

Outreach and Engagement through Instagram: Experiences with the Herman B Wells Library Account

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Abstract

Instagram, a social media tool designed for photo sharing, is increasingly being used as an outreach and engagement tool by academic libraries. Current successful strategies used by academic libraries are discussed, including lessons learned from running the Herman B Wells Library's account and future plans for the account. The author considers the place of Instagram in the Wells Library's social media presence, its value, and how it complements other platforms. Finally, worries about tension between students and libraries, an authority figure, and whether students want libraries in their social media spaces are addressed.

Keywords: social media, Instagram, library outreach, library engagement, academic libraries

In November 2013, Indiana University's Herman B Wells Library joined Instagram, a popular social media platform among young adults used primarily for sharing visual content. During library orientation sessions with new first year students that fall, one of the instruction librarians conducted some informal polling of these new students and found that Instagram was the most popular social media site among them. Wells Library decided to spend this past year doing a soft launch of the Instagram account, so they could build up some content and followers and experiment with running the account.

When developing the library's Instagram account (<http://instagram.com/hermanbwells>), staff were inspired by several academic libraries using Instagram very effectively as an outreach and engagement tool. North Carolina State University's Hunt Library was one of the first to use Instagram well, using a program to harvest all photos tagged #huntlibrary, upload them to a site to create a visual archive of how their users are engaging with the library, and allow users to vote on pairs of photos (Enis, 2013). In this way, users curated Instagram photos of the library. Hunt Library also used broadcasting of tagged photos on visualization walls in the new building to create student interest and increase participation (Enis, 2013). Powell Library at UCLA also runs an effective Instagram account. They connect with users through liking photos whose tags relate to the library, reposting photos from students, and tailoring content to topics they know students care about (architectural/place-based photos, unusual items, historic photos, events, and content related to the UCLA curriculum)

(Salomon, 2013). Using a similar method to Powell Library, Bond University Library in Australia has been using Instagram as "a way of connecting physical and digital spaces, enhancing online presence and identity, interacting with customers and for marketing and promotional purposes" (Abbott et al., 2013, p. 1).

The Powell Library (http://instagram.com/ucla_powell_library), NCSU's library account (<http://instagram.com/ncsulibraries>), and Bond Library (<http://instagram.com/bondlibrary>) accounts make use of a wide variety of photos in their Instagram accounts. All of the accounts have plenty of architecture and landscape photos, which can capture the beauty of the library building and are one of the most popular types of photos with users. Bond Library has more staff portraits in their feed, connecting users with staff members and hopefully making them more approachable to users. NCSU and Powell Library's accounts make more use of photos taken by library users, reposting high quality photos to share with their followers and providing a glimpse into how users are interacting with the libraries. All the libraries use Instagram as a promotional tool as well, from advertising events happening at the library to drawing attention to funding or job opportunities to showcasing library items. Not just images of beauty are posted either, but also more playful, silly images, sometimes with a clever caption, which keeps the account as a more informal space.

Howard Tilton Memorial Library at Tulane University saw a slow start to their Instagram account (http://instagram.com/howard_tilton). Many of their initial images were photos of screens or fliers, which got little response from users. However, as they started posting more dynamic, visually appealing photos, engagement with the account has greatly increased. They also successfully used their Instagram to provide a novel outreach program to their users. Users could express their interest in a personalized scavenger hunt on the Instagram account, and directions would be sent to that user through Instagram's direct message feature (howard_tilton, 2014). At the end of the scavenger hunt, a small prize of a Howard Tilton pin was waiting. Users documented their success through a specific tag, and photos were reposted to the official library account. This scavenger hunt provided a way to link social media with teaching students about the physical space of the library.

Examining these successful accounts provided guidance in starting the Wells Library account as well as inspiration for where to take the account when the formal launch occurred in the fall with the new class of incoming students. Staff were able to see what kind of content received the most engagement from students. The quality of the photos being posted matters, but the content of the photo matters as well. The most visually appealing photos usually get the most likes, however, a photo with a funny or engaging subject can be equally popular. While having an official library hashtag (#wellslibrary) has been useful, many students simply use Instagram's automatic addition of a geotag, so it has been important to monitor both of those sources of user-generated content.

These accounts have also inspired us with their engagement strategies, such as curating photos on a certain theme with a chosen hashtag. The account has primarily been driven by reposting photos taken by a variety of users. This has provided us with more diverse content than if simply a designated staff member or two were taking all the photos, since everyone sees and uses the library and documents that in different ways. As Brian Mathews, a librarian at Virginia Tech, put it, the goal of the social media account is important in making it successful:

It's not about promoting the library, this is about building brand loyalty. It's not about posting library news for students, but about building an ambassadors program, a network of friends and allies. The goal is a [sic] transition patrons from being library users to library advocates (2011).

This is reflected in the images students tend to find most engaging on Instagram. Announcements, which are primarily one-directional, receive little engagement and do not provide opportunities for interaction. But photos engaging users through beauty or humor elicit much more reaction. Reposting also allows for more of this loyalty building. While social media spaces are certainly useful for making announcements, using them to create new library lovers and advocates is equally important.

Currently Wells Library is present on several social media platforms, the most active of which are Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The goal of all of these accounts is to do outreach at a student level, however the kind of outreach varies between the accounts. Facebook and Twitter are focused on raising awareness of events and services which the library offers, along with some tips and tricks for research, as well as some fun library-related information. While the Instagram account is occasionally used to raise awareness of library services and events, the primary goal of the account is more to engage with library users in how they are seeing and using the space. The content of both the Twitter and Facebook account is primarily generated by librarians and staff, making Instagram a different space where the content is primarily generated by students and reposted by the official Wells Library account.

The library hopes to have more formal engagement activities through our Instagram, such as a photo contest and special hashtags for bringing together users photos of certain content ("what's your study buddy?", #shelfie inspired by the New York Public Library's account). Wells Library is being renovated, so staff will have a chance to display user photos on a public screen, increasing awareness of the account and providing motivation for more users to engage with it, by providing an even wider audience for users' photos/art. It is helpful as well to avoid having each library social media account operating in isolation from each other. Regular meetings between the people responsible for the various social media presences can help to provide fresh ideas and to develop a coordinated strategy across the social media platforms, even if it is only cross-posting or referencing the various accounts.

There can exist some degree of tension between students and a library, which can be viewed as a policing/authority figure by student users. This raises the question of how to respond to sensitive photos posted by users on Instagram, doing such things as breaking library rules. Bond University's librarian suggested this as more of an opportunity to see how your users are really using the library and posting a humorous response instead of chastising the poster (Abbott et al., 2013). Doing so helps keep Instagram a more informal, casual place where users feel comfortable sharing. Also, simply because a sensitive photo has been posted, it does not mean the photo needs to be reposted to the official library account or the library account needs to directly address the user.

One thing many academic libraries must address is the question "Do students even want us in their social media space?" Some people may feel that students do not want such an authority figure as the library examining their photos. However, previous research suggests that engaging with students in these spaces can actually increase credibility. Mazer et al. (2009) researched teacher self-disclosure on Facebook with undergraduates and found evidence suggesting that disclosure of certain information, such as personal pictures and messages, may help students perceive similarity between themselves and their instructor and cause an increase in the instructor's credibility.

Instagram offers academic libraries new opportunities to connect with users and to build user loyalty. The primarily visual format allows for a different form of engagement than services like Twitter or Facebook. So far the experience of using Instagram at Wells Library has been very positive. Even before the formal launch and advertisement of our account, staff has seen a high level of engagement with our image posts. We have also been able to see how our users view and use our library. Previously established successful accounts have informed our strategy with Instagram, along with careful consideration of what we wanted to achieve with this social media.

While each university and its population are different,

Instagram offers a novel way to engage with users of academic libraries and receive feedback, direct or indirect, on how they are using the library spaces.

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