

Creating Community at the Digital Branch

Abstract

This chapter of “Building the Digital Branch: Guidelines for Transforming Your Library Website” discusses the relationships and interactions that occur in a digital branch and how they parallel those at a physical library. Topics include both in-person interactions for users of the site like focus groups and online interaction through tools like Twitter, blogs and news groups.

I have spent most of this *LTR* describing content and the process of building a digital branch. Let’s spend this chapter discussing what types of interactions might occur at your digital branch.

What Is Digital Community?

At your library’s digital branch, one big goal should be participation—holding conversations with patrons and interacting with the community. While this may seem like a simple goal, remember that a digital branch should be similar to your physical library in this way. In your physical library, library staff hold conversations of all types with patrons, and the same service principles should apply at your digital branch.

What types of interactions happen in your physical library? When a patron appears at the reference desk and asks a question, that’s an interaction. When patrons show up to an event held by the library, that’s an interaction. When they sign up for a training class, that’s an interaction. These interactions can also happen inside the walls of your digital branch.

Tools That Help Facilitate Digital Community

Right now, there is a great variety of popular, emerging Web-based tools that help connect people to people in a digital medium. Let me describe some of the more popular tools to use for facilitating digital community and conversations and show how they connect people to you and to each other.

Blogs

Blogs have been around for at least twelve years now. Those who aren’t familiar with the term *blog* have probably come across some nonetheless. They have seen the editorials on an online newspaper or the frequently updated What’s New page at their favorite website.

Many people are also familiar with leaving comments on websites. Again, take a peek at your local newspaper’s comments at the end of each article online. People in your community know how to do this, and do it quite frequently. Blogs and blog comments are great because they are a built-in way for patrons to leave feedback for you and to interact with the library.

People can also talk to each other via blog comment boxes. For example, Topeka’s library has a webpage devoted to contacting the library to start a book club. In the comments section of that post, a couple of patrons planned their own book group. Here’s their discussion:

- Randi: “Is anyone out there interested in a book club devoted to Anne Perry? I would be willing to set one up if you do. Please let me know.”
- Adrienne: “I’d be interested in a book club devoted to Anne Perry! I know she’s popular in

some circles . . . but not many people know about her. How do I find out more?”

- Randi: “You are the first one to respond. I figure we should get together when others come and decide on a time and day that will be right for all of us. We will go through one book a month (there’s a lot to cover). There are two Anne Perry series, Monk and Pitt. We will alternate them. We will start with the first one of each series and finish at the most current in each series. Let me know what you think. I am open to suggestions.”¹

Topeka’s “Join a Book Group” page
www.tscpl.org/bgib/comments/join_a_book_group

As the conversation continued, they contacted library staff and worked out scheduling problems. Those patrons wanted to talk—patrons want to talk to you as the librarian and to each other. Both can be accomplished through the simplest of means, even the comment box in a blog post.

IM and SMS Messaging

Let’s go to something even older than blogs for a second— instant messaging (or IM for short) has been around for a long time. Wikipedia says “Modern, Internet-wide, GUI-based messaging clients, as they are known today, began to take off in the mid 1990s with PowWow, then ICQ, followed by AOL Instant Messenger.”² SMS, or text messaging, dates back to at least 1993.³

The concept of IM and SMS is easy—you are presented with a text box that you type into, and once you’re done, hit Send. Whoever you are sending to gets your message, and she can respond back just as easily.

This simple communication method becomes extremely powerful when combined in a library setting with virtual reference services. Forget about costly, clunky, detailed “virtual reference solutions.” Instead, download a free IM client (or use any number of Web-based versions that need no download) and sign up for an account (also free). Advertise your account name everywhere—you should quickly get people asking questions and using the service.

Twitter

Twitter, one of the hottest phenomena on the Web today, combines elements of blogging, instant messaging, and e-mail. At first, it seems similar to the combination of a comment box and IM. You type anything you want into a text box that’s limited to 140 characters or less and send it out—to anyone who has subscribed to your Twitter feed.

As simple as that concept seems, the possibilities of what can be done with Twitter seem limitless. For

instance, Zappos.com has used Twitter to connect with their customers (see figure 14). They have over 837,000 people subscribed to their CEO’s Twitter feed.⁴ On their customer service feed, on any given day, they send out announcements, sales that are going on, and more importantly, answer their customers’ questions. Here are some example of customer service in action, taken from their customer service feed:⁵

- @makkura What’s the order number and I’ll see if I can help you out.
- @BradDitzell We do love our customers. If you are ever in Las Vegas, come take a tour of our building :)
- @FriendlessinSD If you could send your inquiry to cs@zappos.com. We would be glad to assist you in anyway we can.
- @throk - Would you like assistance in finding a shoe in your size? I’m happy to help!

Zappos Twitter Feeds

CEO

twitter.com/zappos

Customer Service

twitter.com/Zappos_Service

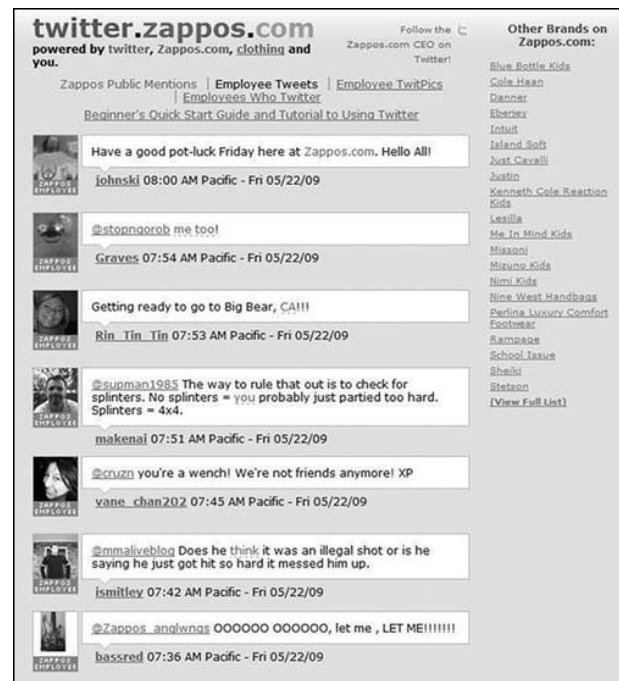


Figure 14
Tweets from Zappos employees on May 22, 2009.

What is Zappos doing? It is connecting with customers online, and you can do this too. Set up a Twitter account and start finding local Twitter users. Subscribe to their feeds (they will possibly subscribe to you as well). Then start using it to answer questions and provide information about your library.

Outposts—Content and Comments

Some of these tools, like an embedded Meebo widget or a blog, reside on your library's website. But there are other tools and services, like Twitter or Facebook, that reside outside your library's website. These types of sites are called outposts. Chris Brogan of New Marketing Labs, a new media marketing agency, says this about outposts:

Social networks are great places to meet new people, to build new business relationships, and to learn about information from non-traditional sources. But another great way to use social networking sites is as an outpost. What do I mean by this? It turns out that people getting to know you on social networks might also find your content for the first time, and/or something you post to those networks might bring you an opportunity that wouldn't immediately come to you in other ways.⁶

Outposts are more than just placeholder sites. They serve a function within the social network or service. They are also your library's representation within those social networks.

Facebook is one such outpost (see figure 15), and you can do quite a lot with it. Let me show you the range of things my library has done with Facebook:



Figure 15
Facebook page of the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library.

- *Facebook Page*: A page that represents the library.
- *Facebook Account*: A personal account that's modeled specifically for the library and to impart library-related information..
- *Facebook Group*: A group for our Big Read program.
- *Facebook App*: A catalog-search Facebook app.

All of these Facebook services allow Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library to interact with users and allow our patrons to leave comments, start discussions, and even search the catalog without having to leave Facebook.

Other examples of outpost sites include, but are not limited to, these:

- *YouTube*: A place to put videos.
- *Blip.tv*: Another friendly place for videos—better embedding tools, you own your content, longer videos are allowed.
- *Flickr*: A place for digital photos
- *Delicious.com*: A place to reference websites as they're found
- *MySpace*: People still use it. We have more than five hundred friends there.

Getting Participation at Your Digital Branch

Want people to use your digital branch? Here are some suggestions to get that attention and interaction.

Listening First

Before you start talking to people, it's best to listen first. How do you do that? Set up a number of search alerts using Google Alerts and Twitter search. Then subscribe to the RSS feeds (or e-mail alerts) for each search. Every time your library is mentioned on the Web, you will be notified of that mention. This gives you a chance to respond. But listening is the first step.

If you're a big library in a busy urban area, do the same thing with Flickr and YouTube. Do this by searching your name in each service, then subscribing to the RSS feed for each search. You'll be surprised at what you see!

Are you a business librarian? Set up alerts for business pushes in the city or for grants. The point is to find out what people are saying about you, your city, the people, and the problems that occur.

Creating Content

Once you've been listening for a while, your next goal should be to start creating content. This is easy if you

have set up services like blogs, YouTube, or Flickr. People will consume your content and will sometimes want to respond or comment.

Go ahead and let people respond. Do not moderate. Give your patrons the freedom to say what they want, and then deal with the few times someone says something inappropriate. Your goal is real-time conversation; it's not a real-time conversation if one person says something, then has to wait for someone else to approve it.

That said, also make sure to follow whatever "patron behavior guidelines" your library has created. You don't really need separate behavior policies for the physical building and the website—bad behavior is bad behavior, and you already have guidelines in place for dealing with it.

Now you need to respond. Do they have a question? Answer it. Do they have a comment? Thank them for the comment, clarify any confusion, gently correct incorrect information. Do they have a criticism? Respond kindly, clearly, and in a nonconfrontational manner.

Criticism on your blog is great. It shows that the person cares enough about your content and your organization to take the time to say something. Your content has moved that commenter to action, which is important. Good job—you got a response! Plus, the criticism and the response can be controlled, since both are happening within the confines of your website.

Being Real

Above all, be a real person. Have you ever known someone who had two voices—the "This is my real self" voice and the "I'm putting on my professional hat" voice? You shouldn't put that professional voice on when holding conversations on your digital branch. It's inauthentic and tends to sound forced, especially on the Web. Instead, be real. Be authentic. People want to hear from the real YOU. People like to know that an organization is made up of individuals that can help, rather than a cold organization with a professional, sterile voice.

Make sure when you're holding conversations online that you are actually holding conversations. Make sure to ask questions, leave room for others to add their own thoughts, and be respectful of others and their beliefs and opinions. This is sometimes harder to do on the Web for some reason, so if it's hard for you, be aware of it.

There are so many places to start with interaction on your library's website! Where should you begin? I'd suggest starting with a "what's new at my library" blog. Post regularly, share the URL of the blog with your community, and try to get some media (new or old) coverage for it. Then work on creating compelling content that people want to respond to. But that's just one suggestion—really, any place you start is just that—a start. So pick a place to begin, and start an online conversation with your community.

Notes

1. RandiAnderson and Adrienne O, online postings to Join a Book Group page, Aug. 25 & 27, 2008, Topeka & Shawnee Public Library website, http://www.tsopl.org/bgjb/comments/join_a_book_group (accessed June 20, 2009).
2. "Instant Messaging," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Instant_messaging (accessed June 20, 2009).
3. "Text Messaging," Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Text_messaging (accessed June 20, 2009).
4. Zappos Twitter page, <http://twitter.com/zappos> (accessed June 26, 2009).
5. Zappos_Service, online postings to Twitter in reply to makkura, BradDitzell, FriendlessinSD, and throk, April 8, 2009, http://twitter.com/Zappos_Service (accessed April 8, 2009).
6. Chris Brogan, "Using Outposts in Your Media Strategy," www.chrisbrogan.com/using-outposts-in-your-media-strategy (accessed June 20, 2009).