Should Librarians Friend Their Patrons?

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Guest Columnists**

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Do you follow your boss on Twitter?

What about your coworkers? Do you friend them on Facebook, or do you reserve your social media accounts for friends and family and leave off professional acquaintances? Or do you try to be selective, friending a few favorite coworkers and letting others' friend requests languish awkwardly unanswered?

Should professors friend their students? Is the answer different if the students are freshmen than if they are doctoral candidates? How did you react when your parents signed up for Facebook? (Come to think of it, what did your children do when you signed up?)

Most users of social media services eventually find themselves debating exactly whom they want to include among their friends or followers. The very connectivity and accessibility that makes social media so appealing inherently forces users to deliberate about just how connected they want to be, to whom, and why. Some people strictly emphasize the social in social media, using Facebook and Twitter and other accounts only for personal interactions with friends and family. Others view these services as professional communication tools, building online networks around shared professional interests and perhaps excluding or limiting personal interactions from what they have decided is primarily a working space.

This installment of "Taking Issues" examines that challenge in the context of the relationship between librarians and our patrons: Should librarians connect with patrons using social media?

It's important to clarify that this is a separate issue from social media use by libraries as an official communication medium. Many libraries maintain a presence on various social networks; naturally, the goal is that patrons would like, friend, or follow them to keep up with the library's events and resources. The current debate concerns individual librarians friending patrons via their *personal* social media accounts.

Arguing in favor of friending patrons is Nedda H. Ahmed of Georgia State University, who uses social networking to build relationships with students and faculty. She argues that such online interactions help her build a sense of community with her users and make her appear approachable and accessible. She is countered by Adriana Edwards-Johnson of the Pioneer Library System, who is troubled by the use of personal social media accounts as makeshift library service points. Both contributors speak to the importance of being thoughtful about the balance between personal and working life when using social media accounts to cultivate professional relationships. Ultimately, librarians who choose to friend or not to friend on social media must decide how

accessible they choose to be, when, to whom, and for what purposes.—*Editors*

AHMED

Should librarians individually friend their patrons on social media? I say "yes"—but a qualified "yes." Under the right circumstances, it's perfectly okay to friend your patrons. Note that I say "it's okay," not "it's essential" or "it should be mandatory": Friending your patrons can be an acceptable option if it fits your institutional culture, your way of working, and your personal worldview, but I don't think it's a requirement of good librarianship.

There are several good reasons to consider connecting with patrons on social media. First, these connections help humanize the relationship between users and the library. Learning about me through my Facebook and Twitter feeds, patrons can come to see me as a real person who is knowledgeable and, most importantly, approachable. The content I post about myself also helps demonstrate my relevance to my patrons, who can see that I'm interested in the same things they are. Finally, social media can be a great way to start and build relationships.

When deciding whether friending patrons is a good idea, I believe that librarians should consider the following key issues: institutional culture, outreach, content, and work–life balance.

Institutional Culture

Culture is, by far, the most important factor to consider when you're thinking about friending patrons. Consider: In what type of library do you work? Who are your constituents? How do they use social media?

I'll use my own situation as an example: I'm a subject librarian at a 30,000-student urban research university where most faculty members and students are commuters. My assigned departments are art, design, film, music, and theater. Librarians in my institution have faculty status, and most of us are seen as colleagues by the teaching faculty with whom we work. In fact, I am friends—really, not just in a social media sense—with many of the teaching faculty in my subject areas.

I am expected to establish deep relationships with the people in my assigned departments—to know what they're working on, to assist with their research, and to maintain open lines of communication. Social media is one tool among many that helps me with this. It has opened doors for me and helped forge relationships that would be difficult to establish in person.

All that said, I'm definitely not friending everybody in my assigned areas! I take most of my social media cues from the teaching faculty and discussions in professional literature, such as *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. The trend appears to be for faculty to friend graduate students and other faculty members, but not undergraduates (there are just too many!). However, in my previous job, at a small undergraduate liberal arts college, the culture strongly encouraged faculty to socialize with students. In fact, the prospect of direct relationships with faculty members was one of that school's main points of appeal. So in that culture, it was acceptable—arguably even expected—for faculty to friend undergraduates.

Using the term in a broader sense, culture can also dictate how circumspect a librarian should be in choosing social media friends and deciding what type of content to share with them. I've found that my political views tend to align with those of most of the faculty and graduate students in my social networks. Other types of libraries may have a broader spectrum of users with more varying political and social views. If that's your situation, you may want to avoid friending patrons so that you can feel free to express your beliefs via social media without reservation. Or perhaps use a "divide and conquer" approach: Twitter for business, Facebook for pleasure.

Outreach

Consider: What are the institutional expectations for how librarians interact with users? What is the communication or outreach strategy of the institution? Will you view your personal friending as part of your outreach work as a librarian, as "outside of work" socializing with people who happen to also be library users, or as a combination of both?

Although my library has an online presence, it's more of a one-way communication and marketing tool than a forum for patrons to ask questions or receive in-depth research assistance. My library depends on subject specialists to accomplish its outreach goals. Subject librarians are the public face of the library: we work with classes and faculty members, answer questions, and relay library information to our departments (and vice versa).

When a faculty member or graduate student has a research question, they don't want to talk with a generic entity. They want to talk with a trusted person who has the subject expertise to get them a reliable answer quickly. Many times I am the person they contact, but they also turn to peers for answers and frequently use social media to obtain that peer input. As a member of their social networks, I see and can respond to questions, even if the questions aren't directed to me.

Social media, therefore, gives me a forum for positive outreach interactions with patrons in my areas, who then have positive associations with me. In turn, they build positive associations with the library: "I like Nedda. She helps me and adds value to my work. Nedda is my librarian. I like the library!"

Content

Consider: How much do you feel comfortable sharing about yourself? Are you comfortable blurring the lines between personal and professional?

In addition to taking cues from faculty colleagues about whom to friend or follow, I also look to them to gauge content. I have observed that they blend their social media content—some personal, some professional. Including both personal and professional content shows that you are approachable and that you are willing to engage in the unspoken social media contract: I will share something about myself, and you will share something about yourself. I look at it this way: I meet with graduate students and teaching faculty over coffee and lunch regularly. Should I refuse to share any personal information in that context? Of course not. It would seem artificial. Social media is simply a virtual extension of our face-to-face interactions.

This question is fundamentally one of personal preferences: I am comfortable being open and informal, but I know many people who are more comfortable maintaining a clear line between work life and personal life. My barrier between work life and personal life is very low: all my Facebook friends (patrons, family members, etc.) know, for example, that we're trying to sell our house. Does that get in the way of my work relationships? I don't think so. If anything, letting people get to know me has strengthened my relationships with many of the faculty members and graduate students with whom I work.

So what do I think is out of bounds? I mentioned political and social views in the culture section, but it's worth mentioning again, because you want to be careful not to alienate people, even if your views are similar to those of the people in your networks. Most extreme forms of opinion are unpleasant to read, and friends will quickly block or defriend you if you rant too much. I also try not to whine or complain a lot. Everybody has bad days, and constant pleas for sympathy are almost as grating as political rants. If using your social media accounts as a platform for potentially contentious self-expression is a priority for you, perhaps it would be prudent to avoid friending your patrons.

I picture my social networks as a big cocktail party, where everyone is mingling and chatting, and hot-button debates over religion and politics are off the table for the evening. I'm lucky that some of the things I enjoy most in my free time (food, art, music, movies) overlap with my work life, so even personal content is frequently work-related to some extent. Some of what I post is purely work-related ("Hey! Look at this new book I just bought!") but some posts are just personal anecdotes or interesting things I've stumbled across, and I think posts like that are appropriate as part of the balance.

Work-Life Balance

Consider: Do you want to be connected to your patrons during evening, weekend, and holiday hours? Do you enjoy being able to leave your work at work?

Artists and scholars don't stop working at 5 p.m. on Friday. They work whenever inspiration strikes, whenever they have time to write, read, paint, or compose, and they frequently have Facebook and Twitter open while they are

working. When a question arises, it's simple for them to pop into Facebook, send me a direct message or post on my wall, and keep on working. They can easily see whether I'm online or not, which helps them gauge how long it might take me to respond.

I know what you're thinking: "This sounds like a great way to get librarian burn-out!" But honestly, it hasn't been an overwhelming amount of work for me, mostly because I have limited my online connections to teaching faculty and graduate students. In addition, the casual nature of social media implies that it might take me a bit longer to respond to a question than my typical workday email response time. My social media presence is less about providing a service point and more about networking, getting to know the people I work with, and being a part of the conversation.

Conclusion

Using social media can augment your work as a librarian if you use it wisely and take cues from the people with whom you're connected. It's one more way to bring people in and establish relationships. But it's not for everyone, and that's okay! I hope this column will help those of you who are on the fence to decide: to friend or not to friend?

EDWARDS-JOHNSON

Many librarians feel the need to friend customers on a one-to-one basis. Some intend to fill a social networking gap left by the library as a whole (e.g., a Facebook page that has not been updated since 2010). Some friend customers to perform outreach to a population they feel is underserved through the existing library services, such as performing liaison work for a specific department. And some librarians simply really like particular customers and want to cultivate friendships with them just like they would any other amiable new acquaintance: "Sally always brings her 5 kids to story time and they are SO cute!"

Although it's understandable that librarians would find any of these reasons appealing, individual social media relationships between librarians and their library users can place both the library and the librarian in difficult positions.

When patrons become accustomed to relying on a social media connection with an individual librarian as their portal to library services, then that librarian's personal Facebook or Twitter essentially comes to supersede the library's official communication channels. Personal connections are valuable, certainly, there is nothing like successful one-on-one contact for establishing positive associations with the library in a patron's mind. But what happens when Marian the Friendly Librarian personally friends all "her" customers and then goes on sabbatical for a year? For those friended customers who were in the habit of going to Marian on Facebook when they needed library services, the library has suddenly become inaccessible until she returns or until an individual relationship

is formed with a new librarian. Can we depend on patrons to find a new librarian or the library's official Facebook page now that Marian has stopped responding on hers? Or will they just go elsewhere for information? And even if the individually friended librarian's absence is not so dramatic—say, a week's vacation, or even just an afternoon off—why should her absence be allowed to create a barrier to the customer? Why, in an age of 24/7 access to information, should customers have to wait on one person's schedule to get access to library services?

Second, the content of the librarian's posts may become an issue. Perhaps Marian the Friendly Librarian decides she wants to support a really, really unpopular political cause that ends up alienating a large section of the service population she personally friended. Does Marian's discussion of her politics on her ostensibly personal Facebook page (which is not personal anymore, since she uses it professionally) imply an endorsement by the organization that employs her? Do the legal realities matter when the library cardholder isn't going to take the time to parse the difference? In the customer's mind, their library is endorsing a stance different from their own, potentially causing negative associations that cause the customer to use the library less frequently or avoid it altogether. As reference librarians, after all, one of our jobs is to be approachable. But when your customers know and dislike your political stances, will they continue to be willing to approach you?

Maybe Marian has a falling out with the library, and her employment is terminated on less than favorable terms. What are the implications for the organization should she use her audience of onetime customers/remaining Twitter followers to air her grievances about her former employer?

Ultimately, depending on friendships with customers via librarians' personal social networking accounts to deliver library services makes the users too dependent on one librarian. It tells customers that unless one specific librarian "friend" is still employed at the library, in good personal standing, and currently monitoring the relevant social media accounts, there is no help to be had from the library.

That approach also allows library administrations to avoid developing or organizing an identity for the organization as a whole online, which is to the library's overall detriment. Administrators in our organizations should make social networking with our users a priority. They can do this by creating a team to respond to customer inquiries via multiple points of access, including the library's official social media accounts. Take my library system as an example: I manage the Virtual Library of the Pioneer Library System, which provides online services to approximately 350,000 residents in central Oklahoma. Besides delivering all regular library services online, we also maintain a presence on social networks, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, FourSquare, YouTube, and Flickr. The administration of Pioneer Library System has made it a priority to have our hometown libraries where our library cardholders are located—both physically and digitally—and to provide consistently excellent customer service.

The responsibility is therefore shared among librarians, the communication channels are reliably open, and customers learn that no matter the venue through which they contact the organization, they will receive spectacular customer service in a professional, timely manner.

If the library has a presence on a social network and has a team dedicated to responding to the needs of followers (not "friends"), this builds the brand of the organization—not just one "friendly" individual. Think of it for the long range: Who would vote to increase funding for a library if only a handful of individuals are seen as Marian the Friendly Librarian? It creates a much better public face if the organization, as a whole, can be seen to respond to the needs of each individual user.

So what about Sally the story time regular? She's so nice, and she always loves the books Marian recommends, and her kids go to school with Marian's. Marian wants to friend Sally on whichever social networks they have in common—not to create a library service point, but out of personal fondness. Should she? This is a fine line to tread and, as in all things at the intersection of our personal and professional lives, the decision made will set a precedent. If Marian friends Sally, will Janet—whose obnoxious kid is also a regular at story time—feel slighted that Marian doesn't choose to socialize with her? How would that reflect on the library's approachability?

The rule of thumb my colleagues and I use is this: If the only relationship we have with someone is through our workplace, then we do not friend them on our personal social media accounts. If, however, we have other relationships besides librarian-patron (we know the person not just as a library user but also through our shared school, house of worship, sport, hobby, etc.) then we are free to friend them on the basis of the other relationship—not as "friendly librarian," but as "friendly fellow congregant" or "friendly first baseman." This guideline would allow Marian to tell Janet, "Apologies, I don't friend library patrons on my personal account. Sally and I know each other through the PTA, and that's why you saw me posting to her wall. But if you want to know more about the library's services, please be sure to follow our official [insert favorite social network] page for information on current events!"

In that case, Marian must remember not to cross that line between personal and professional. Sally can't be allowed to use Marian's Facebook as a library service point. If she needs help with her library account, Marian must—politely—steer her to the official channels.

Ultimately, librarians will do what seems best to provide services to those they view as "their" customers. And they will continue to work out inconsistent solutions until library administrators step in and develop a plan for how both their organizations and their individual employees interact with social media. It's in the best interest of our profession for our administrators to direct the innate customer service skills that librarians possess toward creating dynamic online social networking presences for our entire organizations, not just individuals.