

# Why Use Social Media?

Social media is not new. MySpace, an early social media channel, was created in 2003. Classmates.com (figure 1.1) was started in the early days of the web in 1995. Based on those two sites, social media is somewhere between eleven and nineteen years old. Based on the older date, social media appeared around the same time as DVD technology.

Even though DVDs are an important part of many libraries' collection plans, social media channels often are not. Either they're an afterthought or they are considered a secondary service the library uses to communicate with customers. Some library administrators still question the need for social media; they don't see the importance of it.

Before we get too far into ways to successfully use and manage social media channels in a library, we should answer that important question, Why use social media? The answer will provide a foundation for the rest of your library's social media operations.

## Social Media Trends

Social media has captured the attention of the world. Here are some recent statistics about web and social media use in the United States.

According to *The Web at 25 in the U.S.*, among American adults:

- 87 percent use the web
- 68 percent connect to the web with mobile devices
- 90 percent own a cell phone
- 58 percent own a smartphone<sup>1</sup>

In about twenty-three years (1991 being the beginning of the publicly available web<sup>2</sup>), web usage has morphed from a handful of academics and researchers to most of the United States.

The other important fact to note in the above statistics is the devices people use to connect to the web. The numbers show that a majority of Americans connect using mobile devices. Smartphones (58 percent ownership) make up the majority of those devices.

Mobile device use is important in a discussion about social media. Why? Because that's how most of us connect to our favorite social media channels. Mobile technology has provided us with a way to connect to the web and to social media pretty much anywhere, instead of only connecting via a desktop computer with a wired Internet connection.

## How Many People Use Social Media?

As you might have guessed, there are also a lot of people using social media. Sixty-seven percent of US citizens ages 12 and up use social media of some type.<sup>3</sup> Some of the more popular social media channels see a lot of use, too.

For example, 57 percent of all American adults are using Facebook. If you think about that statistic in your own community, that means that over half of your service area is on Facebook. If you're thinking of your younger customers, the statistic grows; about 73 percent of teens ages 12–17 are on Facebook. Most Facebook users—64 percent—visit the site every day.<sup>4</sup>

How about Twitter? Currently, 16 percent of US adults use Twitter.<sup>5</sup> Although that's a much smaller percentage than Facebook users, 16 percent of your community is still a lot of people.

## Why Do People Use Social Media?

Think about your own use of social media for a second. Why do you use it? Most likely, you use social media to connect. You might want to stay connected to friends and family. Maybe you have a favorite hobby and want to discuss it with people who share similar interests. Maybe you have a favorite rock band or TV show and want to stay up-to-date with it.

Your community has similar interests. In some communities, social media has changed people's lives. For example, in recent years, social media has helped people in some countries organize protests and even revolutions.

## Why Use Social Media in Libraries?

We've established that a majority of your customers and surrounding service area use social media. Now, let's connect those customers to the library using social media. What are some good reasons to create and use social media channels to connect to customers?

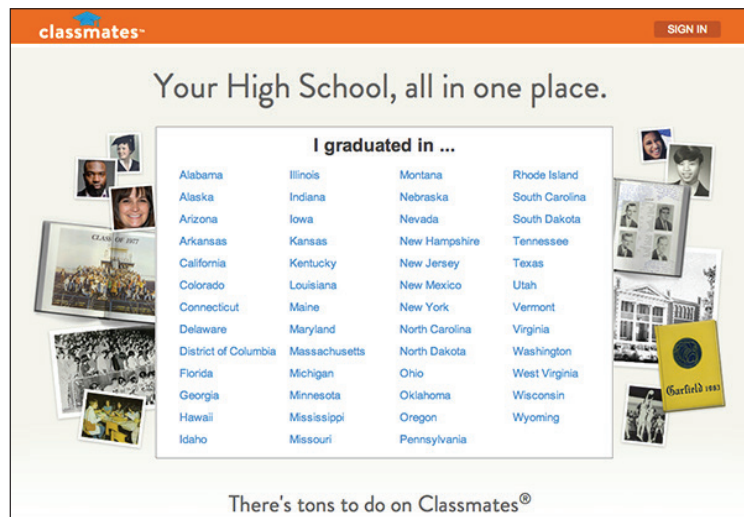
Here are five, and I'm sure there are others! Those reasons are:

- listening
- making connections
- getting responses
- taking advantage of mobile technology
- extending reach

Let's look at each of those reasons:

**Listening.** Social media tools provide a handy way to listen to what your community and customers are talking about (figure 1.2). Listening is a good way to get a feel for the general issues of the day in your community. By creating a couple of alerts and saved searches on your library's name and on important local issues, you can see what your customers and community think about your library.

**Connections.** One of the main reasons many people use social media is to connect with people they care about or are interested in. People also enjoy connecting and sharing their thoughts on an event taking place, like a football game or a TV show. In both cases, people using social media are sharing



**Figure 1.1**  
Classmates.com—an early social media channel

something about themselves—what they're doing or what they think about something—and other people are responding to them by commenting and adding to the conversation.

When well implemented, social media can be extremely useful when it is used to connect the library to its customers. Almost 70 percent of your customers are already on social media, using it to connect with and talk about people and stuff they like. Most likely, many of those people like the library and are a Like or a Follow button away from being connected to the library in a way that's never really existed before. And it's free.

**Responses.** The other side of listening is asking for and receiving a response. Your active social media channel is a great place to crowdsource for ideas. For example, ask a question when you want customer input.

You can "listen" to the responses; that part is easy. The harder part is figuring out what to do after you have asked for opinions. Asking sometimes implies that you plan on using those responses to help the library grow and improve.

**Mobile.** The rapid growth of mobile technology provides us with a great reason to use social media. Why? Because your customers are in love with their mobile devices and are using them multiple times a day. You don't have to wait for customers to sit in front of a desktop computer to read your message; they can see it anytime, anywhere.

**Reach.** Because of increased usage of social media, social media channels are a great place for libraries to share what's going on at the library and to reach their customers where they are "hanging out" (on social media). If you share, there's a good chance that your customers will see your post, read what's happening, and want to respond in some way (e.g., by checking out the book, attending the event, or using that new service).



**Figure 1.2**  
Listening in on social media conversations

## Be in That Space!

There are some great reasons for libraries to use social media to reach their customers. However, the best reason to participate in social media is a simple one. Social media channels potentially provide libraries with a direct connection to your customers.

When a library establishes an active presence in a social media channel, the library is able to share some pretty traditional-sounding library-related activities in a new online space that customers have access to 24/7. For example:

- **Answering questions.** Through a variety of social media channels, library staff can answer reference questions. Those questions might come through a Facebook chat, a Twitter mention, or a direct message from a library friend or follower. Even though the delivery method for the question might change, the question itself will be one of the same types of questions library staff answer in more traditional settings.
- **Conversing with customers.** Casual conversations happen every day in a library—at the reference desk, at the circulation desk, or even in the stacks while searching for a book. Casual conversations can happen through a social media channel, too (figure 1.3). For example, my library (Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, Topeka, KS) sometimes asks Facebook Page followers what they plan to read next. When we ask that question, we usually receive a lot of replies! Library customers are book lovers and tend to enjoy sharing favorite books and authors in a Facebook comment.
- **Promoting and marketing.** You might create posters and hang them in your building. You can do a similar thing online, using social media tools. For example, you can create a Facebook event and post about the event in other social media channels. You can create a video about a new library service and share that video using Facebook and Twitter. The upside to this? You are sharing about a new service



**Figure 1.3**  
Example of a library asking customers “What are you reading?”

or event with people who have “signed up” to see those promotional pieces.

- **Sharing classes and events.** Events, classes, and instructional tutorials can be created and shared using a combination of your website and social media tools. This is a great way to share insider or “pro” tips with your community.

- **Reaching outside the building.** Most important, a library using social media has the opportunity to connect outside of its physical building and build relationships with customers through social media channels.

This is a very exciting time for libraries!

## Notes

1. Susannah Fox and Lee Rainie, “Summary of Findings,” in *The Web at 25 in the U.S.* (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, February 27, 2014), 4–8, accessed July 7, 2014, [www.pewinternet.org/2014/02/27/the-web-at-25-in-the-u-s](http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/02/27/the-web-at-25-in-the-u-s).
2. “World Wide Web,” *Wikipedia*, accessed July 17, 2014, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World\\_Wide\\_Web](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Wide_Web).
3. Shea Bennett, “67% of Americans Use Social Media (with One in Six Active on Twitter) [STUDY],” *mediabistro*, April 2, 2014, accessed August 12, 2014, [www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/social-media-america\\_b56131](http://www.mediabistro.com/alltwitter/social-media-america_b56131).
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5. Amy Mitchell and Emily Guskin, “Twitter News Consumers: Young, Mobile and Educated,” Pew Research Journalism Project, November 4, 2013, accessed August 12, 2014, [www.journalism.org/2013/11/04/twitter-news-consumers-young-mobile-and-educated](http://www.journalism.org/2013/11/04/twitter-news-consumers-young-mobile-and-educated).