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"Be My Friend:" Using Facebook in Libraries

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Program Abstract: Facebook is a social software application that allows users to connect with friends and create online communities. Social networking applications like Facebook are powerful tools for libraries to connect with users and deliver services from a distance. Attendees will explore Facebook social software applications and their uses in library environments.

Facebook provides several ways for libraries to connect with their patrons. What better way to encourage a user-center atmosphere than to have a presence on Facebook? This session introduced the various uses of Facebook in libraries, the history of Facebook, its potential uses in libraries and professionally, key privacy issues and possible legal issues surrounding the use of social networking site for communication, and provided a testimonial of actual practical uses for Facebook in an academic library setting.

History

Launched on 4 February 2004 in Cambridge, MA, Facebook is the creation of Mark Zuckerman, Dustin Moskovitz, and Chris Hughes. Originally, Facebook was original titled "THE Facebook. Eventually, the "the" was dropped from the title.

At the time of Facebook's launch, Zuckerman, Moskovitz, and Hughes were students at Harvard University. The social networking site was originally designed to emulate a school's yearbook as it included photos of Harvard students that the three founders had underhandedly obtained from Harvard's student services databases. Membership was initially limited to Harvard's student body. Word quickly spread, and the whole of the Ivy League collegiate system was allowed membership within just a few months. By the end of 2004, all universities were allowed membership and the numbers soared to over 2,000. University membership was soon followed

by high schools in 2005, and finally, anyone over the age of 13 in 2006. Networks range from particular university to particular city. Some Facebook users do not belong to a particular network, since all that is now needed is a valid e-mail address.

Facebook in Libraries

The presenters discussed four areas regarding use of Facebook in libraries:

- Personal accounts for librarians;
- Useful applications for libraries;
- Library event publicity; and,
- Joining and creating “groups.”

The presenters strongly advocated the use of Facebook by librarians. By creating a Facebook account, the librarian creates a virtual “office” where patrons can contact them. Using Facebook creates visibility for the librarian. Thus, the librarian can create a space for Reader’s Advisory, create a more personalized service for their patrons, and creating an additional and “safe” avenue for those that might have communication or social challenges.

As one explores Facebook, one finds many Facebook applications (created by and for Facebook) that could assist libraries of all kinds. For example, for Reader’s Advisory, such products as “Visual Bookshelf,” “GoodReads,” “Bookshelf,” “My Bookshelf,” “I’m Reading,” “We Read,” “BooksIRead,” and “Book Stack” might be helpful. Each of these applications provides the addition of reading lists and suggestions along with the ability to recommend and write reviews by readers and for other readers.

Facebook can also act as a portal of individual library catalogs. Many libraries, especially larger academic and public library systems, have developed library catalog search applications on their own for use in Facebook. Users can add this application to their account and, with a click of a mouse search their preferred catalog through a Facebook interface. Some of the libraries that have developed this application for use with their catalogs are Wake Forest University, Notre Dame, and Broward County Public Library Systems.

Library catalogs are not the only applications available for searching. Major vendors such as JSTOR and OCLC have also created applications for searches of their products. Sometimes, however, access to both JSTOR and OCLC require a proxy setting for authorized access.

Real-time communication is also a possibility through Facebook enabled instant messaging. Instant Messaging is no longer just for recreational use but has developed into an integral tool for libraries. From personal accounts, librarians can add “ADD me” buttons for patrons to add themselves to the librarian’s “buddy list” (i.e. Yahoo Messenger). Library group pages may take advantage of this as well by installing a messaging application (i.e. “Ask A Librarian,” “Askaway”) which provides yet another way to communicate.

Facebook can also help libraries in the areas of Development & Outreach. Through Facebook, librarians can conduct reading challenges, create book clubs, and encourage book swapping services through such applications such as “World Books” and “ReadItSwapIt.”

Marketing is yet another way libraries can use Facebook. Events can be publicized and marketed to “home networks” or for the “global” Facebook community. This application would be helpful to publicize “Friends of the Library” events, fundraisers, seminars, and workshops. Even the Tennessee Library Association Annual Meeting was publicized on Facebook.

Professionally, there are many Facebook groups for librarians to join. The American Library Association (ALA) and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) are just two examples of professional organizations that have used the power of social networking. Other groups of interest: “the Library 2.0 Interest Group,” “Classroom Instruction in Facebook,” “For Librarians who Love Wikis,” and, for alumni of the University of Tennessee-Knoxville School of Information Sciences, the “UTK SIS” group.

While useful for libraries and the librarian, Facebook can also be useful to library patrons. Libraries can create a library Facebook page to enhance their already existing web pages. Libraries such as Harvard Law School Library and the Public Library of Charlotte and Mecklenburg Counties enhance their existing web pages by a Facebook presence making interaction with their patrons more immediate collaborative.

Despite the numerous examples of professional outlets on Facebook, there are so many “just for fun” groups that may be of interest. Some of the “fun” groups include: “Sexy Librarians,” “I’m a librarian but I’m not Old, I don’t own many cats and I work nights,” “Yes, I do look like a Librarian,” “Don’t Mess with me, I work at a Public Library.” The author’s personal favorite is “Jack Love is going to kick my A__”. This list is totally a fantasy “for fun” and is centered on Appalachian State University Library’s Jack Love, the Circulation Manager. Despite the “nasty” overdue notices which are sent in his name, Jack Love is the best manager and all around great guy! One additional note, Facebook groups can also be the harbinger of precarious economic times. There are many Facebook groups that have the title “Save the [insert library name here] Library.” This woefully indicates a very bleak and an uncertain future for so many libraries and library colleagues.

Despite its popularity for more professional uses, Facebook has been the target of various watchdog groups regarding its handling of privacy of its members. Of particular note was the controversy surrounding a Facebook application called “Beacon.” Beacon was an application that initially did not have an “opt-out” feature (e.g. all Facebook users were connected to Beacon automatically). When Beacon was implemented in November 2007, it informed a user’s friends of their online activity on “Beacon-affiliated” web sites. For obvious reasons, this caused quite a stir as some of the buying habits and surfing habits of users were being broadcast to their friends. Moreover, companies that were affiliated with Beacon began to pull advertisement funding when they learned that users had no option to “opt-out” of Beacon (i.e. Coca-Cola, in particular). After much criticism, Zuckerberg and Facebook changed Beacon’s features and allowed users to “opt-out” by default.

Regarding legalities in the library setting, both presenters strongly encouraged attendees to seek the advice of institutional attorneys when faced with possible legal issues. Because it is acknowledged that anything posted on the web becomes admissible in legal proceedings, the question arises of what is legally required of the user when they notice references/images of illegal activity by their “friends.” This is especially true for academic libraries, for example, if they should see photographs of students engaged in illegal activity or underage drinking. Questions arise such as “How does one react when it is discovered that students are discussing cheating on assignments on Facebook?” As librarians, one of the fundamental responsibilities is to protect and respect the privacy of patrons, but, in the face of potential legalities surrounding posts on Facebook, caution, discretion, care and legal direction must be exercised judiciously.

On the other hand, libraries should take a role in educating patrons to use caution when posting personal information on Facebook accounts. Considerable personal information can be posted on Facebook, so patrons should err on the side of caution regarding what personal information is available to potentially the world.

As a personal and successful testimonial of Facebook, Susan Jennings shared her use of Facebook as a communication tool for several groups at Belk Library. Susan has used Facebook extensively to communicate with her 16+ student assistants in her charge. As the manager of a fast-paced academic library service desk, Susan has often times had make split second scheduling arrangements. In the past, this could only be accomplished through email which was found to be often ineffectual and unreliable. As soon as the Lower Level Service Desk Facebook group was created for her students, Susan experienced tremendous success in disseminating information, scheduling and quickly covering open shifts. She reports that normal response time for a reply is within 5 minutes of sending the message to all group members. “Facebook Mobile” makes this even more convenient since it seems that most of her students carry a cell phone or other electronic communication device and can receive and respond to messages “on-the-go.” Due to the success and popularity of the student site, Susan also created one for scheduling the Student Research Laboratory and for former student assistants and former staff of Belk Library as a gathering place.

As libraries enter the 21st century, there is an increasing demand that “bricks-and-mortar” libraries look for more ways to make inroads in joining the digital world. Social networking is but one way to create a virtual space and extend the physical walls of libraries. Facebook allows libraries to do just that by meeting users “where they are” and in environments with which they are most comfortable. Social networking sites such as Facebook is a great way to promote library services, disseminate information and build a digital community quickly and at no cost. With that said, the presenters, urged participants to start a Facebook account and “be my [our] friend!” Facebook . . . it’s not just for “play” any more but can also be a valuable tool for libraries as well!