today as self-contained systems, rather stingy and conservative with the ways that user-related data are handled. I understand that we must absolutely respect patron privacy. Yet within these bounds it's possible to provide opt-in services that enable much greater interactions among patrons and that exploit normalized transaction logs and other types of use-related data to enhance and enrich resource discovery and service provision.

Social networking sites exploit every grain of data toward delivering services—usually advertising—that target very granular segments of users. Likewise, library automation systems should be able to automatically deliver quite customized services to users based on data accumulated regarding use patterns. I'm optimistic that ongoing developments in the library software arena will increasingly embrace aspects of social networking.

Beyond Web 2.0 to Advanced Models of Social Computing

While Web 2.0 provides the impetus to shape the way that we approach our users in more positive ways, I think of it as a steppingstone along the way toward even better and more powerful technologies. It's important for libraries to exploit social networking sites and other technologies that embrace a more dynamic view of user involvement. But we also have to look beyond. In the early phase, libraries implemented social technologies as a set of separate activities. Today, we need a more strategic approach. The ways in which libraries make use of external social networking concepts and hone our internal technologies need to be orchestrated to meet larger library goals. We can build on our previous experiences with Web 2.0 concepts as we move toward more systematic user-focused strategies, in both our physical facilities and our virtual presence. But we also need a new generation of technology infrastructure for libraries that more fully supports collaboration and social interaction. ∎

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