Developing a social media strategy: Tweets, pins, and posts with a purpose

After the initial thrill of creating an account, or the rush of seeing your follower count tick upward, social media can lose its excitement. As a result, in many libraries, especially when seemingly more pressing demands or staffing shortages arise, social media becomes an afterthought. It then loses its social qualities and, instead of cultivating interaction, it becomes just another media channel to infrequently promote services and events. Successful social media accounts curate relevant content and engage their audiences. But before any of that can happen, we've found it's important to take a step back and think carefully about your purpose for using social media.

Collecting offline feedback.

Our experience comes from a small academic library with a culture that encourages experimenting with new technologies. The library includes 22 enthusiastic staff members, many of whom are interested in social media personally and professionally. As a result, we created a number of social media accounts, ten at present count, without thoughtfully considering how we planned to use and maintain them in the future. This was problematic because we weren't making meaningful connections or engaging our audience. At the time, we lacked consistency in activity and content, had no policy to help define our intentions, and no strategy. As we took stock of our social media accounts, we began to question our purpose on social media. The following outlines characteristics of successful social media programs based on our own research and experience.

Purpose

Identifying your purpose for using social media is the first step to creating a successful social media plan. To make a meaningful purpose statement, connect it with your library's mission.' This will explicitly make your social media actions one of the many ways your library fulfills its mission.

You can translate your library's mission statement into a social media purpose by considering what your library values. These value statements help identify qualities that the library administration finds important. Impact maps are a useful exercise to identify which of your library values could translate to social media. Consider how your library uses different social media platforms. Do these accounts, actions, or posts reflect or impact your library's values? What if you altered your strategy? Social media efforts might not map to all of a library's core values; your social media purpose is created with the values that do connect.

We considered the following questions when identifying our social media purpose:

- What are our library's values?
- What are we currently doing on social media? What would we like to be doing?
- Are our current or aspirational social media activities related to our library values?
- If yes, what values do our social media activities map to?
- If no, how could we improve our social media efforts? Are there different platforms that might help us better fulfill our library's mission?

Using Facebook to give updates on their relocation.

Our social media purpose statement is now clearly defined, and aligns to our library's values:

In order to fulfill our mission, we seek to connect, share, and listen to our users on social media. Our users are increasingly active online, and the library intends to be present in these virtual spaces to support the teaching, learning, research, and information needs of the university community.

This purpose statement directly connects to our library's mission and informs most, if not all, social media interactions.

Policy

Once you have established your social media purpose, it should be articulated in an official document. That document is most likely a social media policy, the overarching document that outlines your intentions and guides the choices you make on various platforms. Your purpose statement must be present in the policy because your purpose informs future decisions on social media.

In addition to your purpose, a social media policy may also include a number of other guiding statements. These could include references to appropriate behaviors and actions that represent your organization. Additionally, policies may include guidelines related to creating new accounts, approval of posts, and appropriate ethical or legal policies, including copyright and privacy policies.

Though a policy may contain all of the necessary elements, it won't be successful unless it's compatible with your organization's culture. A recent study showed that many academic library social media policies use restrictive language, though it need not be restrictive to be successful. It may be useful to review other successful library policies and examine the tone, style, implementation, and enforcement of the policies and look for common successful elements. There are an abundance of social media policy examples online to use as a starting point for your own.

When we created our social media policy, we started by documenting the

procedures we were currently using, without modifying any existing power or responsibilities. We considered our library culture that encourages creativity and inclusion, and left our policy less restrictive than other library social media policies we reviewed. Along those lines, we used positive language when listing our guidelines. Although we based our policy's tone on our work environment, policies are only as effective as the ability to implement them.

Implementation

Successfully putting a social media policy into practice is demonstrated by your ability to create posts and interact with others on social media in a way that reflects your purpose and follows your policy. This is a manageable task if there is only one person managing all of your social media, but can be difficult if you have a large or diverse team of people managing your accounts. If there are too many people managing a social media account, your voice might not be unified, and staff might have different visions of how the policy and purpose are implemented.

In our experience, we have a group of colleagues with different levels of knowledge about social media platforms, and different ideas for what content should be posted. To build a cohesive team, we spent time discussing and defining our library's voice. One exercise we found useful, regardless of how many people contribute content to your social media accounts, is to consider how your brand might be personified.

Tweeting resources for a writing class.

To personify your library's brand, consider what your library, if it was a person, would look like, talk about, wear, etc. This exercise may help you articulate your library's culture, values, and purpose in a way that can be translated on social media. When you've developed a clear idea of *who* your library is, let that be the voice of your brand through social media. If done

well, this exercise should match the purpose and values of your library.

In order to deliver thoughtful, meaningful posts on any social media account, it is important to think critically about what type of content you post, and what tone is used to be sure it reflects your purpose. While it's possible that not every tweet, pin, or post will expressly tie to your purpose, it's essential that your actions reflect your overall intention.

Goals

During the implementation of a social media policy, an organization can begin to consider goals. Goals will ensure that your purpose has direction and you're not stuck in the paralysis of planning. A library does not need to develop an extensive number of goals. Even one goal is a reasonable place to start. What's most important is that the goals are firmly rooted in the purpose you've articulated to ensure that your action is purpose driven. Each goal should have SMART objectives. The acronym SMART is often used to create meaningful goals or objectives, and stands for: specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and timely. Considering the pieces of the SMART acronym will help you think through the process of accomplishing your goal.

Our library has a goal to support the university's curriculum through social media. To help accomplish our goal, we created objectives, which served as an action plan. One objective under this goal is to use a hashtag for Writing 300 (WRIT 300) students to post research tips, as students in that class start work on their annotated bibliographies and research papers in early March.

Since all of our reference librarians are embedded in WRIT 300 courses, we are promoting the hashtag to writing students and instructors. This objective helps our library fulfill its social media purpose of supporting university curriculum and creates a stronger definition of how that goal might be fulfilled. Though there may be other activities that help fulfill that purpose, we have one concrete objective currently employed that will be measured for success.

Extensive planning, while helpful, can leave you lost in the details. It is important to not let the planning process obscure the product. Most users are aware that social media platforms, possibilities, and constraints are ever-changing, and while planning, goal-setting, and strategizing is important, remaining flexible and purpose-driven is vital to social media success.

Assessment

Measuring and determining success is dependent on what you're trying to achieve. There are many tools designed to measure specific aspects of your social media presence. Most social media platforms offer embedded tools for assessment, like Facebook insights, Twitter analytics, or Google analytics. There are also third-party measurement tools, like Klout, TweetReach, and Keyhole. When deciding how to measure your social media success, focus on the tools that will help you determine whether you achieved your goals.

Let's revisit the example of supporting curriculum by creating a WRIT 300 hashtag and posting tips for WRIT 300 students. To determine whether we successfully supported the curriculum using that social media strategy, we plan to rely on a variety of measurements, such as clickthroughs. One nondigital tool: student feedback. We might best understand whether we supported the curriculum by surveying students to find out if they were aware of these posts, how they learned about them, and whether they incorporated the tips into their papers. Context for any of these metric tools are important; what's successful for you might be less successful for others. Consider your audience base, similar institutions, and your social media goals.

Remember when you're measuring and assessing your social media success it's important to measure what matters, and what matters is what you've identified as your purpose throughout the planning process. You cannot measure anything effectively if you're not clear about what you're trying to achieve, which makes the goal-setting process even more important. It's easy to be attracted to all of the data available about social media, but be careful

not to fall into the trap of collecting data for the sake of collecting data.

Conclusion

If you've been planning effectively, you should have revisited your purpose many times throughout this process. Your purpose for being on social media should be carefully considered as all actions will stem from that. Ultimately, planning will enhance your social media presence with a clear brand capable of setting and meeting goals based on your library's values.

In our own library, we've spent time evaluating popular posts, successful and unsuccessful campaigns, and platform use to find what works on our campus to help promote what our library values.

Notes

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