

MAKING YOUR WALLFLOWERS

How to implement the best social media strategy for your library

By Ryan Harrington

Considering the number of law libraries currently engaged in social media, many of us would agree that there is a benefit to be gained from our online presence. Yet when we polled the librarians here at the Yale Law School for priorities on resource allocation, we discovered that our efforts in social media received the lowest priority.

This led to an interesting dilemma: Are we librarians spending too much time on social media without getting enough benefits? Or do we not receive enough benefits because we don't spend enough time? There was no way to resolve this dilemma until we decided what we hoped to accomplish through our online presence and until we implemented a system that would enable us to measure the benefits adequately.

Engagement Profiles

Last year the Altimeter Group released a fascinating report ranking the top 100 global brands. The group found a profound correlation between profitability and deep engagement in social media. What caught my interest, however, was the way the authors looked not merely at engagement but

also at depth of participation. They looked at the number of channels that the brands used as well as the level of engagement in each channel, and created four "engagement profiles": mavens, butterflies, selectives, and wallflowers.

Mavens are brands engaged in seven or more channels and have an above-average engagement score. Brands like Starbucks and Dell are able to sustain a high level of engagement across multiple social media channels. Mavens not only have a robust strategy and dedicated teams focused on social media but also make it a core part of their go-to-market strategy. Companies like these could not imagine operating without a strong presence in social media.

Butterflies are brands engaged in seven or more channels but have lower-than-average engagement scores. Butterflies, like American Express and

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Blossom

Hyundai, have initiatives in many different channels but tend to spread themselves too thin, investing in a few channels while letting others languish. Their ambition is to be mavens and they may get there—but they still struggle with getting buy-in from their organizations to embrace the full multi-way conversations that deep engagement entails.

Selectives are engaged in six or fewer channels and have higher-than-average engagement scores. Selectives like H&M and Philips have a very strong presence in just a few channels where they focus on engaging customers deeply when and where it matters most. The social media initiatives at these brands tend to be lightly staffed—if they are at all—meaning that, by default, they have to focus their efforts. These are beachheads, started by an impassioned evangelist with a shoestring budget.

Wallflowers are engaged in six or fewer channels and have below-average engagement scores. Wallflowers like McDonalds and BP are slow to start—or just getting started—dipping their toes into social media waters. They are still trying to figure out social media by testing just a few channels. They are also cautious about the risks, uncertain about the benefits, and therefore engage only lightly in the channels where they are present.

In attempting to classify our law library outreach into one of these profiles, I could not help escape the conclusion that Altimeter would label us as either butterflies or wallflowers. You can find us on Facebook, Twitter, and Flickr. We have a reference blog, a rare book blog, a news and events blog, and a foreign and international blog. From reading the report, I could see this was

not a desirable classification. If the results of the report were applicable to libraries, maybe we would receive more benefits by shifting our outreach efforts into the selectives category and investing *more* time in *fewer* channels.

Benefits and Cost

Measuring the “benefits” of social media is not a straightforward task. Generally you can measure a return on investment (ROI) by subtracting the cost of the investment from the net profit and dividing that value by the cost of the investment. This brings us to a serious question: Is it possible for libraries to measure “net profit”?

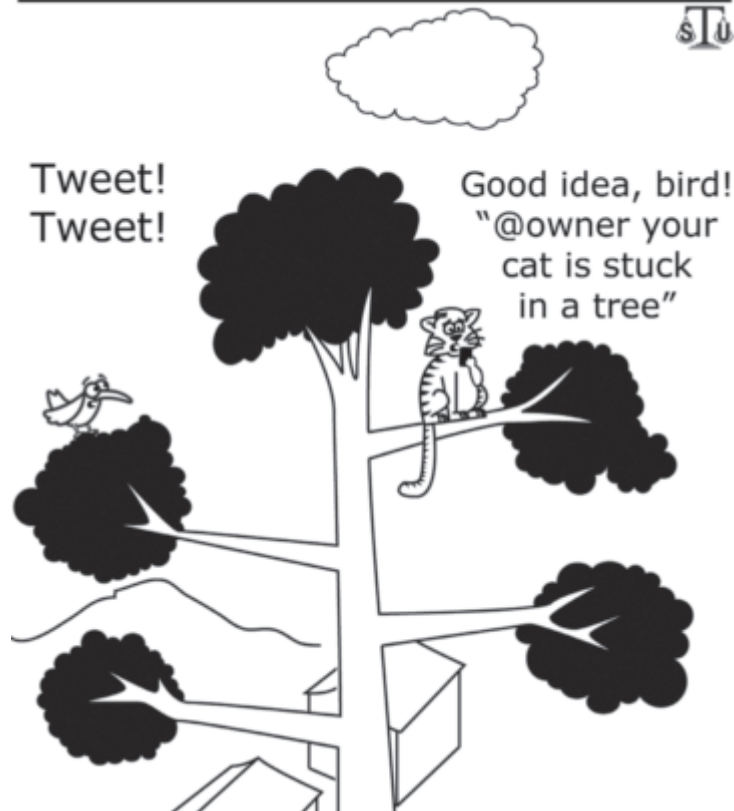
To answer that, we first need something to measure. If Dell publishes a special offer online, it can easily track how many people took advantage of that offer by tracking the links or counting how many people entered a particular code. Because a corporation can measure outcome, it is possible to measure ROI.

Libraries are able to track statistics as well. If I discuss a periodicals database in a blog post and link to that database, I can see how many users entered that database via my link. If I publicize a nutshell guide, I can measure circulation statistics. I can easily measure downloads from our repository. Database usage, circulation statistics, and downloads, to name just a few examples, all constitute “sales” for us as librarians, and they are all measurable outcomes. Libraries therefore are capable of measuring profit.

In addition, libraries may be able to measure more than sales. One way that we differ from a corporation is that we are not in the business of making

money. Dell may be disappointed when its Twitter followers visit the Dell page via a link to a special offer but subsequently fail to make a purchase. A library’s mission, on the other hand, is different—we provide access to information. If I do nothing more than write on our Facebook wall, “Our ‘Superheroes in Court: Lawyers, Law, and Comic Books’ exhibit will be up until Dec 16 and is open to the public,” and provide a link to our rare books blog, the mere fact that people are viewing the information we generate constitutes a success. We can even count the number of times a message from our Twitter account has been retweeted, referenced, discussed. We don’t need sales because traffic in and of itself is a success. It means we are getting our message out—we are educating (or entertaining) our users, and thereby providing value. There are a number of metrics librarians can use to track social media ROI if we rethink the meaning of “profit.”





The second part of the ROI equation regards costs. In purely financial terms, our costs are quite low. We spend no money on a number of social media channels while our presence in a few channels, such as Flickr, requires a modest fee. Naturally we have costs associated with our own website and blogs, but, by and large, social media costs are negligible. When librarians talk about cost, we are primarily talking about time. As was evident from the internal polling at Yale regarding resource allocation, we regarded these hours quite seriously, presumably because they indicate time deflected from other tasks. However, one piece of information was lacking at the time of the survey, namely how much time we were spending on social media tasks. We needed to create a system that both tracked our time and made our time more efficient.

The Policy

Our next step was to plot our social media policy. We appointed a task force to determine what we hoped to accomplish, which engagement profile we would pursue, and which channels were most appropriate to reach our goals. We agreed that our core mission was to publicize our law library's holdings and offerings. Our strategy would be to use social media to direct traffic to our website and library where people could best explore those offerings. We also

decided to focus our efforts on our blogs, Facebook, and Twitter.

The task force took a critical look at our four erratically updated blogs and addressed the most fundamental question: whether we should keep them. It is a question that many institutions should ask themselves as the social media landscape has shifted away from its previous focus on this format. Blogs provide the opportunity to be thorough or brief and can be maintained, tagged, updated, and searched. They can also be aimless, unnecessary, and redundant. Our rare book blog, however, has a unique focus and audience and produces content that tends not to be duplicated at other institutions. With that in mind, we determined that the rare book blog should certainly continue and drew inspiration from it in considering what strategy to apply to the other blogs.

We decided to use the rare book blog as a model for our foreign and international blog and created a publication schedule that requires different members of the foreign and international department to update the blog regularly. We consolidated our reference blog and news and events blog into one, and we required departments to update the news and events blog on a regular, rotating basis.

Under this system, each of the blogs will produce about two new entries per week. With so many different authors, we knew we would not have a consistent

voice, so it was important for us to have a consistent theme. As discussed earlier, our core mission is to publicize our library's holdings and offerings. Each of the different departments in the library can produce content in line with that vision.

We also determined that we would use other social media channels to supplement our blog focus. This meant that the mission of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter would be to steer traffic back to our own website. However, it was important that Facebook and Twitter updates have some personality because we wanted to continue to attract followers and fans.

At the time we began the social media task force, our Facebook page was almost entirely automated, consisting of short links to "resources of the day" that directed users back to our website. Because the updates were automated, they resulted in a hollow page that received very little interaction from fans. Since changing that approach, we have seen a number of positive results, including increased link usage, retweets/replies, and likes.

We considered who our audience would be on various channels, as well as what voice we want on the separate channels and what our purpose would be. For example, was our role on Twitter to merely provide links to our blogs with some commentary, or did we want to provide entertaining content? By creating a strategy for those two channels, we now understand the utility of updating them.

Unlike our presence on Facebook and Twitter, our engagement in other social media channels, such as Vimeo and Flickr, has become entirely secondary to our blogs. We will continue to use those sites to host videos and pictures, but our goal is for people to discover those sites via links from our own web pages. While Flickr offers a unique service that organizes pictures in terms of "interestingness," we are unlikely to consult the statistics there for anything other than illuminating purposes. This reduces the amount of time we will need to spend on a variety of channels collecting information and engaging with our users.

Measurement

By focusing our efforts on blog posts, we retain substantial control over the content and can easily monitor the discussion. We can follow the number of subscribers to our blogs and view the number of visitors to the blog pages. We also retained a system whereby our blog posts automatically generate announcements on our Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Using the tracking tool HootSuite, we can also track and understand our current user statistics, which gives us a future point of comparison. HootSuite allows us to provide unique links from those two channels, so even if the language of the updates on Facebook and Twitter is identical, we can clearly delineate the source of every click. Those announcements allow us to monitor the number of visitors who enter our blog pages from either Facebook or Twitter.

A genuine ROI analysis would set specific goals for the amount of traffic increase we wish to see. We realized we were unable to set this goal when the task

force first met because we had not been monitoring the traffic previously. Now that we are tracking these statistics, we have been able to establish a “base point” of traffic observed before our outreach efforts began. We can accumulate the statistics over the course of several months and learn where we are engaging most with our users, which will allow us to target different audiences with different sorts of announcements. We will also re-evaluate when we are able to analyze our progress. It is entirely possible that some of the outreach will not be successful or that it will be successful in ways other than what we expected. We

need time to let the policy take root before we can fully evaluate our progress.

Like many aspects in our profession, measuring the “value” can be challenging for librarians. Despite the complexity of measuring social media metrics in the library world, it can and should be done. After all, the next time we discuss priorities on resource allocation, I want to have access to the information necessary to help me make the best decision possible. ■

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