Social Media and Readers' Advisory

New Zealand Experiences

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Guest Columnists**

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In this second and final instalment of a two-part readers' advisory series, Anwyll and Chawner present the findings and conclusion of their small-scale research project which examines the use of social media in New Zealand public libraries, with a focus on RA activities and practices. While focussing on New Zealand public libraries, the similarities in uses, reasons for adaptation to new technologies, and the conclusions are not bound by borders. They provide a glimpse into what other professionals are trying in an effort to enhance readers' advisory services outside of our own towns, states, and perhaps, countries. Even if you're half a world away, the familiar struggles, efforts, and technologies that readers' advisors are putting forth and introducing in New Zealand libraries to reach their readers in a digital environment reminds us that the next good read is only one click, and not one world, away.—*Editor*

The first column in this series identified the potential of social media, such as Facebook, blogs, and microblogs, to support readers' advisory (RA) services. This column presents the results of a small-scale survey examining the use of social media for RA in New Zealand public libraries, based on interviews with 15 librarians conducted in 2011.

REASONS FOR ADOPTION

Three main reasons were found to lead to the adoption of social media by public librarians: individual staff interest, attending conferences and forums, and monitoring trends.

Individual staff interest was mentioned by one third of the interviewees as a key reason for their adoption of social media. One commented that "it was driven by a keen staff member who has the support of library management to give things a go." Others explained that they saw the need for the service and initiated the work to "get the ball rolling." In some cases the implementation process began with a small-scale trial, which allowed library management to see how the tools were being used and for what purpose before making a formal commitment to adopt them.

Some interviewees found that attending forums and conferences like the annual LIANZA (Library and Information Association of New Zealand/Aotearoa) conference gave them the biggest push toward using social media tools. One interviewee noted that "at the conferences you could gain other librarians' ideas and how they're using it, so this then prompted me to try it at our library." This suggests that it is

important for libraries who are early adopters of social media and other new technologies to seek opportunities to share their experiences which may encourage others to do the same.

Some interviewees acknowledged the influence of trends when discussing their reasons for using and implementing social media tools. They saw that other libraries were starting to "jump on here" (meaning Facebook and Twitter) and it "seemed to be coming together for them." One interviewee said there was "pressure from the knowledge that others were doing it and we were getting left behind." Members of digital service teams often follow trends closely to identify new ways of delivering effective customer service or improving everyday practices.

OBJECTIVES IN USING SOCIAL MEDIA TOOLS

Interviewees identified three common objectives for using social media tools, discussed individually below.

The first was as a means of contacting library patrons, particularly those who are not everyday library users. One interviewee explained that it was important to be seen to be "reaching out to a different customer type, that will not come to the library or who is using the online catalog / resources." Similar comments were made by four other interviewees, suggesting that this is a common reason for choosing to use social media as a communication channel. One interviewee explained "it allows us to provide the opportunity to undertake RA services outside library walls." As the number of people who have mobile devices increases, extending library services to non-traditional virtual 'spaces' is increasingly important.

A second objective was the promotion of books and other materials. One interviewee mentioned that for RA, using social media "is more about new book titles, or new programs, we definitely tweet about the new books we have arriving each week." Other comments indicated that interviewees used these tools to highlight resources such as humorous titles that were already part of the collection, in addition to new books. A few of the interviewees explained that they deliberately choose resources that are "quirky" or "really different" to attract attention from their audience.

Engaging with library users via social media tools was another aim of the librarians interviewed as part of this project. The ability to have two way communication with library patrons through Twitter and Facebook was one of the key reasons these social media services were used. One interviewee said that this allowed "the librarian to engage with the borrowers and link them to information and readers' advisory tools, should they require it." This type of engagement is a significant aspect of RA, so capturing those comments or tweets and replying to them with relevant information shows how RA and social media can be combined effectively. Some interviewees noted that their Twitter followers responded to this interaction, saying "they mention us in their tweets or RT [retweet] our messages" and by "getting direct tweets from people saying positive things."

CONTENT OF SOCIAL MEDIA POSTINGS

There were broad similarities between the content of social media postings across all interviewees.

Most interviewees used social media tools to discuss books and other materials found in the library in online postings. Typical comments about content included:

- "new books every week, new titles"
- "books, book and movie / CD reviews"
- "new resources"
- "the external blog is pretty much about books and reading"
- "recommended reading for the teen demographic"
- "the content is new adult titles"

Many of the interviewees let their patrons know about new books on one or more social media channels before they are displayed or listed on the library's website.

One interviewee acknowledged that RA involves more than listing and promoting new books, saying "we will soon be doing a lot more RA by author recommendations and spotlights on particular genres." Another explained how easily social media tools can be used to provide an RA service: "If I find a book that looks interesting, I'll just type in the title, give the link to the catalogue, write a bit about it and give it a hash tag to say it is coming soon, especially for cooking or craft type books." This librarian has recognized patrons' interest in these types of books and uses Twitter to promote them to their library patrons.

LINKS IN SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

Links to articles or directly to the library catalog were commonly used within the various social media posts. These provided library patrons with direct information about a topic or book. Interviewees thought their users responded best when there were links in social media posts. One interviewee said "most users love links, they prefer the immediacy they provide." Library patrons often want to know more about a library event or book review they have just read about. Another explained that "the response to providing links is positive; we received online reservations as a result." However, this experience was not shared by all interviewees. Several of the interviewees in this study had limited or no feedback from links provided in their posts. In some cases the response to links in postings varied depending on which social media platform was used.

Interviewees using Facebook noted that users responded positively to the use of links on wall posts made by the RA and social media librarians. One commented "they definitely do, they 'like' the posts, make comments and hit the links." Two other interviewees also mentioned that links provided on Facebook have more success in gaining responses from patrons than Twitter. Facebook facilitates immediate interactive moments, and it also provides weekly user statistics that

are emailed directly to the librarians. These user statistics provide summaries of how many people have clicked on the links, visited the page, and written comments. This made it easy for interviewees who used Facebook to assess the impact of their postings and links.

However, despite the more positive response from Facebook users, in some ways Twitter benefits the most from using links because tweets are limited to 140 characters. This is often not enough space to inform readers about something important and interesting within the library. Examining participating libraries' Twitter streams showed that the most common links directed patrons back to the library's catalog to show additional details about a book or the current status of the material being discussed. Links were also given to larger booklists for more detailed reading suggestions. One interviewee explained "we do post links on Twitter when people have done reviews etc. to our online catalog."

INTERACTION

Twitter allows librarians to have one to one communication with library patrons who also use Twitter. Several interviewees commented on their interactions with patrons on Twitter, with one saying "what works most is the interaction on Twitter, when I catch a question and I answer it." These interactions usually involve research or book-related queries. If librarians responded within a short timeframe the conversation often continued. This interactive question and answer type approach was not limited to Twitter, and also took place through Facebook wall posts and blog comments, though to a more limited extent.

USE OF PROMOTIONAL LANGUAGE

A number of interviewees were conscious that their use of social media had a promotional goal. They explained that their choice of language was deliberate, and intended to have an effect. Examples included:

• "Using quotes from books or reviewers' words"
• "Did you know? Or Check this out!"
• "Hi, Wow is this a real book?"
• "We use images and blurbs"

These show that not all material posted on social media must be original. Using images and book covers can persuade a potential reader to find out more about the book mentioned. Promotional language like "check this out," as used by a few of the interviewees shows that public libraries want their material to be out on circulation not just sitting on the shelves within the library. One librarian explained that "the language is often a mirror of what has been output via print collateral, we try and remain consistent with other forms of promotion being used."

Two interviewees used the term "hook":

• "I try and have a hook as in something that's humorous or something that makes them want to click on it to find out more."
• "Have you ever seen such a thing?! Sort of hook lines or quirky top loaded comments, mainly so it hooks a reader."

A few of the interviewees were not consciously aware of using promotional language or tools in their social media posting. However, when their posts were examined, some were found to use promotional language, perhaps without realizing this was what they were doing.

GUIDELINES AND STYLE GUIDES

One topic that arose in the interviews was the use of guidelines or style guides for social media postings. Organizations create guidelines to ensure everyone is consistent in what they post and follows a similar structure. Seven of the 15 interviewees followed agreed guidelines. Three were in the process of setting up and creating guidelines for other team members to follow. Only five did not use formal guidelines. One of these said, "We are trying different styles to see what works" suggesting that they were conscious of the need for consistency, but still determining what would be best.

Council Guidelines and Restrictions

All New Zealand public libraries are part of a local council, which may have organizational policies and guidelines in place that determine what library staff can and cannot write about. Four of the interviewees were subject to council restrictions that applied to social media postings. Comments about this included:

• "We have to go through the council; the council now have some social media guidelines."
• "Our council has very specific stipulations on what we can and cannot post."
• "The council has a social media policy that outlines high level guidance about what you can output."

The councils have considerable control over what the social media and RA librarians in the sample can and cannot publish. In some cases the councils provided overall guidelines for what can be included in social media content. Comments by two of the interviewees noted that "posts to both our blog and Facebook cannot be political or negative of council or councils / governments" and "we can't say bad things about the book, it's a council policy."

In-House Guidelines and Recommendations

Guidelines were more common when more than one person

was involved in posting and contributing social media content. One interviewee commented "there were a few people twittering, I was like far out we need to have some kinds of guidelines so everyone is consistent." Each interviewee had similar ideas about what guidelines needed to cover. These included recommendations for how frequently posts should be written and updated, plus examples and prompts to ensure that content is consistent. The consensus was that Facebook should be updated only once a day so that the library didn't "bombard people with new information."

Examples of the content of the style guides included:

- "Try to keep tone casual without being too personal."
- "Be polite and respectful and those type of things."
- "Tweets: always with a link to the catalog or a review for RA."
- "Making sure you check your spelling and punctuation / capitalization."

One interviewee indicated that they had developed eight commandments for social media postings, which included:

- Be social. You only get out what you put in.—Share the love
- Take risks, just try something
- Own it. Content creators should own our Web 2.0 presence
- Know the game. Know the platform before you represent your organization

Another explained that they used guidelines set out by social media and web writing professionals and offered this quote: "Lead with the need. Get to the point. Then stop."[1]

EVALUATION

Most of the interviewees used a range of formal and informal techniques to measure their success in using social media to engage members of the library's community.

Seven of the interviewees identified the number of 'followers' they were gaining on Twitter and their blogs and how many patrons 'liked' their Facebook page as a key measure of success. One said "initially it will be on just the number of people we can get as 'friends.'" Numbers of followers and likes provided the interviewees with evidence that people are following them and are interested in what they have to say. One commented "success to me is that we're still getting followers and it hasn't dropped off."

Gaining customer interaction through social media platforms was largely seen as a success by the interviewees. Interaction typically involved staff discussing books in the collection with library patrons or responding to general reference inquiries. One interviewee noted that "any engagement via these channels is seen as a success." Interaction was not limited to dialogues between staff and patrons. It also included the retweeting of tweets and patrons interacting with each other through comments on Facebook wall and blog posts.

Customer feedback was considered important in determining the success of the library's social media content. Feedback confirmed that patrons read the social media posts and subsequently comment on what they think or what they would like to see more of. One interviewee said "we have had customer feedback via Twitter and we've been able to act on it and show we listened." Another provided a quote from one of their patrons: "I have found so many books to try from you're [sic] . . . Tweets." One interviewee also noted that another form of feedback comes from Facebook, "we have the 'likes' and this is telling us is what we're doing is effective."

One third of the interviewees used bit.ly (a URL shortening service) for links in their posts. Bit.ly provides tracking statistics that identify how many links were followed over a designated period, and which types of domains they came from. One interviewee explained the main reason for using bit.ly was to get feedback, to "see how many people have clicked on our link." Another interviewee evaluated the success of using links in social media posts by "mainly looking at the bit.ly links and how many people click on the link."

Not all interviewees measured the success of their social media initiatives. One explained "we haven't spent time trying to evaluate the success . . . we feel that reaching a few customers is better than none." One interviewee had not been using the tools long enough to start the evaluation process, saying that it is "too early to say, but probably necessary to stay in the game."

Barriers to social media adoption

Six interviewees found staff limitations to be a barrier to actively using social media tools within the library for an RA purpose. One of these involved a lack of knowledge and experience in using social media. Two interviewees commented that it was an "uphill battle against lack of . . . expertise by other staff" and "it is a big learning curve for most staff." In some cases, interviewees reported that only authorized staff were able to access social media tools such as Facebook, limiting the library's ability to involve more staff in their social media projects.

One library in the sample encountered technical restrictions in using social media, which was "the council firewall not permitting library staff access to any of the tools." Library staff were able to overcome this barrier by emphasising the importance of social media for communication:

> After the explosion in publicity about the importance of these sites after various international political uprisings and the Christchurch Earthquake, the Library Management team were able to successfully demonstrate that social media is not merely for "recreation and socializing" but is a key communication tool. Consequently all staff have now been granted access during work hours and is [are] encouraged to browse these sorts of sites to become more familiar with them. This has resulted in a lot of the staff becoming more confident when dealing with queries from patrons utilising free Internet access in the library.

Having sufficient staff time to use social media tools was an issue for five of the interviewees. One interviewee said, "we would like to extend the use of social media but are restricted both by IT issues and staff time restraints." Another provided a similar example: "It feels like library web master should be a full time job in itself . . . the amount of time and energy put into social media for the library reflects this."

Limited staff interest and input into what to use as content on the social media tools and also about RA in general were additional challenges identified by interviewees. One commented: "I wish more staff would take interest in it and promote it [RA] but it's very hard." Another said: "the tools are great for RA but just wish there was more feedback and input from staff as far as that goes to make it a more successful and a more in-depth service." Approaching other staff for ideas about material to include on social media sites was not always successful. One interviewee found that "librarians are not willing to share their knowledge about books and they don't want their reviews to go public." In this case other staff members were capable of supplying content but were not comfortable sharing their views of material in the public arena. Some interviewees had set up internal staff blogs and provided access to Twitter to allow other staff to familiarise themselves with using these platforms as a way of overcoming these barriers.

Awareness of Readers' Advisory
The findings of this research show that interviewees acknowledged the positive effects of offering RA in the online environment. Comments supporting this included:

- "It's invaluable, not hard to implement and not as much time required as many might think to manage and maintain."
- "I am a staunch advocate of RA; I believe we don't do enough of it in our libraries generally."
- "Of all the uses of social media in the library, using it for the purposes of reader advisory would be one of the best ways of getting information out."

Incorporating RA services in public libraries and especially through social media platforms is a work in progress for some of the interviewees. However, a few found it difficult to distinguish RA from current awareness, saying "for myself, I have trouble defining the difference between RA and new books." This suggests that there is some confusion about what RA is and what kinds of services it provides.

Effect of Library Size
The library's size appeared to affect the extent and nature of its use of social media for RA. Smaller libraries, which had fewer resources and staff, were generally later to adopt social media than larger libraries. However, larger libraries were often subject to greater council restrictions than smaller public libraries. The larger libraries were more likely to have dedicated digital teams able to utilize social media tools for RA purposes, while this was not always possible in a small library.

GOOD PRACTICE FOR IMPLEMENTING SOCIAL MEDIA–BASED RA

A number of suggestions for good practice in using social media to deliver RA services emerged from the interview findings. These will be particularly useful for new RA and social media librarians considering implementing a similar service.

Use Promotional Language and Techniques
The language used in social media postings is important in gaining users' attention. It needs to be friendly, and using a 'hook' encourages readers to click on the link and read further details on the library's catalog. One promotional technique that interviewees found to be effective was the inclusion of book covers in blog or Facebook updates.

Include Suggestions
Most interviewees used their social media content to suggest book, CD, and DVD titles customers might be interested in. Some interviewees also provided the titles of new acquisitions. Reviewing a book on Facebook or the library's blog was also common. One interviewee recommended focusing on particular genres or authors, and including librarians' recommendations from within the library's collection.

Provide Links
Incorporating links to specific items in the library's catalog or to information about a topic is stimulates readers' interest, and may also generate interaction.

Develop Guidelines
Guidelines provide librarians with structure, ideas, and templates for updating social media content. They also ensure consistency in the tone of social media postings when more than one person posts to an account, or when staff responsible for posting updates change.

Measure Success
Being able to measure the effect of social media content is important to prove to management that the content is being used. Simple methods include tracking the number of followers or likes for each social media site over time, and using the URL shortening service bit.ly, or an equivalent, when posting links.

Involve More Library Staff

It is increasingly important for pubic librarians to familiarize themselves with social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, or blogs, because library users may expect them to understand how to use these services. Some of the interviewees addressed the need for this within their own libraries by setting up internal staff blogs and allowed access to Twitter for staff to familiarize themselves on using these platforms.

CONCLUSION

The research forming the basis of this column examined how and why a sample of New Zealand public libraries used social media tools for RA. The findings show that this is a simple, but effective way of extending library services to the online environment, providing new ways of interacting with public library customers. Interviewees' main aims for using social media tools were promoting books, providing alternative communication channels, and engaging with library patrons. Many of the interviewees are implementing suggestions for good practice from previous literature, and the findings extend these with additional suggestions.

Reference

1. Gerry McGovern, *Killer Web Content: Make the Sale, Deliver the Service, Build the Brand* (London: A & C Black, 2006), 82.