

**How Public Library Management Can Engage in Effective Social Media Planning, Marketing,
and Staffing Efforts to Empower Communities Through Connection**

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Ever-changing to suit local community needs, the library and its staff encourages real conversations with each other, library patrons, and the greater community because the library genuinely functions as an equalizing space. Human nature wants us to be together with our neighbors, living and learning, and the library as a commons helps facilitate connectedness. This looks a little different right now with the world six-feet apart due to the COVID-19 pandemic, but desire for continued human interaction has not ceased. Because of the pandemic, libraries have increasingly turned to social media not only out of necessity, but also to carry on with their knowledge-sharing mandate and community-building hopes.

To effectively engage in social networking, public library administrators must understand how it works and why it is a vital need in libraries today. Up until the last few years, a lack of literature has characterized social media in public library environments and researchers have cited a need for further qualitative research to supplement quantitative findings discerning public libraries' social media use (Gaha & Hall, 2015; Joo et al., 2019; Joo et al., 2020; Phillips, 2015). This paper serves as an exploratory study investigating how public library administrators can engage in effective social media planning, marketing, and staffing efforts to empower communities through connection. Informal survey responses by seven Pinellas Public Library Cooperative (PPLC) member libraries demonstrate how these overarching management principles apply to social media in public libraries today.

Literature Review

Social Media in Libraries, Generally

Social media is defined as any kind of internet-based platform where users can interact, share, and create with others, asynchronously or in real-time (Joo et al., 2018; Pashootanizadeh & Rafie, 2020; Wright Joe, 2015). Examples of social media include, but are not limited to, Facebook, Instagram, Tumblr, TikTok, YouTube, SnapChat, Pinterest, and Twitter. As a cost-effective marketing tool, social media gives libraries tools to communicate with patrons, build community, and advocate for libraries through its interactive nature (Gaha & Hall, 2015; Joo et al., 2019). This interaction is key because people want information instantly today, and will turn to other sources if libraries do not provide it. Social media provides libraries instruments to respond quickly to inquiries, which in turn “enhance[es their] reputation as a responsive and collaborative institution” (Pashootanizadeh & Rafie, 2020, p. 215). Promotion and marketing of library resources and services is a major objective of social media; it brings awareness to patrons and encourages use (Muhambe & Davis, 2019; Wright Joe, 2015; Young & Rossmann, 2015).

Furthermore, out of this promotional marketing emerges interactive community building, which may be the greatest benefit of social media to both libraries and the communities they serve (Joo et al., 2020; Muhambe & Davis, 2019; Young & Rossmann, 2015). When patrons feel connected to their online community through increased knowledge of both library systems and services and the people facilitating and utilizing them, social media can foster trust and sharing reciprocity (concepts that normally occur in a traditional library space) (Young & Rossmann, 2015). The online space becomes valuable to patrons and links to their lives (Young & Rossmann, 2015). Because social media is a separate entity from the library, it offers library managers the opportunity to expand outreach beyond the typical library audience

to underrepresented or unrepresented groups (Joo et al., 2020). This fantastic bonus broadens the net of who the library serves, and through communication libraries can figure out what these populations seek from a library. Finally, social media gives librarians another creative approach to advocate on behalf of libraries to the public and governmental entities (Phillips, 2015). The public library field continues to depend on local, state, and federal governments and beneficial donors for its existence so any methods to prove its worth should be utilized, like social networking.

In the early days of social media, Aharony (2012, as quoted in Mathiasson & Jochumsen, 2019, p. 860) found that libraries used Facebook “simply as a way to deliver information to users, rather than as a venue for discussion” (p. 366). Luckily, now library-patron interactions on Facebook and other social media occur in integrated ways; evidence-based strategies are utilized and expanded for effective use of social networking in public libraries. Stemming from an examination of changes to an academic library’s updated approach to social media that it must “be interesting, be interested” (Young & Rossmann, 2015, p. 28), key social media components include audience focus, goals, values, activity focus, tone and tenor, posting frequency, posting categories, and posting personnel. This can be extended to apply to public libraries to aid in understanding what comprises good content.

Four main types of interactions exist on libraries’ social media: “knowledge sharing, information dissemination, communication and knowledge gathering” (Joo et al., 2018, p. 941). In order for these interactions to be successful, they must target the audience they wish to reach on the proper platform (Joo et al., 2019). Further, the posts’ content must expand in assorted ways to include the range of interactions listed above. As per Joo et al.’s (2018) study,

content types of Facebook posts include upcoming events; completed past events; emotionally inspirational posts; general announcements; library clubs; books, authors, and collections; storytimes; community news; profile and cover photograph updates; and other miscellaneous posts.

Storytime events, informational news, and new materials or services tend to be lower engagement because there is no need for patrons to clarify this information; however, they must continue to be part of the library's social media presence because patrons look to social media as a reference point for locating this kind of information (Joo et al., 2018). High engagement posts tend to feature at least one image (it makes the post appear more user-friendly), and relate to acknowledgment situations (awards, thank you notes, or fundraising), funny images or jokes, inspirational thoughts, or community events (Joo et al., 2018; Joo et al., 2020). The underlying rationale for why patrons enjoy participating in these types of posts stems from people liking to join something bigger than themselves, uplift positive messages, and be in on jokes; patrons want to be included and embraced by others and these methods make this happen (Joo et al., 2018).

About half of all Facebook posts focus on upcoming and past library activities, events, and programs (Joo et al., 2018; Joo et al., 2019; Joo et al., 2020). These public library program or greater community announcements are a primary emphasis for postings because they engender social interactions between librarians and patrons first online, then during the programs themselves (Mathiasson & Jochumsen, 2019). Patrons expect to see these posts on social media, too (Joo et al., 2020).

Planning

Understanding what makes for good social media content is a small part of the work library managers must undertake in order to discern how and why its usefulness is integral to library success today. Specifically, management must engage in effective planning efforts, learn how to market its particular library strengths, and support librarians and other staff in their social media tasks. Successful social media adoption arises out of the library's "previous practice, perceived needs, innovativeness and social norms" (Joo et al., 2020, p. 259). If the library does not have a solid basis for its existence in terms of overall mission, vision, and values, then its social media application will likewise be inconsistent. Thus, generating grounded policies and guidelines with measurable outcomes that can be assessed, all while keeping targeted audiences in mind, is integral (Gaha & Hall, 2015).

Research agrees that strategic planning and developing standards and policies governing social networking's use and legal issues is most important in administering a successful social media strategy (Muhambe & Davis, 2019; Wright Joe, 2015). By using a formal policy, a library system systematically understands its outreach intentions, which in turn kindles confidence and solid foundational knowledge in staff (Phillips, 2015). To identify social media planning goals, library management must (1) determine which platform will be used based on the library and parent institution's stated goals, (2) shape the marketing plan itself using those goals by matching them to social media technology, and (3) include input from supervisors, marketing personnel, librarians, and library staff (Wright Joe, 2015). Strategic planning takes time, effort, and money, but is worthwhile when social media aligns with library goals (Muhambe & Davis, 2019).

Specifically, library management should consider social “media types, content, monitoring, and updating and assessment” as part of their planning process (Joo et al., 2018, p. 942). Suggested best practices for content include having a set strategy with tasks to complete; using a friendly, upbeat, and informal tone and writing style; updating once a day or more; focusing on interactive messaging not simply announcements; and creating a variety of fun, timely, and informative content in targeted categories towards different audiences (Joo et al., 2018; Pashootanizadeh & Rafie, 2020). Basically, “an intentional, personality-rich, and interaction-driven approach to [] social media activity” works well (Young & Rossmann, 2015, p. 20). Good policies require managers to consider formally incorporating library legal protections and explanations for acceptable use of social media (Gaha & Hall, 2015). These stem from information posted by library staff (including copyright issues), public responses in the comments, and privacy rights. Without these protections in writing, libraries open themselves up to legal suits or poor image problems.

Library management must engage in ongoing monitoring, updating, and assessment of the library’s social media to determine the effectiveness of posts. These steps can identify gaps in librarian training and ensure future professional development in needed areas (Wright Joe, 2015). Further, use of analytics informs the library how the public is engaging (or not) with posts. By having a plan that links set goals with assessment strategies, library administrators can ensure a sustainable approach to social media (Wright Joe, 2015).

Marketing

Library managers have a growing understanding that marketing, especially social media marketing, empowers libraries to share information with patrons and non-patrons about its

services and materials on an increasing scale while developing trustworthy relationships between the library and its community (Pashootanizadeh & Rafie, 2020). Social media marketing plans and tools used in implementation should clearly define information, assistance, and support for patrons by utilizing similar steps in the general social media planning process (Joo et al., 2019). For example, library management should set marketing goals for the library stemming from the strategic plan, decide on a social media team, create use guidelines, explore and select assessment options, create an assessment timeline, and assess, review, and update the plan (Wright Joe, 2015). Social media marketing strategies help the library demonstrate its importance to not only funding authorities and donors, but also give it relevance and acknowledgment to underrepresented and unrepresented communities (Joo et al., 2019).

Social media functions found in library marketing consist of raising awareness through the dissemination of information, improving communication, and engaging and connecting with the community through interactions (Joo et al., 2019; Joo et al., 2020). By expanding awareness of the library's collections and services to the community using social media, the library opens itself up to future meaningful interactions (Wright Joe, 2015). It has to take that first step, however, in reaching out through marketing measures and convincing patrons that the library is a worthwhile place to visit (Wright Joe, 2015). This outreach needs to move beyond one-way communications of library announcements and statements with no expected reply because it disregards the interaction purpose inherent in social media (Wright Joe, 2015). Many libraries continue to engage solely in these types of posts (Young & Rossmann, 2015), but their lack of conversation hampers development of real connections between patrons and libraries. To remedy this communication barrier, Muhambe and Davis (2019) suggest libraries could focus

on improvements in the following areas: reaching patrons quickly while connecting with large numbers of patrons; marketing a library's strengths; sharing information through dialogues; looking for instant responses from patrons in the form of comments, suggestions and feedback (and then quickly responding to them); sharing space with patrons in their language so they can feel comfortable; providing remote access; and encouraging freedom of expression for all ages.

Patron engagement on social media is an extremely important part of the relationship between libraries and patrons (Joo et al., 2018). Engagement can be discerned via likes, shares, and comments and reflect varying levels of engagement from low (likes) to high (shares and comments) (Joo et al., 2018). Although liking is the most common response for patrons to expressly engage with a library's social media, to develop true relationships information must be shared in more interesting ways. Posting basic information needed for awareness is insufficient; adding pertinent questions for the audience gives them more to react to than simply acknowledging a post (Wright Joe, 2015). Expanding content beyond the library to shares of community issues can draw more engagement from the community, especially those who would not necessarily frequent the library (Joo et al., 2018). Library managers and staff should want this increased interaction capability allowing the free flow of communication because social media facilitates sharing the library's awesome qualities, leading to better community knowledge about the institution, higher use, and ultimately its continued presence as the heart of the community (Pashootanizadeh & Rafie, 2020).

Staffing

It would be impossible and ill-advised to continue the discussion of social media in libraries without recognizing the importance of librarians and other staff who integrate social

media into their libraries. A growing body of research has looked at librarian attitudes and perceptions about social media and its inclusion in daily tasks. Two primary factors are at play regarding a public librarian's engagement in social media activities – (1) the usefulness of the platform in reaching target audiences and (2) the platform's ease of use (Joo et al., 2019). Both are needed for librarian acceptance of social media technology and successful integration of social media as a marketing tool (Joo et al., 2019).

Early in the creation of social media, librarians were divided on the benefits of utilizing social media in libraries (Gaha & Hall, 2015), but now a consensus of librarians have positive attitudes and acceptance of social media marketing; they correctly believe it should be a segment of their professional responsibilities (Joo et al., 2020; Phillips, 2015). Despite this recognition of usefulness, however, librarians still feel reluctant to implement it as a marketing tool because of the large number of networking sites, frequently changing interfaces, lack of management support, and other institutional barriers (Joo et al., 2019; Philips, 2015). These are similar to barriers of successful implementation of any library service and require thoughtful managers to help navigate the process. According to Joo et al. (2019), "improving an already useful technology's ease of use would reduce the effort expectancy associated with it and ... would likely create more favorable attitudes about implementing these technologies in the library setting" (p. 142). Thus, library managers must aid librarians to ensure they feel an ease of use when working on social media matters; this can be accomplished through effective collaboration and training.

The team model would work well here to make social media posts more interactive and content-diverse, which would in turn increase user engagement because the library is appealing

to a larger community utilizing librarians' own varying interests (Joo et al., 2018; Joo et al., 2020). Librarian collaboration, especially across departments, could aid in creative strategizing, which also enhances communication both within and outside the library (Joo et al., 2018; Joo et al., 2020). A goal for planning – picking a leader to head the team – could be met via the library director selecting the most appropriate person for the job or the team itself could select a leader or co-leader. Using a collaborative model allows individuals to work based on their strengths, and the distribution of tasks ensures the work, blame, and success are shared (Gaha & Hall, 2015; Wright Joe, 2015). Moreover, rotational distribution of monitoring, maintenance, and assessment authorizes sharing and processing of these constant and intensive functions like the “regular weeding of a library collection” (Wright Joe, 2015, p. 674).

Without social networking skills, a monolithic barrier blocks effective engagement and impedes social media collaboration. Proper and ongoing training of librarians is needed to overcome this hurdle (Joo et al., 2019; Muhambe & Davis, 2019). To become familiar with social media, Joo et al. (2019) encourages librarians to explore social media technology for personal use first, to get a feel for the tools available and discover what platforms individuals prefer and recommend for library use. This gives librarians ownership in the process and substantiates their positive attitudes towards social media. Librarians' personal knowledge can then be supplemented with formal training via conferences, seminars, and workshops as needed since the technology is frequently evolving (Muhambe & Davis, 2019). Obtaining this training leads librarians to find social networking easy to use as well as heightens their perception of it as more useful, the two factors necessary to lead to increased engagement in social media activities (Joo et al., 2019).

Findings and Discussion

This researcher devised a brief survey (see Figure 1 below) with seven questions designed to learn about social media planning, marketing, and staffing processes in public libraries. This researcher submitted the survey via email or online form to all fourteen-member libraries of the Pinellas Public Library Cooperative (PPLC) and seven (50%) responded. Responders ranged from non-librarians to librarians to an Assistant Director. All seven (100%) utilize Facebook in some capacity; five (71%) use Instagram, four (57%) use Twitter, four (57%) use YouTube, one (14%) uses Pinterest, and one (14%) uses Zoom. One responding library could only maintain a Facebook account due to City rules.

Figure 1 – Survey Questionnaire for Libraries
Q1: How is social media incorporated into your strategic plan?
Q2: What social media platforms do you use?
Q3: Is there an individual responsible for posting, or is it a team?
Q4: What kinds of approvals are needed for posting?
Q5: What makes for a good social media post on which platform?
Q6: Who moderates the comments?
Q7: How do you come up with ideas for posts – programs, events, displays, collections but also library memes?

Planning

The researcher designed Questions 1, 4, and 6 to get an overview of library planning processes as they pertain to social media. Three out of seven (43%) asserted that their strategic plan mentions social media marketing within the Goals section by “[i]ncreas[ing] visibility through traditional media, social media and webpage” or it has elsewhere been incorporated into the plan as a “big part of our marketing effort.” One library’s social media is entirely directed through its city’s Communications and Engagement Office, which has a mandated city-wide social media policy. This policy’s especially severe rules require strict adherence or the

library risks log-in disablement. This responder found this policy helpful to keep the library's message inclusive and cognizant of ADA compliance as well as representative of the City's mission and vision. On the other end of the spectrum, one responding library makes its own Social Networking Policy freely available on its website. It delineates a clear purpose, what constitutes acceptable use, how public comments are handled, and copyright and privacy rights.

In the absence of official policies, the responding libraries have informal guidelines established by those working in social media as part of their jobs. There is a "general understanding amongst the librarians of what we use our page for and stick to it." Some of these guidelines involve how often, when, and what platforms to post on, and what to do when a staff person wants to post on someone else's day. One library gets more specific in terms of basic specifications for each post, requiring the library's name, logo, time and date of the event, and title of the program.

The libraries generally agree on how to moderate comments; staff assigned on a particular day to social media respond on their days or staff generally monitors social media for issues. The libraries noted that staff responds quickly to inquiries and comments, but if an issue of concern arises they often consult together before responding. One library has turned off commenting completely on YouTube so as not to monitor it.

Research demonstrates that utilizing a strategic plan and formalized policies gives libraries a solid foundation upon which to build their social media presence. The responding libraries that took additional steps here had more thorough answers to this researcher's questions and a better grasp on their community's connectivity needs. Informal guidelines

assist with daily social media tasks and create self-confidence in staff, giving them a framework to work within. By having a plan to work together when comments require extra attention, the libraries have built in monitoring help. No questions were specifically asked regarding assessment of social media, but some library disclosures regarding analytics shows that they are considering this part of the planning process, too.

Marketing

Questions 5 and 7 primarily cover marketing concerns, but responses to other questions also allowed this researcher to grasp the big picture of what social media marketing looks like in actual libraries. One library's team has brainstorm sessions in its monthly meetings and stays current with what's happening on its platforms. Taking this a step farther, several libraries monitor analytics to see how engagement is performing on specific posts. Working from a different angle, one library makes social media posts the end game in their program planning process.

The majority of postings appear to be programs and events happening online in these COVID-times or in person when the libraries were able to be fully open. In addition to programs, some libraries focus their social media on fun days, monthly celebrations, and holidays, as well as informative city and community mandates and happenings. Still others include interesting articles for the literary community, library passions, and content from local partners, other libraries and institutions like the Library of Congress, and library organizations like the Florida Library Association. One library sees social media as "an opportunity to advocate for our services while bringing advocacy for libraries at a National level to our patrons."

Generally, libraries try to match their posts to their targeted audiences on a designated topic while promoting the library in a fun or interesting way. They try to keep the tone light and fun because they “like our followers to enjoy following us.” One library uses bright graphics reflecting a modern theme and has found that visual videos (with little text) or posts with a call to action are more successful because patrons want to interact with their libraries. One librarian stated that it is “hard to predict” what will make for good social media on a particular platform.

A couple of the responding libraries have developed methods making it easier to predict what will work by gearing posts towards different demographics and styles on various platforms because it “makes for a better experience for our patrons.” For example, Facebook, which is one library’s main social media page, has a broad posting base with adult virtual programs hosted using its Live feature, informative posts across age groups and programs, reading initiatives, City information, and recognition using infographics, images, and GIFs created in Canva and then posted. Facebook also has a Youth Services Group page with additional content. Further, this library’s Instagram is teen and young adult-focused with “bright, fun infographics, GIFs or short videos and appropriate hashtags related to the post.”

The other library that intentionally focused its social media platforms based on multiple factors had quick tips for each platform it utilizes. For Facebook, the responding librarian recommended others to be aware of trends and to utilize additional features to promote content; they also like to post less than three times a day and continuously try to balance posting timing with user habits. For Twitter, this library likes to keep it light, bright, and interactive, which includes following other libraries and sharing their posts. Instagram allows

this library to share “vignette style content or content that leaves the audience with curiosity” and tends to draw in younger users. YouTube is this library’s main video hosting platform so organization across their channels is prioritized with “playlists, standardized descriptions, and brand continuity.”

Pinellas libraries surveyed feel empowered to share information on social media about their library programs and materials and have taken steps to do this efficiently. They monitor engagement, post on a wide variety of topics, match audiences to targeted posts, maintain a fun and bright tone, and advocate for libraries in exciting ways. Although one librarian admitted that it is “hard to predict” what the community wants out of this online relationship (and others likely feel similarly), all the responding libraries have begun developing trust in their online relationships. However, many of these libraries can do more than center their postings on daily happenings and regular programming, which do not generate as meaningful interactions as those that share information through questioning or deeper engagement than likes alone. These libraries should focus on the interactive aspects of social media because that is what it is designed to facilitate – increased communication and true relationships. The two libraries that gave specific examples for their success in engaging on the various platforms appear to be ahead of the group in terms of connectivity to their communities. The other libraries surveyed could learn from their example and further expand their social media to play toward their strengths utilizing some of the tips listed.

Staffing

Questions 3 and 4 cover parts of the training process. Six out of seven (86%) responding libraries function as a social media team with multiple people working on the numerous

accounts on various days. Some have co-chairs or other types of leaders, while others do not have a designated staff person assigned to social media. These teams range from two librarians taking turns posting to sizeable teams across branch libraries and departments for larger cities. One responding librarian stated their team is comprised of people who have graphic design experience or have fallen into social media for whatever reason; this social media team does not have staff from all branches because the selections were based on individual strengths.

One library holds monthly strategy sessions and maintains a Google document with days and platforms that are “theirs” for posting. The rationale behind this is that “staff get a lot of autonomy and that’s important to us.” Other libraries have regular meetings to discuss social media as well. They “encourage our staff to let their personalities shine through while promoting libraries and librarianship as a culture.” One responding librarian stated that their library’s logic for having a team stemmed from the need for a variety of content without burning out one person. Moreover, one responding library stated that “coordination within your team is [] vital in order to maintain a unified ‘voice’ for your audience.”

The majority of responding libraries using a team approach did not have a formal approval process; they trusted their library staff to follow the guidelines and policies and use their best judgment. However, outliers existed. One responding library stated if a staff member is unsure about a post, then a director or supervisor screens it first. Alternatively, if there is an unusual post planned, another library’s administrator must approve it in advance of the posting. Finally, one library requires all videos and original content to have prior approval before posting.

The lone library with one person posting social media is a smaller library where the employee's title is marketing coordinator so social media marketing is a primary job responsibility. In this library, the Children's Department has its own separate Facebook page and that department's head handles all of its social media. No external approvals are needed unless a big event with time sensitive deadlines arises.

Only one library specifically mentioned training of new social media team members. These new members are trained in a conversational style towards targeted audiences and are taught which type of posts work and the kinds of interactions to avoid. Once they have a feel for it, these new team members are free to post on their assigned days.

Creating collaborative teams and providing quality training can help librarians feel comfortable using social media platforms. The majority of libraries surveyed use a team model for their social media, which benefits their libraries in several ways. The work, which takes time and effort, is systematically distributed among librarians sharing the load so no one is required to do it all (except for the one library where one person is actually doing everything and that is their job description). Librarians get to shine using their strengths and feel empowered while working together. Available assistance from other members of the team or administrators aids librarians when they need it, which is great. However, there appears to be room for improvement in terms of training. Only one library specifically mentioned the training process; this could be because it was not specifically asked on the survey or because there actually is no formalized training. More research is needed here to discern whether it is the former or latter. Conferences, seminars, and workshops are available to learn more about social media, and

librarians could work through their issues by accessing social media in their personal life to try new things first before doing them for work.

Conclusion

Library social media returns power back to communities to publicly make their voices heard. Librarians have the ability to facilitate these interactions through good social media practices, but first must ensure empowerment actually happens. Library managers must do the work needed to support their staff through the training and collaboration process for full acceptance and ease of use of the technology. Although plenty of social media best practices lists for library success exist, without understanding how to connect with patrons online on a relational level, librarians will never fully reach their lofty social media goals to raise awareness through dissemination of information, improve communication, and engage with the community. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, administrators must guide their libraries in a complete planning process, tying in their library's values with their goals, and updating these plans as they fail and succeed.

A real limitation exists in this research due to the intentionally small sample size that likely cannot be extrapolated beyond the population of PPLC libraries. Moreover, the types of questions utilized in the survey process could have been more targeted based on previous research; however, the survey was devised prior to conducting research due to time constraints in needing responses. Future research should tailor the questions to the three management areas (planning, marketing, and staffing) more thoroughly and expand the sample to include a larger population.

Despite these limitations, this study falls in line with the belief that the library functions as a commons serving as the heart, pillars, and safe harbor of the community because each library exists to accompany individuals in the sharing of knowledge (McCook & Bossaller, 2018). Social media opens up the library beyond its basic four walls and meets people where they are, just as they are. One librarian responding to the survey put it this way, "Giving people a way to access the library from anywhere is certainly empowering, whether they are participating in a virtual storytime, doing research or renewing a library card." Libraries must continue to equalize access to knowledge and utilize new technology like social media to empower people through the sharing of information online. In this way public libraries serve as democracy's hope, and everyone could benefit from more hope during this pandemic time.

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