

# Use and Engagement on the Digital Branch

## Abstract

*Chapter 3 of Library Technology Reports (vol. 48, no. 6) “Running the Digital Branch: Guidelines for Operating the Library Website” by David Lee King answers questions about use of the digital branch, including whether people read blog post content, subscribe to the library’s blogs, and leave comments. The chapter discusses statistics from FeedBurner and Google Analytics, Twitter and Facebook activity, and how to use library banner ads on the main pages of websites.*

Once a digital branch is running well, the next question becomes, Is it being used? Most likely, some people use the digital branch to find the building and learn about program information. We know they use the catalog to check out items—even when they’re outside the physical building. These are awesome traditional uses of the digital branch.

However, we wanted to know if patrons were accessing our blogs. Are people reading them? Are they subscribing to them? Commenting on them? Here’s what we discovered.

## Are People Reading Our Blogs?

We can find out if people are reading our blogs by examining a variety of statistics and analytics, including FeedBurner’s RSS and e-mail subscriber counts and a year’s worth of Google Analytics.

FeedBurner is an RSS feed management service that began as an independent startup company and was bought by Google in 2007. FeedBurner helps manage feeds by cleaning them up, making them visually presentable, providing easy-to-set-up e-mail

feeds, and keeping some useful subscriber statistics.

Having said that, I should point out that FeedBurner’s statistics catch a lot of website visitors, but not nearly all. FeedBurner’s numbers fluctuate greatly, especially on the weekends. For example, FeedBurner usually shows around 6,700 weekday subscribers on my personal blog—but that number shrinks to around 5,000 on weekends. That’s because some people still use desktop-based feed aggregators to check feeds from work. They’re not turning those computers on during the weekends, so numbers go down. Then subscriber numbers go back up on Monday when people arrive at work and turn their computers back on.

FeedBurner also doesn’t really capture an accurate total number of readers. There’s no guarantee FeedBurner catches every available RSS feed reader. Plus, not everyone subscribes via RSS. Some people are e-mail subscribers, using either FeedBurner’s service or any number of other services. Some people keep up with blogs through Facebook or Twitter feeds. They might even enjoy browsing your actual website or blog. FeedBurner wouldn’t catch these readers.

That said, it’s still good to watch FeedBurner statistics. These numbers show trends—like how many people read, how many people subscribe, and what types of RSS readers are being used. Now let’s look at TSCPL’s FeedBurner statistics.

## FeedBurner Statistics

Each of our blogs has subscribers. Some don’t have very many, while some have quite a few. For example, our main “get everything” RSS feed currently has 106 subscribers (numbers are from April 2012). That number has been steadily growing over the past year. In January there were 89 subscribers; in February we

reached 102. Our Books Movies and Music blog has 42 subscribers, up from 33 in January. The Employment Opportunities blog has the most subscribers, with 224. Apparently, people want to work at the library!

There are also some blogs with lower subscriber statistics. For example, our local history blog has 11 subscribers, and my fledgling Digital Branch blog also has 11. While those numbers sound low, they don't tell the whole story. We see a clearer picture of use when we check web analytics for visits.

*TSCPL Digital Branch blog*  
<http://tscpl.org/blog/digital-branch>

### Google Analytics and Our Blogs

I'll use my Digital Branch blog as an example because it's one of our newest blogs. It has only 11 subscribers, but when we look at Google Analytics, we can see a more complete story of growth and readership.

The statistics for January 1–March 3, 2012, show that we received 84,333 page views for the entire website.

The first post went up January 13, and there have been four posts so far. I post to that blog once every two weeks, sharing something from the digital branch manager to his customers. So far, I have shared tips on how to use part of our website and introduced Pinterest to our website visitors, among other things.

So, are people reading these blog posts? Here are the number of views for my first four posts.

Post	Date Posted	# of Views
Subscribe to Our YouTube Videos	Jan. 12	15
Visit Our Flickr Page	Jan. 27	21
Do You Use Pinterest?	Feb. 10	137
Subscribe to Our Website	Feb. 24	9

The statistics show that some people are reading this very new, not-yet-advertised blog. There were 182 total visits to the four pages, and the average time spent on those pages was about two minutes. The post on Pinterest was particularly popular. So although this blog is not the hottest page in the digital branch, I can see that it is frequented more than the 11 subscribers might indicate. I can also see what types of topics our patrons find most interesting.

Let's look at one other blog. In that same span of time (January–March 2012), our Books Movies and Music blog had 33 FeedBurner-reported subscribers and received 7,107 page views.

Here are the four most popular posts.

Post	# of Views
New Ebook Service Is Here	2,837
New Audiobooks Service Offered to Customers	364
Our Boys the 2012 Kansas Reads Choice	165
Check Out Our New DVD	103

*TSCPL Books Movies and Music blog*  
<http://tscpl.org/blog/books-movies-music>

So we see that there are a few people who utilize either RSS or e-mail subscriptions to subscribe to our blogs. Many more customers and website visitors actually visit the digital branch and browse through and read the newest blog posts.

Some of those individual posts have great numbers behind them. The post on the new e-book service, with 2,837 views, shows a huge interest in a certain part of our collection. These reader statistics could support future decisions—like expanding a collection.

So how should we feel when our blog posts have low reader counts—for example, my Digital Branch blog post about subscribing to YouTube videos? It has been read 15 times since it was posted. Dismal numbers, right? Well, compare your blog posts to a program you do at the library. If 15 people attended a program about subscribing to YouTube videos, in many libraries that would be considered a pretty solid turnout. I see many of our blog posts the same way—some of them will serve a smaller niche audience, and that's fine.

Also, those blog posts have the added benefit of pointing to other parts of our library's services and can even introduce customers to something they didn't know about. Let's use the YouTube blog post again as an example. Did people actually subscribe to our YouTube channel after that post went live? The answer is yes. After that post went live, we gained three YouTube channel subscribers. So the post was successful when we look at results and not only number of views.

Keep in mind, too, that blog posts are ephemeral. They appear today, then disappear tomorrow from an RSS reader or the main page of our website. Remember that the posts are still there if people need them, though. So even with a new blog, reader and subscriber numbers tend to increase over time.

### A Simple Way to Gain Readers

My Pinterest blog post gained 137 views pretty quickly because I cross-posted it to the library's Twitter account and Facebook page. In the text of those status updates, I asked people what they thought about the library using Pinterest.

Some of our customers engaged in conversation using both those mediums and helped to spread the word about that blog post. For example, I accessed Facebook page statistics for my status update that pointed to the blog post. The status update had a Reach statistic of 969 (the number of unique people who saw the post), an Engaged Users statistic of 68 (the number of unique people who clicked on a post), and a Talking About This statistic of 23 (the number of unique people who created a story from the post, meaning they commented, shared, or Liked the post, creating another post on their Facebook profile for their Facebook friends to see).

Of those 137 page views for my blog post, 68 of them—or 50 percent—came directly from sharing that post on our Facebook page.

There are other ways to share, too. For example, TSCPL shares links to blog posts through the ads on the main page of our website. On the main page, we frequently feature a story that we really want our customers to see (more on this later). We also have an e-newsletter that goes out to customers. It includes links to blog posts. We have noticed that when we push something on the main page of our website or feature it in our e-newsletter, page views for those stories also increase.

## Do Our Users Interact Online?

Do TSCPL customers comment on blogs or interact on TSCPL's Facebook pages or through Twitter? The answer, of course, is yes.

Let's look at the variety of interactions and engagement that have happened via our digital branch and our social media outposts. I'll show where the interactions are happening and where we could use some improvements.

### Comments

Comments are a great form of engagement. Comments of different types are found practically everywhere on the modern Web, from a comment on a blog post, to a comment on a newspaper article, to a mention on Twitter. Even LinkedIn includes comments.

The library's digital branch receives comments on its blog posts. A quick check of our blog statistics in WordPress shows that, as of today (July 15, 2012), we have posted 1,409 blog posts and have received 1,429 comments. That's an average of approximately 1.01 comments per blog post. In reality, some of our posts receive no comments, while others receive quite a few. For example, a recent blog post describing our new ILS system has received 35 comments to date (some from customers asking questions and some from me answering those questions).

*TSCPL blog post describing new ILS system*

<http://tscpl.org/books-movies-music/new-library-catalog-coming-soon>

So far, comments on blog posts do seem to work for TSCPL. Because we offer a place to ask a question or to simply engage, our customers do just that. Sometimes readers add to the conversation. For example, if we write about genre fiction, a customer might add his or her favorite author to our list.

### Twitter and Facebook

We also receive comments from Facebook and Twitter. For the past year or so, some of our best Facebook conversations have taken place when we talk about books and then ask a question. For example, we asked: "Good night folks. What book is on tap for bedtime tonight? Share what you're reading so our friends can decide whether they want to check it out."<sup>1</sup> We received 14 comments and three Likes for that post.

Here are some of the comments we received:

- "Minding Frankie by Maeve Binchy"
- "the wind through the keyhole. new stephen king. omg so excited! i am giddy! :)"
- "Try to finish another chapter of I Was Carlos Castneda [sic] . . . which is probably overdue now >.<"
- "I was in bed reading 'A supremely Bad Idea' by Luke Dempsey when you posted this."

We have found that our social media status updates really do start conversations.

### Not Everyone Leaves a Comment

Not everyone leaves a comment. You might very well read a blog post, and even find it interesting, yet you just don't have anything to add. That's perfectly fine—reading is engagement, too!

Thankfully, social networks and blogs (depending on how they are set up) have tools that help people engage, even if they don't add to the conversation.

For example, in Facebook, people can comment on a status update. But they can also Like the post—a form of engagement. In Twitter, you can Favorite a Tweet, which is a simple way to bookmark it. You can also retweet the post, which sends it out to all your Twitter followers. Other social networks have similar engagement functionality. For example, YouTube offers Likes (and Dislikes) to each video, as well as a way to Favorite the video. Account holders can also add a video to a custom-created playlist, which means that the viewer liked the video enough to curate it into a shareable list.



**Figure 3.1**  
Ads on the main page of TSCPL's digital branch.

What's the goal with Likes, Favorites, Retweets, and so forth? Engagement. Not engagement with the website or with the social media tool, but with the library, the library staff, and the library's stuff.

### Ad Space on Our Site

We have created a type of ad space on the main page of the digital branch website (see figure 3.1) that helps gain readers and interaction. We do not sell ads.

We use ads to point people to the most important content. We have one big banner ad at the top of the page that rotates between three to five ads. Our customers like top-level rotating content—I've actually had customers tell me that they like clicking through them to find out what we're doing. We also use what we call the three-pack. The three-pack is a set of smaller ads that appear directly under the main large ad.

We designed the large ads after looking at other websites for ideas. We found some inspiration at [apple.com](http://apple.com). What do you see when you go to the Apple website? There is usually one big ad, pushing the most important thing at Apple at the moment. If you click that, you'll find smaller pointers to major information,

then text underneath.

Do those big, in-your-face ads work to drive customers to content (and then to library services or stuff)? When we use the large ad to push, say, a blog post, our statistics for that blog post go up.

For example, my post about our new library catalog has received 34 comments. It has also received 3,037 page views to date. It's popular enough that it is the third most popular page on our website right now. That's because of two things:

- **The content is important.** The post is about our new ILS system, the main way our customers access our stuff.
- **The post was pushed heavily.** We pushed the blog post heavily on the main page, even doing a daily countdown, highlighting new features the catalog would have. We changed the big ad every day to reflect the countdown.

### Constant Page Review

One final thing that our library web team does to make our digital branch better is to regularly revisit sections of our website. We have a regular weekly meeting of our creative group (including the marketing department, the web team, the events coordinator, and a public services librarian).

During each revisit, we show a page or section of the site to the group, and then we start throwing out ideas to improve that page or section of the site. Once we reach consensus on positive changes, we add those changes to our to-do list for the website.

### Note

1. Facebook post, Topeka & Shawnee County Public Library, posted April 24, 2012, accessed May 24, 2012, [www.facebook.com/TopekaLibrary/posts/10150751221062976](http://www.facebook.com/TopekaLibrary/posts/10150751221062976).