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It Just Went Viral: Now What?

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Introduction

In March of 2016, one post made by Troy University Libraries “caught fire” and went viral. What does it mean to “Go Viral?” If it happens at your library, what can you do to take advantage of the unexpected publicity?

In this article, librarians from Troy University will discuss the importance of social media for libraries, including how Troy University Libraries developed a social media presence over a period of eight years. The authors will describe Troy University Libraries’ experience with a social media post that went viral, including challenges that came with the unexpected publicity, and offer recommendations for other libraries using social media.

What does it mean to “Go Viral?”

Nahon and Hemsley (2013, p. 16) define virality as

“...a social information flow process where many people simultaneously forward a specific information item, over a short period of time, within their social networks, and where the message spreads beyond their own [social] networks to different, often distant networks, resulting in a sharp acceleration in the number of people who are exposed to the message.”

Libraries can position themselves to take advantage of a viral post. According to Scott (2017), in his book *The New Rules of Marketing and PR*, the challenge for marketing is to “harness the amazing power of viral” (p.113). Scott advises that an organization must monitor its social media posts. If social media administrators know what people are talking about online, then they can quickly respond to posts that go viral.

Importance of Social Media for Libraries

Today, it is the norm for libraries to have a social media presence. Libraries announce events that are happening at their location, promote new acquisitions, and engage in a host of other activities. Typically, a library’s post does not receive the attention that a major media outlet’s post might receive. However, anything placed on social media can be seen by anyone. All it takes is for one person to be interested in the topic at hand, share a post to the right site, and suddenly a seemingly insignificant post to their specific audience goes viral on a national and/or international level.

There has been an extensive amount of information created discussing the use and benefits of social media. This is no surprise, considering the impact social media has on the daily lives of users worldwide. Social media is how large numbers of people access news, entertainment, and information about their friends’ lives. Libraries can harness the power of social media by using various platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, to promote their services, events, and other information they want to make the public aware of. This, in turn, will hopefully lead to greater usage of libraries that go to the effort to utilize these resources.

In 2011, the BRASS Program Planning Committee wrote an article entitled “The Business of Social Media: How to Plunder the Treasure Trove.” This article provides an excellent introduction and historical synopsis to popular social media sites, and advises (correctly) that librarians should remain watchful for opportunities to share information by using social media tools. Doing so will allow librarians to be better connected with their users, and also allow them better publicize what is happening at their libraries. Not only does social media provide an avenue of free marketing, as people interact more with libraries via this medium, librarians and patrons can develop a deeper connection.

Malin (2012) discusses the importance of social media in the article “What if? Exploring How Libraries Can Embody Trends of the Twenty-First Century,” and reminds readers that the modern library serves as a social institution. Malin (2012, p. 7) states

“To prove relevant to our hyperconnected participatory world, a library must strive to embody current trends, not just house materials around them. While the fundamental mission of a library will stay the same, its approach and methods must evolve to incorporate trends related to participation and connection.”

Buono and Kordeliski (2013) explain that libraries should use social media for transparency, engagement and exposure. They make the point that social media can engage people in conversations about what the library is doing, and in the process help build the needed support and interest in ongoing programming. By developing a dialogue with library users, it is possible to better determine what type of programming has been a genuine success, and what sorts of programming should be provided in the future.

The use of social media and the issues involved with it are not unique to libraries only in the United States. In the 2013, "Social Media and Readers' Advisory: New Zealand Experiences," Anwyll, and Chawner describe three objectives in using social media tools. Those objectives focus on having a means to contact library patrons. First, they argue that the use of social media allows librarians to focus on patrons who are not daily library users; second, that it serves as a way to promote books and other materials; and third, social media tools engage patrons. In addition, Anwyll and Chawner (2013) recommend a number of good practices and ideas, such as providing links in social media content and using friendly, promotional language and techniques. They suggest that libraries develop guidelines for the use of the social media tools.

Libraries have responded to the social media phenomenon through different methods. In one example, researchers Young and Rossmann (2015) studied Montana State University's creation of a "social media group (SMG)," and the effects of its actions on the followers for the library's Twitter account. Through the SMG's use of "personality-rich content" that invited two-way communications, they were able to show the value of having a social media program with a purpose to build student participation in support of their Twitter operations.

Booker and Bandyopadhyay (2017) stress that libraries need to establish a comprehensive plan to take advantage of the strengths of the different social networking sites. They analyzed data from one Midwestern university and noted that Facebook was the most popular social networking site, followed by YouTube and Twitter. Booker and Bandyopadhyay (2017) found 86.0% of their study sample size had membership in Facebook, 41.5% in YouTube, and 40.9% in Twitter. Membership in other social networking sites, blogs, and Wikis accounted for another 14% combined, versus a lower 9.1% who responded as having no membership in social networking sites. They recommend more academic libraries incorporate a social networking strategy into their broader marketing strategy.

Developing a Social Media Presence at Troy University Libraries

In early 2008, Troy University's Dothan campus library developed a Facebook page to promote various events the library was hosting. The hope was that the page would be popular and the library would open a line of communication with not only the student body and faculty on the campus, but also the surrounding community. The first 100 "likes" on the Facebook page were the easiest. However, those likes were from people that knew the person who set up the page, worked or attended the university, or had a stake for some other reason. After those first "likes," there was some disappointment among librarians at Troy University that the page was not wildly successful in terms of sheer numbers of visitors. Ultimately, a smaller number of active followers are more important than having a raw number of followers (Shaffer, 2017). Over time, librarians realized their definition of success should not be focused on raw numbers, but instead

on how invested the Facebook users are in keeping up with what is happening at Troy University Libraries.

When event pages were created on Facebook to publicize happenings at the Troy University Dothan campus library, about 50% of those listed as attending (or indicating they might attend) usually came. After about a year, it was possible for librarians hosting a film or lecture to make a reasonable guess of how many people would attend their events based on responses left on a Facebook events page. This knowledge is remarkably valuable, because although any event that a library is hosting should be actively publicized from start to finish, it is useful to know if for some reason people are not interested in what is being offered. With this information, the host can change the marketing message or strategy to one that might better capture the public's attention. It also allows the host to know ahead of an event if the type of event promoted does not interest the audience served. Conversely, such pages can alert librarians if an event is going to have better attendance than expected, which is important for planning purposes.

The development of the Troy University Dothan Campus Facebook page was successful and worth the time that librarians spent creating and maintaining it. However, the hope that something the library did would capture the imagination of the public and "go viral" did not happen, even though the library received numerous grants and hosted a variety of unique educational opportunities. Over time, the name of the Facebook page changed to Troy University Libraries, so that other campus locations could take advantage of the page. More people added it to their list of "likes," but the page still has a little under 1,200 followers.

Going Viral

The virality dilemma, or lack thereof, was solved on February 24th, 2016. Over the 2016 Christmas break, Dr. Christopher Shaffer, Dean of Libraries at Troy University, learned that several libraries around the nation were adding stationary exercise bikes with small tabletops that could accommodate laptop computers. The idea was to give students an option for studying - other than one that was sedentary. According to Shaffer (May 2016), the reason libraries were adding exercise bikes was grounded in the belief that health issues such as excessive weight gain, were being caused by a societal change relating to technology. Much of Americans' work and social lives now revolve around computers and televisions. Once upon a time, watching television was viewed as the primary passive activity that students engaged in for daily entertainment. However, with the advent of new technology, students often attend classes and conduct group projects online. They sit in front of a computer to write papers and study, to play video games and search the Internet. Students use computers for much of their communication needs. All of these factors led to the decision to add three stationary exercise bikes to the Troy University main campus library.

On February 24th, 2016, the library posted a picture on its Facebook page of three of the bikes on the Troy campus. (Three bikes were also added on the Dothan, AL campus.) The very next day, the student newspaper, *The Tropolitan*, published a story about the bikes by staff writer Quinta Goines. The library shared the article on its Facebook page. Facebook News shared the story, which led to United Press International (UPI) posting the story. The reaction to this one post about adding bikes to the library was astounding on a local, state, national, and to a degree international scale.

Quickly, it was clear that Troy University Libraries had its first post that went viral. In only a few days, 7,379 people had viewed the picture of the bikes, compared with only 1,004 actual people following the page at the time.

Dr. Shaffer was interviewed by a variety of media outlets, including the *Huffington Post* and *USA Today*. Bloggers and radio show hosts requested interviews, as did many local media outlets including television newscasts in Montgomery, AL and Dothan, AL. The magazines *Self* and *Science Explorer* published the UPI article with additional commentary. Cornell (2016, March 6) in the online magazine *Inquisitr*, compared what the Troy University Libraries were doing, with an elementary school in Austria that was trying something similar.

The Afterlife of Virality

In their book *Going Viral*, Nahnon and Hemsley (2013) describe the “decay” and “afterlife” of virality. According to the authors “what is decaying is the rate of growth of the number of views that a viral event receives” (Nahnon and Hemsley, 2013, p.125) and “the afterlife of viral content follows the decay phase and is a semi-dormant period of time; however, virality can be revived and return to the center of attention at any given moment (p. 129).”

This statement about the afterlife of virality seems to hold true based on the Troy University Libraries’ experience. There seems to be a natural cap on a post’s lifespan. After two or three days, most people who are interested will have viewed it. However, the media attention and the number of inquiries can last much longer than the lifespan of an individual social media post.

In order to make the most of the afterlife of virality, librarians should make themselves available for interviews and be responsive when people have questions. As mentioned earlier, Dr. Shaffer gave interviews with various media outlets for nearly two months after the original post. He actually did an interview with the national library magazine of South Korea about them in March of 2018, two years after the original bike story went viral - and Troy University Libraries continue to get an inquiry every month or so from institutions wanting to try out the concept.

In total, 232 pieces of media were generated relating to this story. Additional attention came as libraries from across the nation discovered these articles and made contact requesting information about the bikes’ usage, cost, safety,

and durability. To date, over 40 university, public, and school librarians have requested information about the bike program so that they could try to replicate it at their home institutions.

Lessons Learned

Based on over eight years of experience using social media to promote library programming at Troy University Libraries, the authors have the following recommendations for libraries who use Facebook and other social media:

- **Online posts should follow a clear pattern, and there should be a discernable agenda for the page.** The Troy University Libraries Facebook and Twitter pages are intended to let followers know about (essentially in this order) library outreach programming activities, services offered, latest additions, and general knowledge about the facilities (days of operation, hours, and holidays). There are also a certain number of “fun” posts that are library, or book themed, that fill in gaps when there is not much new information to post. The theory is that fun posts remind viewers that the library page still exists, and perhaps even causes them to follow the link to it.
- **Pictures are noticed more than words.** Pictures with some catchy words do particularly well on social media, particularly Facebook. Pictures with people doing something such as using a new piece of technology, or in Troy University’s case, riding a bike, are usually very popular.
- **Likes, Shares and Comments increase viewership.** Specific actions that will help a post be noticed are likes, shares, and comments. When students comment by leaving the names of other students and alumni, this dramatically increases the number of people who see the post.
- **Posts are always on the record so think before you write (and speak).** Understand that something written online (or said to the media) cannot be taken back. If a mistake is made, own it; apologize, clarify, and move on.
- **Avoid sarcasm and/or irony.** For example, early on with the bikes, Dr. Shaffer fielded a question from local media asking if the bikes had to be reserved. He replied, “we haven’t reached the point that people were fighting over bikes yet, but if that happened we would devise a system.” The Director of Troy University Relations was not amused with the comment, pointing out that too many people are literal, and flippant or sarcastic comments should not be made to the media.
- **Avoid politics, religion, and sex.** Do not post anything that might be construed as inappropriate. Somewhere between these topics and the weather is the best way to position posts!

From an administrative standpoint, it is important to:

- **Train and limit the number of individuals allowed to post to the institution's social media page and have a concrete, written policy relating to the page.** Page administrators should be sure they understand how the page works, so that they understand how to post as the institution (not themselves). On Facebook in particular, it is easy to fail to realize that instead of posting as yourself, you are posting as the institution. Follow through with promises/plans made on social media and be prompt in answering messages from users.
- **Designate one person to talk to the press to limit misstatements, keeping the outgoing message consistent.** In a large library, this assignment might be delegated. In medium or smaller libraries, the duty could fall to the dean or director.
- **Consistently monitor social media pages so inappropriate, or uninformed posts by followers can be contained and/or deleted.** If a page has multiple administrators, there should be one person who is responsible for being sure that

all posts on behalf of the organization are appropriate.

- **Link various social media accounts such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to save time and effort.** Linking allows the institution's message to get out to the maximum number of people with the least amount of effort on the part of page administrators.

Conclusion

The experience of one post going viral brought positive worldwide exposure to Troy University Libraries. This exposure caught the attention of senior level university administrators who praised the library for being forward in their thinking and for putting the university in a positive light. The positive attention brought renewed excitement to the library's outreach efforts, serving as an impetus for better communication with students. It only takes something small to grow and produce results. In this case, one post brought positive worldwide social media exposure for Troy University and brought change to Troy University Libraries.

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