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A Pinch of This and Salt to Taste: An Iterative Approach to Social Media

Shannon Bowen-Maier and Rachael Dreyer

Abstract

The American Heritage Center (AHC) formed a Web 2.0 Task Force beginning in April 2009 to develop a social networking strategy and implementation plan. Two years later, the AHC has a blog, a Facebook page, and a Twitter account. After a year and a half of engagement with these utilities, we have accumulated a small online following, gathered data about the kinds of content preferred by our users, and identified areas for future experimentation and growth. This case study will describe our strategic planning process, discuss the transition from concept development to implementation, and highlight how assessment has informed the AHC's plans for growing its Web 2.0 presence.

Archives and libraries have increasingly adopted social networking tools as a part of their outreach strategy, and the American Heritage Center (AHC) at the University of Wyoming (UW) has been one of many repositories experimenting with this recent form of communication. In April of 2009, the AHC convened a task force to explore the ways in which social media channels could be used to enhance the repository's mission. The task force began by investigating models of strategic engagement with social media and then proceeded to look at individual utilities, along with other repositories' approaches to their use. It evaluated YouTube, RSS feeds, Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, blogs, and wikis on the basis of popularity, usability, resource requirements, and potential return on investment. Task force members queried other repositories with established social media presences about how and why they chose to invest in the utilities they did. Based upon the results of these analyses, the task force recommended the creation of AHC Facebook and Twitter pages, as well as a blog. It also recommended that members of the arrangement and description unit begin to edit Wikipedia entries related to the collections that they processed. However, for the purpose of this article, we'll focus primarily on the AHC's use of Facebook, Twitter, and a blog hosted by WordPress.

The implementation of the three main prongs of our social media strategy began as a trial. The blog (<http://americanheritagecenter.wordpress.com/>) was intended to publicize AHC operations, collections, and events. The Twitter account (<http://twitter.com/#!/AHCnews>) referred people to the blog and any other new online content related to the AHC, such as new digital collections, online exhibits, online finding aids and subject guides. The AHC Facebook account (<https://www.facebook.com/UWAHC>) publicized events, newly donated collections, new finding aids and exhibits. It also provided a platform for communicating basic information about the AHC, such as hours of operation, contact information, and links to the main website. The goals for the trial echoed many of the themes described in the Smithsonian Institution's 2009 Web and New Media Strategy, namely that the utilities enhance the AHC's mission-central communications, that they maximize "one-to-many" transmission of knowledge, that they attract larger audiences than the AHC could reach in person, that the tools contextualize and market AHC resources for users, and that the implementation model would allow for further innovation and change.

The overlapping content posted to the blog, Facebook page, and Twitter feed allow us to identify the most effective platform for communicating different kinds of information. The simple analytics built into each utility give us feedback about the impact of individual posts. Further, the interlocking nature of this communications strategy multiplies the impact that any announcement might have on our users. We repurpose content from both newly completed and legacy finding aids as blog posts, raising awareness of collections related to popular research topics. We also repost articles written for AHC publications and press releases sent to media outlets. Using repurposed content makes regular posting sustainable. This technique insures that our users are provided with a steady stream of information, while building in time for us to create, edit, enhance and upload new pieces.

A separate challenge that the AHC encounters with its social networking strategy is the difficulty of crafting a communication brand—a range of specific messages that promotes and highlights the AHC's collections, services, and mission that also invites meaningful participation from our audiences. For example, many of our blog and Facebook updates announce newly processed collections, new finding aids, or new donations to the collections. Other updates might publicize a public lecture or exhibit. The style of these posts is "broadcast" in nature; they do not intrinsically invite engagement or discussion from our online audiences. While an important part of our social networking strategy is disseminating useful information and "staying on-message," one of the obstacles in moving forward with our social media operations will be crafting meaningful content that promotes feedback from and engagement with our users.

Feedback and assessment are areas that the AHC encounters complications that shape our social networking approach, currently and in the future, as we gather more information about how our users are reaching us. Due to the dispersed and shared management of many of the web tools used to manage AHC collections and service delivery, tracking the online traffic patterns on some sites is simply not possible. The challenges involved with determining whether our social networking strategies impact information-seeking behaviors of our end users are myriad. Nonetheless, the assessment that we are able to conduct reveals that we are attracting users to our digital collections through our Facebook presence. Facebook sent 1,054 users to our digital collections portal from November 2010-November 2011; 267 users accessed the digital portal through the AHC blog. Over 1,300 users found their way to our digital collections from our blog and Facebook updates; these are, presumably, users that we may not have had an opportunity to reach through other means. But compare this with the 11,340 users who found our digital collections through Google. This sheds some light on how both researchers and casual users first approach their research queries and we can then use this behavior to inform our strategy. For example, in several instances, including a post that announced the digitization of the Charles Belden photographs, our AHC blog posts received more traffic than the official access points (University of Wyoming Libraries catalog and the Rocky Mountain Online Archives (RMOA)) because these links were higher-ranked Google search results.

Participation in social networking channels has given the AHC the opportunity to explore new modes of communication with current and potential users of our collections and services. In the initial year and a half in which the AHC has maintained an active online presence, we've seen the potential that social media hold for both information broadcast and engagement. We at the AHC look forward to exploring the possibilities for future engagement with our fans, followers, and researchers. However, our iterative approach requires assessment throughout the process, as well as a scalable, sustainable model so that our strategy can grow and evolve as the social media landscape shifts and morphs into new modes of interaction. The iterative approach we've chosen means that we are always working to perfect our

recipe for a successful social networking strategy that blends the complementary ingredients of engagement, branding, and assessment

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