Experiential Learning In Digital Marketing:
A Library Social Media Takeover

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ABSTRACT

While most academic libraries engage in some form of social media communication, questions have been raised as to the effectiveness of social media in building library community and the appropriateness of adding social media communication to the wide array of job duties librarians take on each day. In the spring of 2016 Saint Peter's University Libraries allowed a student team from a Digital and Social Media Marketing class to conduct a "social media takeover" of the library *Facebook* account and to kickstart a library *Instagram* presence. This successful project led to the establishment of a social media plan for the library and the creation of a new work study position focused on digital marketing and social media outreach. This case study will describe the experience of transitioning from librarian-run to student-run social media at a small urban university library, as well as examine the effect of this experiential class component on attainment of student learning outcomes in a digital marketing class.

Keywords: experiential learning, digital marketing, social media, student-run social media, marketing projects

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms--notably *Facebook, Twitter*, and *Instagram*--are now utilized by most public and academic libraries as part of their marketing efforts. A 2010 study of 100 academic libraries in the USA found that 89 libraries had a presence on Facebook and 85 libraries were using *Twitter* (Mahmood & Richardson, 2011). Because undergraduate students are crucial stakeholders for academic libraries and heavy users of social media, it makes sense for libraries to adopt these technologies in their efforts to engage undergraduate students (Palmer 2014). College and university libraries often cite social media as part of their toolkit for student outreach, attempting to "reach students where they are" in a rapidly changing, competitive online environment. As job duties expand, librarians are including social media skills and experience on their resumes and CVs, and professional organizations like the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) offer workshops on effective social media marketing.

Despite the popularity of social media, it has not been universally adopted or lauded by the academic library community. Some librarians have questioned the effectiveness of library social media in engaging students online, evidenced by social media pages that function more like events calendars with typically low student interaction. Other publications have suggested that librarians and library staff, often diminishing in numbers in the last decade, do not have enough working hours to devote to expanding social media efforts. A recent survey published in the *Canadian Journal of Information and Library Sciences* revealed that out of 247 libraries responding, 194 had implemented at least one social media application, most commonly Facebook. However, when survey respondents were asked about factors that influence whether or not their organizations implement a new social media application, ''lack of staff resources'' was selected as the major influence.   The same survey revealed that although librarians and archivists felt they fulfilled a "business necessity" by using social media, far fewer reported successful participatory factors amongst their users. Thus their findings indicated "a large gap between the vision of social media usage by cultural heritage institutions, as reflected in the literature, and the reality of actual implementation" (Liew, Chern & Li, 2015).

This professional literature on libraries and social media begs several questions. First, how can social media be managed more effectively to forge interaction with students and build community? And secondly, how can libraries, particularly academic libraries, expand their social media footprint without over-burdening librarians or other professional staff?

In addition, as Kim, Sin and Yoo-Lee (2014) point out, while Information Literacy specialists and researchers often point out the negative implications of social media use by college students, the literature does not fully explore the

positive contributions and opportunities that social media platforms offer. From facilitating interactive and collaborative knowledge production and sharing to providing a voice to legitimate news outlets, sources and individuals that are overlooked by mainstream media, these digital and social media platforms can be powerful and transformative tools. Collaborative projects such as the one described in this paper, is one method of maximizing information sharing and consumption in an accessible format, while developing key career skills in business student interns engaged in the project. Employers consistently cite the need for more development of soft skills, like communication, leadership and creativity as well as the need for applied learning and skill development in collegiate marketing education (Chong, Lee & Benza, 2015). This project addresses this need, forcing students out of their comfort zone of an objective assessment or project, and instead putting them in the role of a real employee or consultant.

Librarian-led social media @ the O'Toole Library

Much like the respondents to Liew's survey, lack of staff resources at Saint Peter's University slowed our adoption of *Instagram* and *Twitter*. Despite joining *Facebook* in 2012 and making over 500 "friends," we found most interaction with the Library *Facebook* stemmed from a core group of faculty and alumni who could only be described as existing "fans of the library." Although the main goals of creating a library presence on Facebook were: 1) outreach to undergraduate students, and 2) building a new audience for library services and events, it seemed that neither was being achieved. As our *Facebook* "status updates" generally received low engagement, often from the same 4-5 individuals, the motivation to devote time to the project subsided. Meanwhile, as Saint Peter's University Libraries lost 40% of our professional library staff since 2010 to layoffs or attrition, the five remaining librarians were struggling to keep up with greater demands for reference, instruction, and collection development, not to mention growing responsibilities developing online information literacy instruction, as we worked to support the university's segue into online and hybrid course offerings and later fully online graduate programs. While we knew that many of our students had abandoned *Facebook* in favor of other social media, like *Instagram*, *Snapchat*, and *Twitter*, we were not ready to devote staff time to learning these applications and posting regularly. At least not yet.

Handing it over: BA 327 #socialmediamarketing

In the Spring of 2016 the opportunity arose to experiment with student-led, student-centered library social media through collaboration between the O'Toole Library and the Business Department. As a university that embraces experiential and service learning as well as community-engaged projects and reflection, Saint Peter's faculty often identify real-world opportunities for students to apply knowledge and learn new skills by solving an organizational problem or taking on a consulting project. In business programs in particular, this is emphasized, since industry leaders and employers often cite a lack of entry-level skills in new college graduates, which has been linked to a perceived separation of theory and practice in pedagogical approaches (Sashi, 2014). This library social media project infuses a practical exercise with an unstructured problem and measurable outcomes, thus helping to bridge that documented gap and allow students to tangibly apply theory to practice.

As a possible final project for a business elective BA 327 - Digital and Social Media Marketing, students had as one of their options: "Create a social media campaign plan for your company and implement that plan. The campaign should span at least two social media platforms and you should run the campaign for at least two weeks." The business professor suggested that one group might select the O'Toole Library, instead of a company, for their campaign. Upon invitation, a librarian visited their class and spoke about social media and libraries, discussing our challenges with *Facebook* and presenting some examples of successful library social media efforts, such as those of the New York Public Library and William H. Hannon Library at Loyola Marymount University.

After a few weeks we were happy to learn that two students had chosen the O'Toole Library for their Digital and Social Media Marketing Final Project. We quickly began e-mail communication with students, relaying our goals for a student-centered social media approach, including:

1. Increased online interaction with undergrads;
2. Reduction of "library anxiety" or a sense of not belonging in an academic setting; and
3. Building library community.

The student social media team dove into the project with great enthusiasm. A meeting was arranged to introduce the students to librarians and library staff members who might help generate posts. At this meeting students were also informed about upcoming trends in social media relating to libraries and archives, such as #preservationweek a hashtag created by the American Library Association to help promote cultural institutions and draw attention to historical preservation efforts for one week each year during the month of April . After meeting with the librarians, the students had an *Instagram* account started within a few days. In addition to starting the library's *Instagram* presence, they connected posts with *Twitter* and *Facebook,* when appropriate, tracked analytics, and created a social media plan, with recommendations for the library accounts post-May.

PASSING THE TORCH: LOL

Librarians and administration at Saint Peter's University viewed the BA 327 Library Social Media Takeover as a success. The business student team was effective in gaining a significant *Instagram* following quickly, particularly among Saint Peter's students active in clubs and organizations--and this *Instagram* has clearly generated more interaction with undergraduates than the library account had ever seen on *Facebook*. However, the question remained whether librarians were prepared to devote time to following and developing the social media plan laid forth by the students and, moreover, whether the librarians were even well-suited for maintaining the colloquial, laid-back tone of our new *Instagram*. Instead of taking on this responsibility themselves, the decision was made to create a special work study position with primary responsibility for social media, while the two librarians who started the initiative could supplement or edit whenever they saw fit.

Although the O'Toole Library had seen reductions in our support staff and librarian positions over the years, the library retained a healthy number of work study students, many of whom stayed in their position throughout their educational career at St. Peter's. The new work study position, Library Outreach Liaison (LOL), [Appendix A] was created to reflect the importance of social media in communicating our message of information literacy and library services directly to the students. We secured a higher pay grade for the LOL and established with the Circulation Coordinator and Work Study Manager that this student would be exempt from shelf-reading and shelving tasks in order to work on social media, marketing and outreach. The student we selected was a graduate student in the education program who had worked at the library throughout her undergraduate years. She possesses not only a high level of familiarity with library services and personnel but is a prolific and successful Instagrammer off campus, promoting her virtuosic makeup skills. Upon naming our new Library Outreach Liaison and sharing with her both our expectations for the campaign and the student-generated social media plan, we turned our *Instagram, Facebook*, and *Twitter* back over to student control.

TAKEAWAYS

Since fully embracing student-run social media, our *Instagram* presence has continued to flourish. We see examples of genuine interactions with students and building of our library community. We are encouraged. The LOL has utilized social media to highlight rare books and archival photos beyond any previous efforts by librarians. She has utilized the online graphic design application *Canva* to design unique announcements and memes. Some of these designs have been resized for digital signage, to give them additional exposure within the physical library. Our student LOL has provided a consistent variety of posts and engagement has grown, with posts between September and December gaining an average of 8 likes, vs. and average of 40 for the month of April, when business students were managing the account. Our LOL has been an open communicator, in regular contact with the librarian managing the social media project who provided input and occasional edits. In addition, this student had tangible experience and accomplishments to add to her resume and career portfolio.

One regret we had in our transition to student-run social media was not providing our student Library Outreach Liaison (LOL) with a descriptive style manual from the start. Although our LOL was consistent and professional in her content and tone, she occasionally neglected to include punctuation, such as apostrophes, within words or to conform to general rules about capitalization. Librarians overseeing the project naturally found these errors hard to look past. However, formally editing each of her posts seemed to nullify the time-saving aspect of our student-run social media experiment. Instead of confronting the student about each typo or error, we started building a document that lists frequently used proper nouns (O'Toole Library, Saint Peter's University, etc.), as well as conventions specific to our social media, like frequently utilized hashtags.

Our Social Media Plan and Style Manual now provides students with guidelines and recommendations for online communication along with preferred conventions of grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Since creating the manual we have seen a marked reduction in errors and a general improvement in the quality of posts. Our plan is to evaluate this social media program after one year and edit the manual, as needed. Furthermore we may also consider the value of creating an additional work study student LOL position, perhaps with a stronger focus on archives and expanding our *Twitter* presence.

ASSESSMENT AND CONCLUSION

The students who took on the library social media project accomplished several milestones in terms of creating a social media following for the library, increasing engagement by a significant percentage and learning how to conceptualize social media posts and assess metrics. These students added these skills and accomplishments on their resumes, demonstrating tangible experience in digital marketing that would not have been possible through a more traditional class assessment.

In conclusion, we have found that transitioning to student-run social media can hold significant benefits for small academic libraries, by forging collaborative relationships with academic departments, improving the quality and frequency of social media posts, increasing student engagement with the library, and alleviating job strains on professional librarians. In addition, this type of experiential assignment is likely to increase attainment of student learning outcomes for the course, build a greater sense of satisfaction for students, whose work is having a measurable impact, and enhance skill development and problem-solving ability that can be documented on students' resumes and in career portfolios.

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Appendix A

Library Workstudy: Outreach Liaisons (2)

The Library Outreach Liaisons support the mission and goals of the O'Toole Library by promoting student access to library resources and services and fostering the information-literacy skills of their fellow students.

Duties and responsibilities:
- Designing and distributing fliers, signage, handouts, and internet graphics promoting library resources, services, and events
- Creating online videos and tutorials promoting library services and research skills
- Crafting at least two social media posts per week featuring new library resources, archival photographs, research tips, and library events
- Representing the O'Toole Library at open houses, orientation programs, and other events
- Serving as student representatives at Library Advisory Group meetings
- Communicating new library resources and services to fellow workstudy students

Qualifications:
- At least one year experience as a Library Work Study student
- Demonstrated written and verbal communication skills
- Proficiency with with social media, marketing, and graphic design tools, such as YouTube, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Canva, PowToon, or Camtasia Studio
  - GPA
- Professional interest in marketing, educational technology, communications, or related fields

  Preference will be given to students who have completed BA-327 Digital & Social Media Marketing or CU-350 Public Relations