Engaging Your Library's Patrons with Facebook

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Engaging Your Library’s Patrons with Facebook

Abstract
Deborah McGovern of Charleston School of Law shares information and best practices on engaging with library patrons via Facebook.
Engaging Your Library’s Patrons with Facebook

It’s my job to keep the Charleston School of Law Facebook page up to date, and I have faced the challenge of deciding what should be posted, and how to keep the page lively and engaging. I will look first at the practices used by some local libraries and also at what has worked for us. Then I will point out what can go wrong with a Facebook page and how we have tried to avoid those pitfalls.

Librarians, being the resourceful, intelligent, multi-talented folks that they are, have learned to make the most of this free social networking resource. They do exciting things with their Facebook pages. The Charleston County Public Library Facebook page is a great example. The librarians there use Facebook to advertise upcoming library events, and afterwards, they post pictures of kids and their parents who came to the library to be entertained and stayed to learn; they publicize their upcoming yearly used book sale; they post pictures of the gift basket to be given to the winner of the Adult Summer Reading Contest; and they post pictures of books. Most recently, those books have been about getting your boy and/or girl off to school for the first time. Somewhat surprisingly, there’s one book for boys and another for girls – just see the posting for August 18.

The librarians who manage the College of Charleston Libraries Facebook page have been providing a blow-by-blow description of how the library renovation project is coming along. Daniel Library, at the Citadel, also uses its Facebook page to warn of closures and advise patrons about how renovation there is proceeding. Finally, the librarians responsible for the MUSC Library Facebook page publicize events and feature resources for increasing students’ learning and productivity. Food Truck Wednesdays are the Library’s signature event. Each week a different vendor is recruited to come by to feed the hungry physicians, nurses and medical technicians in training.

Facebook can be invaluable as a purveyor of useful information, a medium for communicating important facts to patrons. Facebook can warn of closures, construction, and severe weather ahead. But for Facebook to be successful in keeping patrons informed, the page needs to provide information or an experience that they can’t get anywhere else. Patrons need to want to follow your library’s Facebook page and to be in the habit of checking it regularly, the way they would check a friend’s page. MUSC Library’s Food Truck Wednesdays provide just such an incentive. That library’s Facebook page is the only source for the answer to that all-important question – “What’s for lunch?”

For the Charleston School of Law, Sol Blatt Jr. Library, the content we provide for our Facebook page that isn’t available anywhere else is called Finding Legal History in the Charleston School of Law, Sol Blatt Jr. Library. The University of Pittsburgh School of Law has a very similar feature called This Day in Legal History. The difference between the two lies in the fact that, as its name suggests, all the recommended sources for further research on our posting are found within the bounds of our own collection. Another innovation is that we post pictures, along with a much more extensively written explanation of how the law
is implicated with the subject of the posting. Wikimedia Commons Images is an excellent source for illustrative photos. Royalty free photos of Lizzy Borden, Clarence Darrow, Sacco and Vanzetti and the first parking meter can all be obtained there, and their presence greatly enhances visual appeal of the posting.

In addition to the inherent interest of most of these topics, this recurrent posting should be of interest to law students for two other reasons. It discusses numerous laws and their application, thereby advancing their understanding of the development of those laws over time. Additionally, each posting points to how to further research the law concerned. This is important to law students because Legal Writing and Research questions may be tested on the South Carolina Bar Exam. Adding this recurring posting has had a very positive effect on page views. But this feature, which typically runs about 500 words long, is produced in-house by librarians. It requires a considerable time investment, involving as it does research into the event and the law governing that event, finding appropriate photographs, and writing and proof-reading. Which brings us to the problem of Facebook fatigue.

Many library Facebook pages, started in a flurry of excitement and enthusiasm, begin to languish before too long. Hunting for engaging material to recommend, for example, takes time, time which a busy librarian may not have. Even the most active library may not have the personnel to both create events and publicize them on Facebook. Not everyone enjoys writing, and in the fast-moving world of social networking, a written notice delayed is a missed opportunity, as the days turn over quickly. So what’s the solution?

Counterintuitively, the labor-saving solution we have found involves posting to our blog. Our blog, The Barrister, is hosted by WordPress. WordPress lets you link your blog with your other social networking sites. This allows you to automatically port over your blog entries to Facebook, Google+, Twitter, LinkedIn, Tumblr, Path or all six. That way, the entries by those on the staff who blog are re-purposed, in our case, to Facebook. So if someone on the staff is a diligent blogger, automatic pour-over keeps your Facebook content refreshed.

A word of caution, another Facebook calamity is just the reverse of the first. Some librarians over-post, writing down every aspect of their day. Follow them and you find yourself awash in their stream-of-consciousness. Anyone attempting to extract important information from their postings may drown. In this regard, cast a critical eye on your posts, bearing in mind that, while your personal Facebook friends may truly care about how late you went to bed last night, the library patrons who are following the library’s Facebook page are unlikely to. Unless, of course, it leaves you too tired to blog.

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