

2018

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Repository Citation

Cotter, K., & Baron, S. (2018). Actively Engaging with Patrons on Social Media. *The Library Outreach Casebook*. Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/library-scholarship/20>

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Actively Engaging with Patrons on Social Media

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Introduction

Using social media for outreach entails more than just creating engaging content—it also means actively engaging with patrons. In our experience, using social media well involves a heavy emphasis on two-way communication with patrons. We have built a social media presence that, above all, seeks to build relationships with our patrons. It provides a venue for building relationships with both those who already closely associate with the library and those who do not. Establishing and strengthening ties to the library makes patrons more likely to share their positive perceptions of us with friends, family, colleagues, and coworkers. Because word-of-mouth remains the most credible mode of advertising (Nielsen, 2015), social media has the potential to greatly enhance the image of the library. This chapter lays out the strategies we have found most successful in building relationships with patrons via social media and will help librarians take advantage of it as a tool for two-way interaction by providing best practices for engaging with patrons. Our strategies revolve around listening to and seeking opportunities to engage with patrons and assessing the appropriate mode of interaction.

Description of Institution

Duquesne University of the Holy Spirit was founded in 1878 at the edge of downtown Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The university is committed to educational excellence, moral and spiritual values, an ecumenical atmosphere open to diversity, and service to the Church community, nation, and world. With nine schools of study, undergraduate education consists of 80 degree programs complemented by 85 masters, doctoral, and professional programs. 25 of these programs are online. The regular student body stands around 10,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) while more than 90,000 alumni have graduated from the institution.

The social media presence of Duquesne University is widespread. An Office of Marketing and Communication oversees official communications via traditional social media channels (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram). Many academic departments, support units, sports teams, and student organizations also have their own Duquesne “branded” social media channels. Further, faculty, staff, and students affiliated with the university have their own personal accounts that often reference Duquesne. Gumberg Library social media engagement seeks to leverage relationships with all of these avenues—formal communication via the official university accounts, the semi-formal announcements and postings via departments and student organizations, and the informal interactions with faculty and students.

Outreach/Marketing Problem Addressed

Most library patrons are not aware of the range of resources offered by libraries, and patrons’ perceptions of libraries reflect a narrow understanding of their purpose (Online Computer Library Center, Inc., 2010). Moreover, libraries have struggled in recent years to communicate their role within their communities and institutions (Creaser & Spezi, 2013). Thus, social media use by libraries has grown tremendously over the years due to their ability to connect libraries directly with their patrons. It has become an accepted—and popular—platform for engaging with patrons because it allows libraries to build a dialogue with users that can inform their mission and goals. Indeed, as Burkhardt (2010) explained, effective social media use produces a conversation, not a monologue:

Much like in real life if you talk only about yourself, people will soon become bored. If you ignore your fans and followers when they are talking to you or post to your profile, they will not continue to talk to you. Constant communication in both directions is crucial to social media success. (p.12)

How We Did It

Social Media Outreach Strategy

Regardless of the platform, all social media activity for the Gumberg Library serves to manage impressions of the library. Social media content often provides information about resources, library events, campus happenings, and/or relevant higher education issues. However, above all, we use social media to influence our patrons' perceptions of our facility. Whether posts provide practical information or general amusement, we aim to present the library as friendly, helpful, fun, and knowledgeable.

An outreach and communications librarian oversees social media activity along with a dedicated student worker and Social Media Committee. Multiple members of the library staff monitor social media activity and, in general, responses are coordinated through the outreach and communications librarian. Social media postings are both planned and impromptu. Planned posts include those that are scheduled in advance to promote library and campus events, regular occurrences such as library's hours changes, or holidays or milestones (e.g., Shakespeare's birthday). Impromptu posts are those that address immediate informational needs, such as elevators being down or an event location change. They also address current happenings in the library. For both planned and impromptu postings, we aim to communicate the information in a creative, fun, and/or captivating manner. Our hope is that every post will result in engagement, such as likes and shares, which will help spread the word that the library is a vital member of the community.

How We Engage

Engaging with patrons on social media primarily requires a sense of creativity, patience, and humor. However, as will be explained, these natural resources may also be supplemented with a systematic approach that includes certain routine practices. This approach benefits from the use of social media monitoring tools like HootSuite (<https://hootsuite.com/>) or TweetDeck (<https://tweetdeck.twitter.com/>) to help libraries keep in touch with their users. Having a general communication strategy for interactions on various social media platforms helps guide the process. In terms of specific channels, Facebook and Twitter posts typically present timely content in a concise manner. Typical Tumblr posts consist of a few informational paragraphs, never more than the equivalent of a page or so. Instagram is used to capture the beauty, charm, and intrigue of various aspects of the library and its parent institution.

Instructions

Be alert. We recommend configuring notifications on your phones and other devices so that you know immediately when someone tags the library in a post, messages or tweets at the library, or comments on a post. We highlight alertness because time is of the essence—on average, 60 of consumers expect a response to customer service requests within an hour (Elrhoul, 2015, para. 9). It is helpful to have multiple people monitoring accounts, given the 24/7 nature of social media engagement. This can be accomplished with a few dedicated employees, a committee, and/or a triage system for responding.

Listen. We have found that paying attention to what our patrons say on social media can help us discern what is important, interesting, and relevant to them. Aside from following user accounts who make up our community, we have set up monitoring streams on HootSuite to “listen” to our patrons. We have found it useful to scroll through our streams at least once a day. These streams can be configured to aggregate publicly displayed posts generated by keyword/hashtag searches and/or posts generated from lists of users we follow. We make use of both types. These monitoring tools apply primarily to Twitter and other public-oriented social media. Unfortunately, monitoring tools provide little utility in keeping up with your community on Facebook because they cannot aggregate Facebook posts created by other users unless they tag your library. Libraries that are part of a parent institution can expect that others around the institution are also monitoring your social media. Thus, it is better to stay ahead of the game by actively reviewing what patrons are saying about the library and catching potential problems than to be caught unprepared by a concerned call from an administrator.

Assess opportunities. As we are listening in, we look for opportunities to engage with our patrons, as well for instances where responding might cause damage. In terms of replying to posts not necessarily intended for or directed to the library, we have found that the following are prime opportunities to jump in and respond to a patron's post:

- The patron is asking a library-related question or mentions the library.
- Your response benefits the patron in some pragmatic way, whether by offering helpful information or resolving an issue. Sometimes comments are made or questions posed that can be easily answered with a link to a library resource or LibGuide. In addition, we have found it pays to respond to patron complaints, especially those that represent a frequently reoccurring issue. For example, we previously received many complaints regarding our ID policy. Thus, when we received the below tweet (see Figure 6.1), we used it as an opportunity to publicly clarify our policy, while also lending a sympathetic ear.

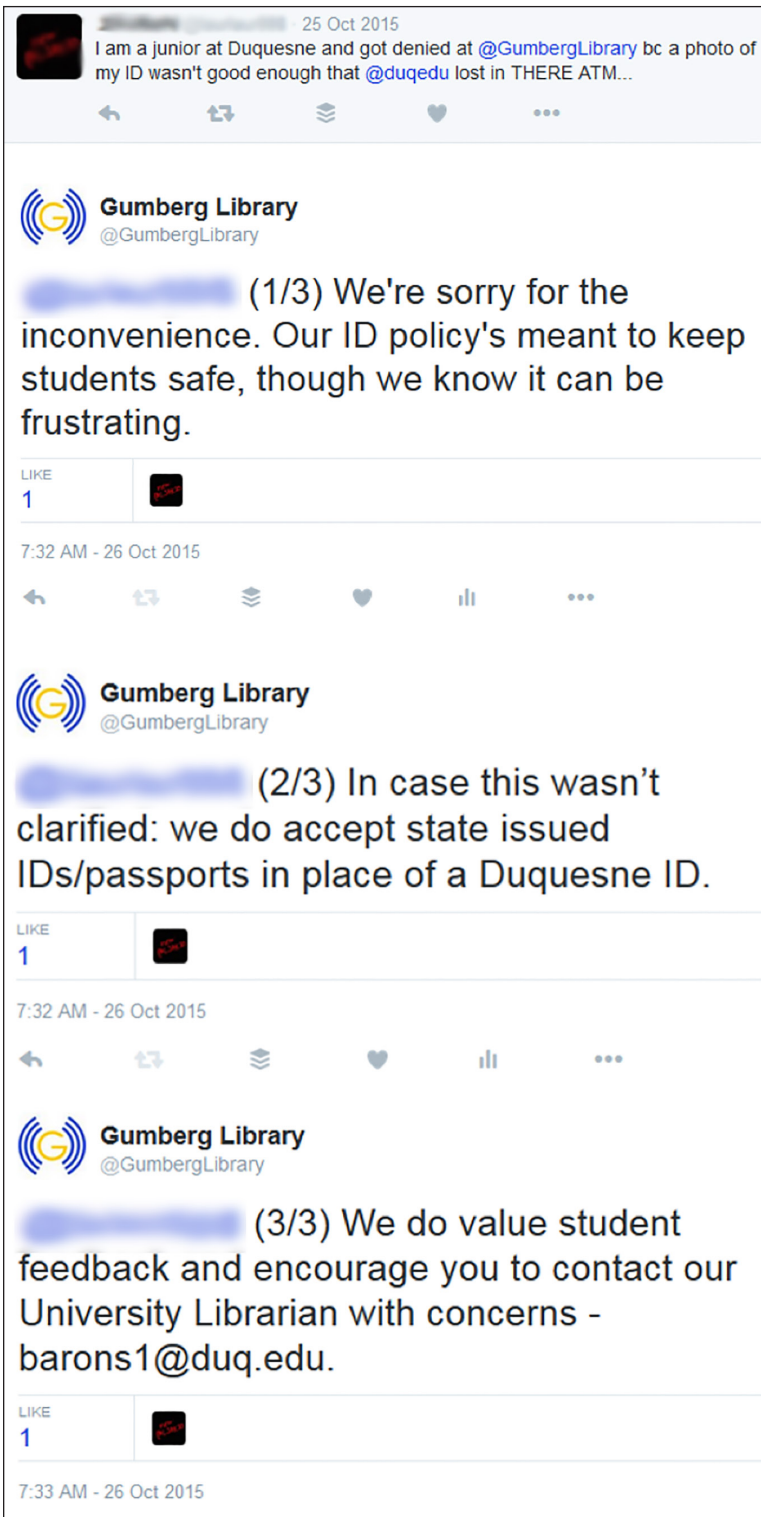


Figure 6.1. An example of a Twitter exchange with Gumberg Library.

- A response demonstrates support for a relevant event or initiative or an affiliated person or entity. We believe that liking a faculty member's post about a new publication or sharing the basketball team's post about a big win not only shows support for those entities but also illustrates that the library is a vibrant and active member of the community. Sometimes, liking a patron's beautiful photograph or post about a major milestone may simply brighten the patron's day, which is the ideal result of social media engagement.

On the other side, whether you are considering “cold-replying” to a patron or replying to a direct mention (i.e., a post/message intended for and sent to your library's account), we have found that the following are some reasons you may choose not to respond:

- The post is purely antagonistic or caustic in nature. Don't feed the trolls!
- The post contains highly personal and/or sensitive information about the patron or others. A response to this type of post could be perceived as “creepy.”
- The post is clearly at odds with the mission of the library or parent institution. While individuals have the freedom to express a variety of views, as a significant unit within a university, everything we post must be held to a higher standard that is representative of the mission. In some cases, acknowledging a post that conflicts with the mission of the library or parent institution may be interpreted as tacit validation or approval of a post's message.
- The post likely has not been seen by many people (e.g., few likes/retweets/shares, the user does not have an extraordinary amount of followers) and a response would only draw unnecessary attention to a negative perception of the library.

Consider the Appropriate Response

Like. Not all posts warrant a conversation. Sometimes, a simple “like” will let the patron know you “hear” and appreciate them and what they have to say.

Repost. A repost (share or retweet) will not only signal to the patron that you like what they have to say but, in some cases, can also turn the patron's statement into an impromptu testimonial of the library. This can be a very powerful tool—one that we regularly make use of (as seen in Figure 6.2).

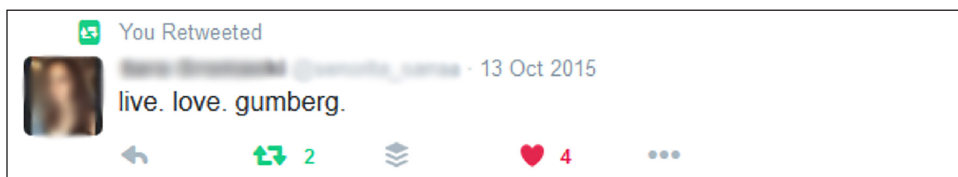


Figure 6.2. Sharing a student's positive Tweet about our library.

Reply. A reply, seen in Figure 6.3, helps define a relationship with the patron and is more personal than a “like” or a repost. We like replies because they allow direct interaction with individual patrons and an opportunity to express some personality.



Figure 6.3. A Twitter exchange with one of our patrons.

Direct message. A direct message (DM) offers privacy above all and can be useful for occasions when you may need a patron to supply personally identifiable information, like a phone number or email address. Additionally, while replying to a patron publicly means others will likely see what he/she said, direct messages are only between you and the patron. You can see an example in Figure 6.4. Thus, we have used direct messages to avoid drawing unnecessary attention to a post that might damage our library’s reputation. On a more practical level, in the case of Twitter specifically, direct messages have also come in handy when an issue becomes too complex for 140 characters.

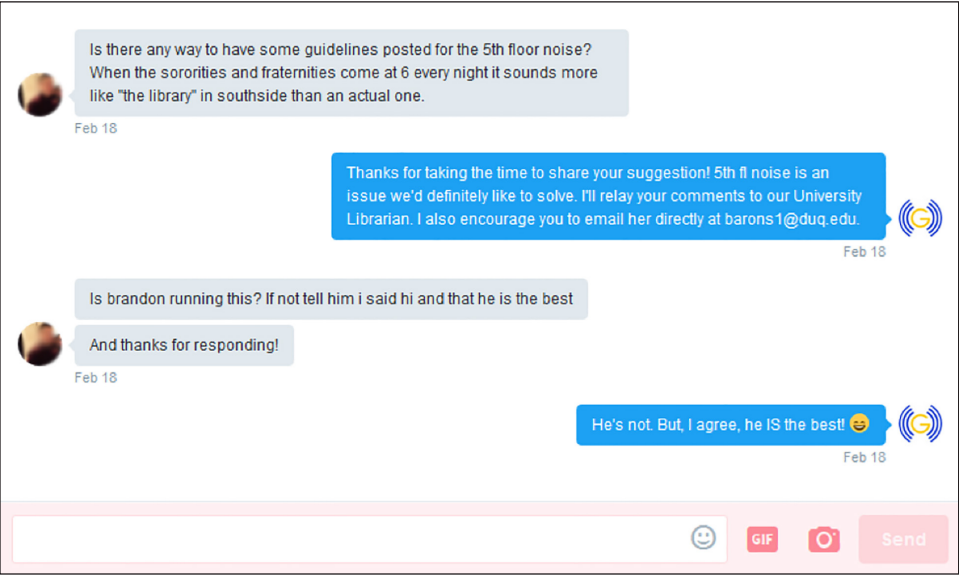


Figure 6.4. A DM with a patron.

Cautions

Choose your words carefully. If you decide to reply or direct message a patron, be friendly. As Twitter reports,

Our study found that when consumers have friendly customer service interaction—as defined by showing empathy and offering to help—they are more likely to recommend the brand. Of those who had a friendly interaction, 76% were likely to recommend the brand. Of those who had an unfriendly interaction, 82% were unlikely to recommend the brand. (Elrhoul, 2015, para. 4)

Also, don’t forget that this is an informal medium. We aim to write as we would speak, rather than as if we were composing a formal letter. When appropriate, we

recommend being funny and light-hearted as seen in Figure 6.5. If you can get the patron to repost your response, you have won. For this reason, we always try our best to craft posts that will make people chuckle.

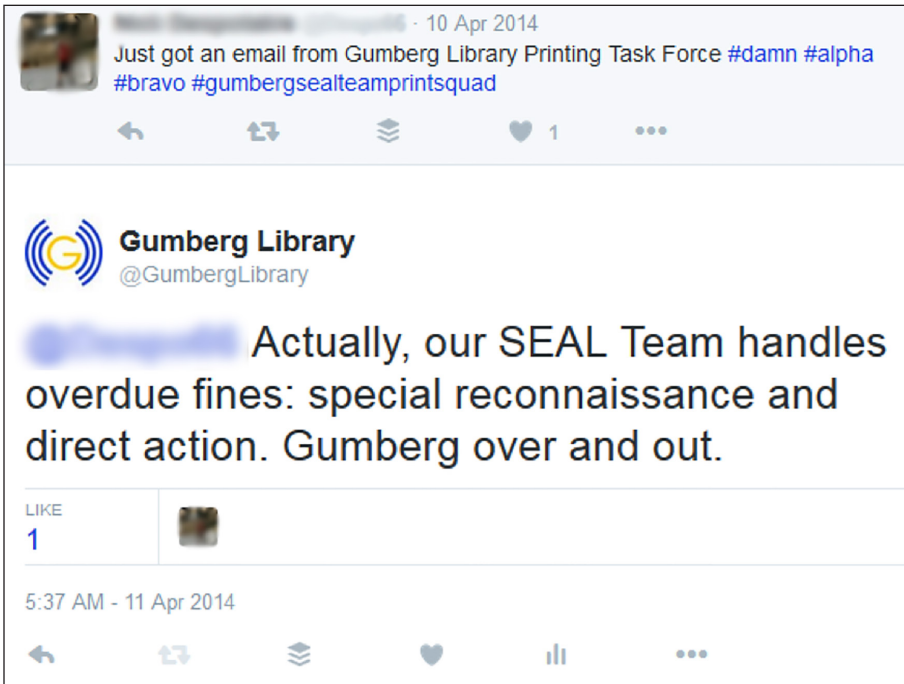


Figure 6.5. Light-hearted Twitter exchanges can help keep the medium informal.

Additionally, keep in mind that any message sent in private may be made public. So be careful crafting responses.

Conclusion

Consistently responding to patrons' direct mentions and posts will encourage further interaction with the library on social media—both by those who have already posted something directed at the library and those who have not. Although we have certainly run into many scenarios that require some heavy-duty public relations maneuvering, we believe consistently responding to posts that tag the library has, at the very least, created goodwill by acknowledging our patrons and demonstrating our regard for them. Overall, we have found that you will not lose a lot by not responding to a post, but you also will not gain anything either. Every interaction is an opportunity to demonstrate how friendly, helpful, fun, and knowledgeable the library is.

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