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Reaching Out: Expanding your library's online presence using online tools

In a world where people increasingly communicate, study, and complete transactions virtually, it is vital for libraries to have a robust online presence to meet patrons at their point of need. Although some resources are simply more useful in print, the ability to answer questions, provide information, and direct library users to information has to be undertaken electronically as well as in person.

Unfortunately, in a world of shrinking budgets, many librarians do not have access to additional funds for electronic outreach.

In March 2016, I started as the Online Services Librarian at the University of Louisville Law Library and took on responsibility for the library's online presence. At that time, although the library already had a website and Facebook page, I felt it was important to strategically expand the library's online presence beyond these platforms. The past year has involved some trial and error as I've established a repertoire of useful, simple, and free tools to provide outreach beyond the library's walls.

Social media may be the first free option that many people think of when considering how to build an online presence cheaply, since many librarians are often already using these resources in their personal lives. The role of social media in a business is obviously different from its role in an individual's life, but it can still be a useful resource. Social media giants like Facebook or Twitter often provide a useful starting place, but libraries that already have accounts here, or suspect that their target audience is elsewhere, may want to consider alternatives such as YouTube, Pinterest, Instagram, or Snapchat. Setting up an account is usually the easy part, while populating content quickly becomes the primary difficulty. One of the tips that proved useful in setting up new social media accounts for UofL Law Library, was to use consistent branding. This makes it easy for people to find the library across different platforms, and reduces the initial creative work involved in developing each account. At UofL Law Library I use the same logo, the University color, and the handle uofllawlib across all our social media accounts.

Despite aiming for consistency in branding, it is best to avoid automatically duplicating posts directly from one platform to another. It is generally preferable to adapt content for specific use on each platform, and repurposing content often involves paring down items to different essentials. For example, to promote an exhibit at UofL Law Library I used Facebook to share a short summary with a slideshow of photos, Twitter for an engaging headline and single photo, and Pinterest as a venue for images of the books on display.

In order to vary content in this way, it is vital to understand who the target audience is on various social media platforms and to ensure that each post is written specifically for that audience. A regular content audit, or even just carefully tracking statistics for all of a library's social media accounts, can help to identify trends in an audience's interests across platforms by highlighting which content performs well or poorly. A 2016 content audit at UofL Law Library, for example, showed that research tips perform better on our Twitter and Pinterest accounts than on Facebook. The audit also revealed that Facebook posts that are more closely related to the library itself perform markedly better than generic material, and increased engagement is noticeable with everything from hours updates to photos or stories about library staff and work going on "behind the scenes". In fact, one of our most popular posts on Facebook,

which received nearly three times as many views as any other post in the month it was published, was an interview with a long-time library staffer who was widely known in the library community.

Varying content slightly for several outlets minimizes the number of new stories that have to be created for various social media platforms, but also helps to minimize the irritation the audience feels if they follow the library on several platforms or chose one social media platform because they prefer a particular type of content or style. Facebook users, for example, may actively dislike the #hashtags of Twitter, and Twitter users may prefer the brevity of an enforced character count. Even when adapting content across platforms, however, creating enough new content can still become a drain on both ideas and time, so reposting relevant information produced by others can prove useful, as long as it doesn't entirely take over the account. In fact, in a world of information overload libraries can play an important role as information aggregators by helping others to identify high quality, relevant information from many disparate sources.

Many libraries have logical partners with whom to share and repost information, although it is important not to blindly share everything another organization creates. At UofL Law Library we have a natural connection with both the Law School and the other libraries on campus, and frequently share stories and information from these departments. It can also be useful to draw on these connections to expand the reach of our content to a wider audience. For example, the University Libraries share our content when it is of wider interest to the University community, such as a blog post from early 2017 about researching executive orders which addressed questions appearing across campus. In a similar fashion, I share content produced by University Libraries that is relevant to our patrons, such as extended operating hours or new resources that supplement our holdings. Being part of a University creates many opportunities for this type of sharing and cross-posting of information from different departments, student organizations, faculty, or librarians. Regardless of who initially created the information, however, relevance to the audience is always key when determining what information to share from another source, and it is important to bear in mind the appeal to the library's immediate community at all times.

While social media provides a vast range of options for hosting free library information on the web, it is also worth considering other alternatives. Blogs have been a standby of many libraries for some time, and the option of a relatively text-heavy format lends itself well to the information-rich library environment. Blogs can be used to provide more information than will fit in a social media post, are an excellent place to include time-sensitive information that may quickly appear out-of-date on a website, and can provide source material to promote on social media accounts. At UofL Law Library I run our blog through the LibGuides platform, but many good free options exist such as Wordpress or Blogger. The key consideration in deciding whether or not to create a blog, or any social media account, is whether you will update it regularly. In the online environment of rapid change and instant feedback, web materials that are not maintained can be more frustrating and off-putting than a lack of presence altogether. The text-heavy nature of blogs, which makes them appealing to many libraries, also makes them more time-consuming to create and update. Online writing needs to be proof-read and of a high quality, even if it has a casual tone, and at some libraries a blog may simply be too costly in terms of staff time required to maintain it.

In addition to carefully edited text, most online content, whether for social media, a website, or blog, will include visual materials. Visuals can make content more eye-catching and engaging, but can also be more than merely decorative. Informative images, infographics, and other visuals are an excellent way to quickly communicate information to an audience, although the design skills necessary to communicate clearly through images takes time to learn. A well-designed visual needs to be easy to follow, for example, so that it is clear how information is grouped together and in what order it should be read. Services like Piktochart or Eas.ly provide useful infographic templates, which assist in creating a clear visual structure, like the road layout that I used to illustrate the legislative process in Kentucky. Other programs, such as Canva, are useful for creating appealing visual content for use in posters, social media photos, and more. While some free quality images are provided in design platforms, other resources like Pixabay, Morguefile, or Unsplash provide supplies of photos with creative commons licenses that allow reuse or adaptation. Regardless of which image sources or programs you use, taking a little time to get to grips with basic visual design skills will make it easier to create content that is appealing, clear, and effective.

Regardless of how engaging the content on a library's website, blog, or social media platforms is, if no one can find that content, then it can't be successful. One of the best ways to reach the widest audience possible is to ensure that the library's content shows up in results from a variety of online search engines, and from Google in particular. One of the first things I did to improve UofL Law Library's web presence was to run a search for the library in several search engines, and note what results appeared. The process of search engine optimization can be time consuming, but an initial search provides a good indication what content is already visible and what needs to be improved first. Every web host and social media platform provides different options for optimizing a page, and Google provides several useful tools that can be applied to any website, including support on optimizing a site for Google searches, a speed test for feedback on a site's performance, and analytics to track a site's usage and trends.

Whether you have an extensive or minimal online presence there will undoubtedly be times when you wish to direct individuals to the physical library, and the library will lose potential patrons if the location and contact information is wrong in online maps and directories. Google Maps makes it easy to submit updates about library information, or to claim the library as a business and maintain information in detail. Google is ubiquitous, but competitors still exist, so check MapQuest, Bing, Foursquare, Yellow Pages, and other providers to ensure accurate library information reaches the widest audience possible.

At UofL Law Library, our Google My Business analytics indicate that people request directions to our building through Google an average of 23 times per month. Since I claimed our Google My Business page in December 2016, I have been able to refine our location on Google Maps within the University campus, to ensure that these Google searchers are being directed to the most precise location possible. I have also embedded an interactive Google map on the library's contact page, along with updated links to a campus map, and driving directions. Information from one service, such as the number of Google searches for directions to the library, can provide cues about useful information to include elsewhere. It is a safe bet that for every potential patron who searches Google for directions to the library, one is browsing the library website for directions as well.

Developing and maintaining a strong online presence on the cheap can be time consuming and requires dedication, but it is certainly not impossible. By being realistic about the needs of our library and users, and balancing those needs against the time available to invest in electronic outreach, I have been able to expand UofL Law Library's presence and reach new library users in the online environment where they are already spending time. The fact that this has been accomplished without any additional purchases, subscription services, or outlay of cash demonstrates the opportunities available in the electronic sphere.

Resources

- Blogger: www.blogger.com
- Canva design tutorials: designschool.canva.com/tutorials
- Google Analytics Solutions: www.google.com/analytics
- Google Maps: www.google.com/maps
- Google My Business: www.google.com/business
- Google Test My Site: testmysite.withgoogle.com
- Google Webmasters: www.google.com/webmasters
- Libraries & Social Media Facebook group: www.facebook.com/groups/LibrarySocial
- WordPress: wordpress.com.

Image Resources

- Canva: www.canva.com
- Creative Commons: ccsearch.creativecommons.org
- Easel.ly: www.easel.ly
- Morguefile: morguefile.com
- Piktochart: piktochart.com
- Pixabay: pixabay.com
- Unsplash: unsplash.com

Further Reading

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