2013

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Recommended Citation
Bacon, Scott and Foster, Amanda, "Using Facebook to Engage Stakeholders: Developing a Content Strategy to Meet Dynamic Social Media Challenges" (2013). Library Faculty Publications. 2.
https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/lib-fac-pub/2

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Using Facebook to Engage Stakeholders: Developing a Content Strategy to Meet Dynamic Social Media Challenges

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Abstract

Facebook is often used by higher education institutions to increase engagement with the campus population and larger community. Facebook page administrators must successfully navigate Facebook’s News Feed algorithm to have content reach the largest possible audience. This algorithm uses different measures of audience interaction when determining how “engaging” a post is, rewarding the more engaging posts by increasing the likelihood that they will show up in a fan's News Feed. This paper will explore the process taken by Coastal Carolina University’s Kimbel Library to re-develop our content strategy in order to increase engagement on our Facebook page. The authors recommend developing a content strategy that addresses the goals and outcomes of having a Facebook presence, the needs and characteristics of the target population, various themes to be used when creating Facebook posts, and logistics for content creators and scheduling.

Introduction

Coastal Carolina University is a mid-sized academic institution in Conway, South Carolina that currently enrolls over 8,000 undergraduates. Kimbel Library, the university’s central information hub, has as its mission to serve as a vibrant, student-centered gathering place for the academic community, offering portals to information and ideas that enhance learning and research for a successful, engaging and diverse community of learners. To extend that gathering place to our online, social community, Kimbel Library created a Facebook fan page in late 2007. The page generated approximately 300 likes in its first few years, showing a steady rise within that time. By early 2012 Kimbel Library had added several more social media platforms, but consistency in content strategy, scheduling and marketing was less than optimal for these tools.
In order to address these problems, the Web Services and Emerging Technologies Librarian and Information Literacy Librarian created a four member Social Media Working Group. The group was tasked with developing a strategic plan for the library’s social media presence, choosing appropriate social media platforms that support the strategic plan and creating content for use on library social media sites.

To serve library patrons most effectively, the Social Media Working Group first gathered account information for each of the library’s social media platforms and examined whether the platforms were being regularly updated, if two or more platforms were performing the same function, and whether the platforms reflected the library’s direction for social media. The working group used this information to consolidate the library’s social media platforms down to the most needed tools. Facebook was considered one of the library’s essential social networking tools, and the working group chose to test and assess its use as a primary social access point with library patrons. To measure our success, we would use Facebook analytics to gather and analyze data. Once successful practices with Facebook could be identified, these practices could in theory be extended and built upon with other possible social media platforms in the future.

Before developing a strategy for content creation, the working group drafted a social media policy to help library staff in creating and maintaining all social media tools, and to define goals and outcomes for Kimbel Library social media. The policy outlined the library’s initial broad goals regarding social media by stating the need to engage and educate the Coastal Carolina University community. In our social media policy our objectives for engagement were to “provide interactive content that starts a conversation with our target audiences, promote involvement with the library or university, and develop engaging content that promotes the academic mission of the university and library” (Foster & Bacon, 2012).

In order to meet these objectives, the working group developed the following outcomes for our Facebook content:

- Outcome 1: Post to Facebook at least three times per week
- Outcome 2: Increase Reach per post to 25% of our fans
- Outcome 3: Increase People Talking About This by creating engaging, dynamic content

Outcomes and success could be measured through the project by using extant metrics provided in the Facebook administrative interface, called Facebook Insights. Analytics and metrics culled from Facebook developer pages would be analyzed by the Social Media Working Group to work toward a better content strategy based on engaging users. Analytics would be compared before and after content strategy implementation in order to measure the effect of our policy changes and strategies across time.

**Engagement**

To assess whether or not the library’s Facebook page was meeting its outcomes for engagement, it was first important to understand how Facebook measures engagement and reports this information to administrators. Facebook provides developers and administrators with an interface called Facebook Insights that supplies and tabulates metrics about their content. Facebook Insights allows administrators
to measure factors like Reach and Virality in order to develop a better content strategy. These analytics factors will now be described in more detail to illustrate how page administrators can create more engaging content.

Facebook Insights allows page administrators to find out “which content resonates with” the community (How can I use Page Insights to improve my Page?, Facebook Help Center). This resonance is assessed through several factors:

**Reach:** Reach is measured by the number of people who have seen a post. A post is seen when it appears in someone’s News Feed.

**People Talking About This:** People Talking About This is defined by Facebook Insights as “the number of people who have created a story from your Page post” (How is People Talking About This defined for each of my Page posts?, Facebook Help Center). Stories are created when someone likes, comments on or shares a post, among other interactions.

**Virality:** As Figure 1 illustrates, Virality is defined as “the number of people who have created a story from your post as a percentage of the number of people who have seen it” (How is Virality defined for each of my Page posts?, Facebook Help Center). There are no limits to how “viral” a post can become.

\[
\text{Virality} = \frac{\text{People Talking About This}}{\text{Reach}}
\]

*Figure 1: Virality equation*

*Figure 2* shows Facebook posts from a month-long period sorted by Reach from highest to lowest. Reach is highest for the library post about Spring Break. This means that more people saw this item in their News Feed than any other post that month. However, as is noted in the Engaged Users column, that post only has the fifth-highest number of people, which means that only a small percentage of those who saw the post clicked on it. The post has the second-highest number of People Talking About This, or people who liked, commented on or shared it. This inconsistent set of numbers causes the Spring Break post to have only a 4.64% Virality number. This ranks behind the Virality numbers of two other posts which were more engaging: a trivia post which asked users to guess the most popular DVD checked out of the library, and a post showing an image of librarians wearing school colors on Teal Tuesday. The DVD post received more comments, which pushed the Engaged Users component very high. The Teal Tuesday post had a high Engaged Users number and also received a relatively high amount of comments, likes or shares. The latter two posts were therefore rewarded with high Virality numbers (7.52% and 6.07%, respectively).
After monitoring the library’s Facebook Insights numbers for several weeks, it became clear to the page administrators that the overall Reach of our Facebook posts unexpectedly began to drop in the fall of 2012. After numerous reports from Facebook page administrators citing similar issues with Reach, Facebook released a statement acknowledging the matter: “In the fall we made a quality adjustment to the News Feed algorithm to reduce negative feedback on stories from people. This meant that some Pages saw a drop in Reach on their less engaging posts” (News Feed Algorithm, Facebook Newsroom).

At that point, our page administrators realized Facebook changed their News Feed algorithm so that only the most “engaging” content showed up on fans’ News Feeds. Less engaging content was less likely to be seen by the Kimbel Library community.

**Content Strategy**

Taking Facebook’s changes to the News Feed algorithm into consideration, the Social Media Working Group determined that in order to achieve the engagement outcomes for the library’s Facebook page, a content strategy would have to be researched and developed. This new strategy would tailor Facebook posts to a particular audience of users. It would call for posts to be fun, relevant and engaging while also remaining smart, classy and informative. After monitoring our Insights data for several weeks, we would be able to analyze which strategies were most effective.

To tailor the content strategy to the campus community most effectively, the library needed to know who were its current (and potential) Facebook users. These segments of the audience could then have content most relevant to them appear in their News Feeds. After examining demographics through Facebook Insights (Figure 3), it became clear that a major number of our page fans (45%) were aged 18-
2013 ASCUE Proceedings

24 and living the area surrounding Coastal Carolina University. This data suggests that our largest and most important audience is Coastal Carolina University students. Other audiences identified included Coastal Carolina University faculty, staff, and administration, alumni, and prospective students and their families.

Figure 3: Facebook Insights Demographics

After determining our page’s various audiences, page administrators set out to research how to maximize engagement with our Facebook fan page. Several social media administrators have written about how to create engaging content on Facebook. Featuring photos, videos, links, and questions and targeting a freshman audience has been suggested as an effective way to engage users (Gagliardi & Mathews, 2011). In addition to photos with questions and fill in the blanks with photo captions, tips and quotes were explored in an article featured on the technology and social media blog, Mashable (Lee 2012). According to the Facebook Help Center, the News Feed algorithm determines the engagement of a post by calculating several factors, “including the number of comments, who posted the story, and what type of post it is (ex: photo, video, status update, etc.)” (How does my News Feed determine which content is most interesting?, Facebook Help Center). Taking this research into consideration, the Social Media Working Group developed the following successful strategies for Facebook content creation:

**Show, Don’t Tell.** As a Facebook user scrolls down their News Feed, posts with photos, graphics and videos are more likely to catch their eye. When Facebook’s News Feed algorithm calculates engagement, it measures how many users click on a photo or graphic to make it larger or how many users play a video. It is not able to measure how many people read a text status update. For example, rather than tell our users we were busy during exam week, we opted to
show them with a bar chart (Figure 4). That post garnered 21 likes, 9 comments, and 66 people clicked on the photo from their News Feed.

![Library Head Counts](image)

**Figure 4: Show, Don’t Tell**

**Start a conversation.** Start a conversation with your users by asking for community feedback or posting trivia questions. Every Friday that school is in session, Kimbel Library’s Facebook page posts a trivia question about our collection, university history or a current event. Avoiding questions that are easy to look up online helps in getting the most guesses in the form of Facebook comments. Kimbel Library has whiteboards stationed at every entrance to the library and we periodically use it to ask students fun questions relating to the library or a current event (Figure 5). If a question is particularly successful in getting feedback, we post the question to Facebook and ask our online community to weigh in. A post asking students which literary character they would vote for to be president garnered 13 likes, 10 comments and one share.
Make connections to your physical space. Another content strategy is to take photos of new additions to your physical space or showcase an interesting architectural feature of your building or surrounding area. For example, the library recently posted a photo of the exterior of our building featuring new spring blossoms and lots of sunshine. We encouraged students to enjoy the day to the tune of 9 likes and one share.

Take pictures of your community. This has two benefits. First, people are likely to look for photos taken of them on Facebook. They may comment on the photo or tag themselves, which results in more people seeing the post and interacting with a page. Secondly, other fans of the page may look through photos to find friends or acquaintances, which increases engagement with the post. For example, Kimbel Library hosted a De-Stress Fest Photo Booth during finals week. We took photos of over 60 students posing for pictures with a variety of silly props. Photos in the album generated dozens of likes and the library saw an increase in likes in the days after the album was published on Facebook. Kimbel Library ensures that every person consents to having their picture posted on Facebook by having them sign a social media consent form.

Get connected. Make contact with other campus departments and campus units who are using Facebook by liking their pages and arranging in-person meetings with Facebook administrators.
• The community manager set up a meeting with the university-wide Marketing and Outreach coordinator to learn about using Facebook more effectively and to network with other campus units using Facebook.
• Like other departments’ and campus units’ Facebook pages, and like, comment on, and share their posts. They are likely to return the favor, which will expose your page to a new potential audience.

Get to know your community. There are several factors to consider here:

• Use Facebook Insights data to learn the demographics of your Facebook audience and make adjustments accordingly. For example, since our primary audience is college students who typically hold later hours than some other communities, we tend to post in the late morning or afternoon. Make sure to post during the hours your community will be checking their News Feed.
• Tie posts to relevant, real-life experiences in your community. A funny post about Spring Break lets the community know that the library recognizes that midterm exams are over and it is time to relax. Posts of this sort reflect on the library as part of the campus community.
• What works for some communities might not work for others. For example, after seeing other university libraries experience success with fill in the blank posts, we tried a post asking, “What are you working on in the library tonight?” No one responded. Now, the library sticks with trivia questions or posting photos of whiteboard questions and asking for feedback.

Determine a good posting schedule. The audience expects to see a post a few times a week. Posting too little causes a page to be lost in the mix; posting too much may cause fans to react in an adverse manner.

Find good employees to help out. Few Facebook pages are completely maintained, administered and written by one person. A good team can provide broader points of view and break up posts so they stay fresh and relevant. Roles that emerged from our working group included:

• **Social Media Administrator.** This person is responsible for the development, maintenance and administration of social media tools.
• **Social Media Community Manager.** This person is responsible for creating and scheduling of content, content quality and moderating and responding to comments on social media platforms.
• **Social Media Working Group Members.** These members are responsible for creating content and contributing ideas about the direction of social media at Kimbel Library. These group members rotate weekly posting duties with the Social Media Community Manager.

Assessment

In order to assess the success or failure of the Social Media Working Group’s initial outcomes, daily data from the spring 2013 semester was analyzed and charted. Grouping data this way seemed like the obvious choice due to the fact that the page administrators tried to map the library’s content strategy to the university’s academic calendar. Numbers appearing to drop on a specific week could be explained
as a result of Fall Break or Spring Break, for instance. Data was gathered by using the Export Data function in Facebook Insights. Data was exported into Excel spreadsheets and analyzed to measure the success or failure of our earlier stated outcomes.

**Outcome 1: Post to Facebook at least three times per week**
The Kimbel Library Facebook page gained traction among our audience in part due to the development of a regular posting schedule. As page fans expected to see new content on a regular basis, they may have become more receptive to the content. After selecting ideal days of the week and times of the day to post, the working group could then optimize posts with more engaging content in order to increase Reach and People Talking About This numbers.

**Outcome 2: Increase Reach per post to 25% of our fans on average**
Facebook has acknowledged that, on average, a Page only reaches about 16% of Page fans (*Sponsor your Page posts, Facebook Notes*). The Social Media Working Group stated as an outcome that it wanted to increase page Reach to 25% per post. *Figure 6* shows a steady increase in our Facebook page Reach from the beginning weeks of the spring 2013 semester until mid-March, where Reach leveled out a bit. During the spring 2013 semester, Daily Total Reach came in at an average of over 84%, or 68% more than the Facebook average. We saw this as a major success, which can be directly attributed to the revised content strategy changes detailed above.

**Outcome 3: Increase People Talking About This by creating engaging, dynamic content**
The working group had as another stated outcome to increase our People Talking About This numbers, in order to bring our Virality numbers up. This outcome was achieved due to the revised content strategy, which increased both Reach and People Talking About This, the two quantities of the Virality equation. The larger the ratio of People Talking About This is in relation to the number of page fans and other Facebook users, the larger the Virality percentage. *Figure 7* shows a rise in data that basically mirrors the rise in Reach data for the first few months of the spring 2013 semester. Since our Reach data leveled out at a higher plateau than the People Talking About This data, the Virality percentages leveled out slightly lower than in the first few months of the semester, to between 1.5% and 2.5%. However, there was an overall increase in Virality of 1.33% during the spring 2013 semester when compared with Virality data from the fall 2012 semester.
Limitations

Although the Social Media Working Group project was an overall success, some limitations to the project should be noted in order to place the numbers in perspective. The demographics of our audience, while comprised of a diverse body of users from several backgrounds and locations, is still constrained by many factors. We are a library in a mid-sized university in the state of South Carolina, and our audience is a specific community of users unlike any other. Others can certainly glean trends from this project, but those trends should be put into context by recognizing our unique situation.

Another limitation surfaces when digging through data on posts. When we don’t post on a specific day, the data looks very low. Since we only post three times a week, analyzing daily data can be an issue. And since our primary audience is collegiate, we post more often when classes are in session. Data for times when classes are out of session are much lower. The authors decided to only use data from the beginning to the end of the semester in order to avoid many of these skewed numbers.

The authors of this study used Facebook Insights as the sole data source for analysis because it offers highly-detailed data about many factors that contribute to user engagement. But page administrators wishing to obtain further analytics information about their Facebook page will find no shortage of third-party tools available. A detailed analysis of third-party analytics tools is beyond the scope of this paper, yet these are readily available on the Web.

Looking to the Future

Another of the initial goals of the Working Group was to increase Kimbel Library Facebook page likes three-fold from the totals in late 2012 (approximately 300 likes) by the summer of 2014. Increasing likes to 1000 or more is no small task, however, as many communities have an upper ceiling which a page cannot reasonably be expected to reach above organically. The relatively slow rise of likes on the
page in its first several years of existence may necessitate finding new ways to engage and interact with potential fans. The authors chose not to focus on likes in this publication, though those numbers rose approximately 8% throughout each of the past two semesters. The revised content strategy will likely continue to contribute to increased likes, but there are other options should this slow and steady rise not yield as many likes as expected. Page administrators can increase the possibility of getting more likes by buying ads targeted to specific users and by paying to promote sponsored stories. The authors recommend that page administrators take care to have a balanced approach to seeking likes organically, however, as it is often better to build slowly than appear too intrusive or even aggressive in trying to grow your community.

One of the first tasks of the Social Media Working Group was to choose the most appropriate social media platforms for the library and focus on using those to the best of our ability. As our content strategy has been successful thus far, we are ready to apply it to our other social media platforms, such as Twitter, Flickr, Blogger and YouTube. The library decided to disable its Twitter account in late 2012 in order to focus on making Kimbel Library Facebook successful. As the library now moves toward an even more coherent content strategy, Twitter will soon be re-launched with a more streamlined mission. Other future considerations that the Working Group will address include targeting mobile social media users, experimenting with Facebook ads, working closely with other similar library committees and working groups such as the marketing and outreach groups.

The authors would like to note that there are several challenges to maintaining a successful Facebook fan page. Facebook’s News Feed algorithm has not been released to the public, so those trying to optimize their content to reach the most users are left wanting more information. The algorithm is dynamic, and can change at a moment’s notice. The Facebook Statement of Rights and Responsibilities is similar in its fluid nature. In order to keep up with these myriad changes, page administrators would do well to keep a close eye on Facebook news. Browse social media and technology publications, be proactive by creating search engine alerts for specific terms and periodically review Facebook rules and regulations. It also behooves administrators to revise their policy and content strategy as needed. These documents should not be inflexible, but rather should reflect the ever-changing nature of the social media landscape.
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