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Bright IDEA

Connecting to Users with Facebook

by Cliff Landis

Social networking websites have gained popularity with a wide variety of library users. Both MySpace and Facebook—two of the most popular social networking sites—have been getting a lot of press in the last year. This is no surprise since they are among the highest ranked sites for web traffic.[1] And although originally thought to be a teenage fad, the average age of MySpace users has continued to increase so that "users between the ages of 35-54 now account for 40.6 percent of the MySpace visitor base."[2]

Social networking websites appeal to users because they provide a variety of services in one interface. Users are able to create a profile, make connections with people they know (called "friending"), send messages, join groups, share photos, and comment on friends' profiles. This ability to connect with many individuals allows users to maintain contacts with friends as diverse as elementary school classmates, distant relatives, college buddies, church members and book club friends.

Since I was already using Facebook to keep up with friends from college and my MLIS program, I decided to set up an "Ask a Librarian" group for VSU students. Walking around my library, I realized that many students were using Facebook while they were researching. Having this group in Facebook allows them to get help at their point of need in a user interface that they are already familiar with. In addition, the group message board retains questions and answers, allowing students to find answers to common questions (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Although I tried advertising the group via flyers around campus, I found that most of the students joined by word of mouth—either they were in a library instruction session where I mentioned the group, or they had heard about it from friends.

Facebook discourages institution-wide accounts (such as creating an Odum Library profile), so I recommend creating individual accounts. Any services you may want to provide can be offered via groups or one-on-one messages. Collection development suggestions, reference services, marketing events and instruction can all be provided via a social networking website such as Facebook.

If you have other ideas or need help starting up, contact me or ask one of the 228 members of the Librarians and Facebook group for help! ⏭

Cliff Landis is a reference librarian and facilitator at Valdosta State University. His email address is: jclandis@valdosta.edu.

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