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# #Donate: the role of social media in academic library fundraising

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to examine the extent to which academic libraries are using social media to fundraise, what tactics they are using to fundraise on social media and how academic libraries' social networks are responding to their fund-raising efforts.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This research is a content analysis of 276 posts from 2015 on the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts of 16 academic libraries.

**Findings** – This study found that academic libraries are just beginning to use social media for fund-raising with many adopting non-profit best practices that brought significantly more likes and shares/retweets to their accounts.

**Originality/value** – This research is one of the few systematic examinations of how libraries use social media to discuss fund-raising, and the findings suggest tactics for libraries to adopt in their fund-raising posts to generate more likes and shares/retweets.

**Keywords** Promotion, Social media, Content analysis, Academic libraries, Donors, Fund-raising

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

From message boards to video chat, social media have redefined how organizations can connect with their constituencies. Social media, unlike traditional mass media and internet technologies, “enable users to articulate and make visible their social networks” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 211). Researchers have found that non-profits can use social media platforms to deepen existing relationships with supporters and extend their reach through their supporters' connections to fundraise. Indeed, many of the suggested practices for non-profit social media fund-raising focus on community building and engagement. Like non-profits, many academic libraries are using social media to build and expand their organizational reach, but what is not known is the extent to which they are using social media to fundraise, what tactics they are using to fundraise on social media and how their communities are responding to their social media fund-raising efforts.

Non-profit organizations are creating communities with supporters by encouraging them to engage with the organization via a variety of social media channels. According to The Center for Marketing Research at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, 92 per cent of USA non-profits report they use Facebook, 86 per cent report they use Twitter and 50 per cent report they use Instagram (Barnes, 2014). The literature on non-profit use of social media suggests that these organizations see social media as a valuable tool that enables them to build and extend their causes. In their analysis of how the American Red Cross uses social media for public relations, Briones *et al.* (2011, p. 39)



found that organizational chapters said that having “open two-way dialogues” on social media is “essential[...] to building relationships” with the public. The Red Cross started out using social media to connect with volunteers but later saw that platforms like Facebook and Twitter could help them exchange disaster-related information with the broader public, thus helping the organization to extend the reach of their information (Briones *et al.*, 2011). Similarly, while some have labeled those who simply like or share a cause’s social media post as “slacktivists”, these acts actually are critical to extending the life of social movements (Barberá *et al.*, 2015).

Connections also play a significant role in non-profit fund-raising on social media. Saxton and Wang (2014) found that non-profits with larger social networks were able to raise more money than those with fewer followers. It is this need to create community engagement to fundraise that underpins much of the best-practices literature related to non-profit fund-raising. One common recommendation is to take advantage of the social component of social media by sharing supporters’ relevant news and content (Mathos and Norman, 2012). Another recommendation for non-profits is to create online fund-raising campaigns complete with hashtags (Mathos and Norman, 2012) to build brand awareness among their supporters (Mansfield, 2014). Similarly, a third recommendation is to tap into the momentum of national social media giving campaigns like #GivingTuesday, the Tuesday after Thanksgiving, in which many non-profits encourage online giving (Mansfield, 2014). Finally, a fourth recommendation often provided in the non-profit fund-raising best-practices literature is to use language that suggests donors need to act immediately, like “give today” to create engagement (Mansfield, 2014).

Like non-profits, academic libraries are using social media to build and expand their connections. In 2013, 76 per cent of academic libraries reported using social media, including Facebook and Twitter, and one of their main reasons for using these platforms was to create community engagement (American Library Association, 2014). The use of social media to build and expand upon connections is usually discussed in the library literature via case studies describing a specific library’s practices. For example, Young and Rossmann (2015, p. 30) reported that they were able to grow the Montana State University Library’s Twitter followers by 100 per cent over the course of a year by adopting a strategy of “responsiveness, availability, and scholarship with the goal of connecting with students and building a sense of community” on the platform. The extent to which academic libraries are capitalizing on their social media community building to fundraise, however, is unclear. How academic libraries conduct traditional fund-raising strategies such as annual giving, major gifts and grant and foundation support have been examined across a variety of academic libraries (Rader, 2000; Hazard, 2003; Dewey, 2006), but the role that social media play in these fund-raising strategies has not been systematically researched. Thus, this study will explore the answers to the following three research questions:

- RQ1. How do academic libraries use their social media to talk about fund-raising?
- RQ2. What best practices from the non-profit social media fund-raising literature are being followed by academic libraries on their own social media accounts?

RQ3. Does following those best practices from the non-profit social media fund-raising literature result in more engagement in the forms of likes and shares/retweets?

Methodology

Because the initial aim of this research was to describe the fund-raising content on academic libraries' social media platforms, this study utilized the conventional method of qualitative content analysis in which the categories are created through immersion in the data (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005). This means that as a researcher goes to code an item, he or she will either add the item to an existing category or if the item does not fit into any of the existing ones, the researcher will create a new category for the new item. Thus with this methodology, the codes emerge directly from the data.

To decide which social media posts to include in the analysis, a researcher examined the posts from 2015 on the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts of the top 20 academic libraries on the "100 Most Social Media Friendly College and University Libraries for 2013" ranking (Parker, 2013). This list is the most recent ranking of academic libraries according to how frequently they use their social media accounts to share information about events, materials and other services (Parker, 2013). It is important to note that in instances when the library posted to Facebook and Twitter extremely frequently, however, not all of the posts from the year 2015 were available for analysis. Thus for 18 of the accounts in this study, only a partial year of posts could be examined. In addition, nine of the top 20 libraries did not have Instagram accounts or no posts were made to their Instagram accounts in 2015, so there were no Instagram posts to analyze for those nine libraries. In total, the researcher examined the posts that 20 libraries made across 51 social media accounts in 2015.

To determine what content qualified as fund-raising related, a researcher looked at the posts for any mention of giving, gifts, support, thanks, thank you, donating or donations to a library project, a unit within the library or the library in general. This meant that a post highlighting a donated collection in special collections would be included, but a post fund-raising for a non-library student group charity would not be. Once the content was selected for analysis, a researcher coded the posts according to:

- the platform of the post;
- the original author of the post;
- the purpose of the post;
- was the post part of a campaign with a hashtag;
- was the post part of a national fund-raising campaign;
- the post used language that conveyed a sense of urgency like give today;
- the number of likes the post received; and
- the number of shares/retweets the post received.

Results

In total, 276 of the examined posts from 16 libraries were included in the content analysis. Thus, four of the top 20 libraries did not have any available posts from 2015 that were considered to be about fund-raising. Of the 16 libraries with fund-raising

posts, three libraries had as few as two fund-raising posts and one library had as many as 70.

### *RQ1*

To get a sense of how libraries are using social media to talk about fund-raising, the 276 posts included in the study were coded by platform and purpose. Twitter was the most frequently used platform with half of the 276 fund-raising related posts coming from libraries' accounts on that platform. Facebook was the second-most used platform, with 93 of the 276 posts coming from libraries' accounts on that platform and 45 of the 276 fund-raising posts coming from libraries' Instagram accounts.

Posts also were coded according to their main purpose, and the examination of the posts found that they fell into one of five content categories. The largest category was an effort to raise money with 38 per cent or 104 posts asking for donations, 56 posts announced gifts made to the library, 38 had thanking donors as the main purpose, 52 were posts about gift celebration events such as dedications and unveilings and 26 of the posts were promotion of or news about donated materials.

### *RQ2*

To examine to what extent the posts followed the best practices described in the literature on non-profit social media fund-raising, the 276 posts were first coded according to their author. For 83 per cent or 228 of the posts, the original author was the library; but 24 of the posts were retweets or shares of content from the official account of another unit within the same university as the library, 11 of the posts originated with library donors and 13 were content from other authors such as shares of news outlets' posts and retweets from the personal accounts of library employees.

Next, the researcher coded whether or not the posts were part of a fund-raising campaign with a hashtag, a national fund-raising campaign and whether or not they used language that suggested immediacy. Of the 276 posts, 168 or 61 per cent were part of a fund-raising campaign with a hashtag, 62 posts or 23 per cent were part of a national fund-raising campaign such as #GivingTuesday and 54 posts or 20 per cent of the posts used language that conveys a sense of urgency. Among those 104 posts with the main purpose of asking for money, 92 posts or 89 per cent were part of a fund-raising campaign with a hashtag, 43 posts or 41 per cent were part of a national fund-raising campaign and 50 posts or 48 per cent used language to suggest that donors needed to give immediately.

### *RQ3*

To assess what impact following or not following these best practices has on the number of likes and shares/retweets that a post receives, a series of independent sample t-tests were performed. On average, the fund-raising posts in this study received 5.78 likes ( $SD = 8.76$ ) and 1.45 shares ( $SD = 3.32$ ). The author of the post did not have a significant impact on the number of likes that a post received, but it did have a significant impact on the number of shares/retweets, with library authored posts receiving only 0.65 shares/retweets on average ( $SD = 0.98$ ) compared to 4.52 ( $SD = 6.16$ ) for non-library authored posts,  $t(48) = 4.34, p < 0.001$ .

For all of the posts, regardless of purpose, the only significant difference between following the other best practices and not, was being part of a campaign with a hashtag. Those posts that were part of a campaign with a hashtag received significantly more shares/retweets ( $M = 1.84$ ,  $SD = 4.08$ ) than those that did not ( $M = 0.91$ ,  $SD = 1.59$ ),  $t(188) = 2.42$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . When the sample was limited to those posts with the purpose of asking for donations, however, two significant differences in the number of likes were found. Those posts that were part of a national fund-raising campaign received significantly more likes ( $M = 8.63$ ,  $SD = 11.22$ ) than those that did not ( $M = 4.30$ ,  $SD = 6.21$ ),  $t(60) = 2.30$ ,  $p < 0.05$ . In addition, those posts that used language conveying a sense of urgency received significantly more likes ( $M = 8.20$ ,  $SD = 10.85$ ) than those that did not ( $M = 4.13$ ,  $SD = 5.95$ ),  $t(75) = 2.35$ ,  $p < 0.05$ .

## Discussion

Social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram allow organizations to build and expand their communities of supporters. While research has found that some larger non-profits have been able to capitalize on their social networks and raise money through social media, this content analysis of 276 posts from 2015 on the Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts of 16 academic libraries found that they are just beginning to explore fund-raising on these platforms.

This study found that 80 per cent of the top 20 university libraries on the “100 Most Social Media Friendly College and University Libraries for 2013” list (Parker, 2013) made at least one fund-raising-related post during 2015, but there is great variability in the number of posts that are fund-raising related with some libraries posting as few as three times and other posting as frequently as 70 times within the span of just a few months. In addition, while the largest content category of the posts (40 per cent) focused on asking for donations, the majority of the libraries’ fund-raising social media posts were focused elsewhere. These results suggest that academic libraries have started to use their social media accounts to ask for donations, and there are some academic libraries that are exemplars at fund-raising on social media, but many are not yet willing or able to use social media to ask their supporters to give.

When they do attempt to fundraise on social media, some academic libraries also follow the best practices laid out in the non-profit social media fund-raising literature, but many do not. This study found that 17 per cent of social media fund-raising content originated from outside the library. A majority of the posts in this study (61 per cent) were part of a campaign with a hashtag, and when it came to fund-raising -focused posts, over 40 per cent were part of a national fund-raising effort and used language that suggested immediacy.

This study also found that following the non-profit best practices increased engagement in the forms of likes and shares on academic libraries’ fund-raising -related social media content. Non-library authored posts received more shares/retweets than original library content and those posts that were part of a campaign with a hashtag received more shares/retweets as well. In addition, when posts focused on asking for donations, those posts that were part of a national campaign received more likes and those posts that used language suggesting that donors needed to act quickly received significantly more likes.



It is important to note, however, that as this study employed the conventional method of content analysis, these content codes emerged from these 276 particular posts made during this particular time. It is entirely possible for another study to look at posts from other libraries at another point in time and expand upon the content categories used in this research. Also, because of the methodology employed, it was not possible to ascertain to what extent academic libraries' social media posts about fund-raising cultivated potential or actual donors. Future research should examine the relationship between academic libraries' social media posts and donations received.

Academic libraries are just beginning to explore posting fund-raising -related content on their social media channels with some libraries frequently posting and others not at all. While it is unclear at this time the extent to which this content generates actual donations, this study found that when academic libraries' fund-raising posts followed the best practices suggested in the non-profit fund-raising literature, they received more likes and shares. Thus, if more academic libraries are interested in venturing into social media fund-raising, they can look to a handful of academic library exemplars in this area as well as some larger non-profits for ideas on how to get started.

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