
The Insta-Story

A New Frontier for Marking and Engagement at the Sonoma State University Library

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This month's author, Catherine Fonseca from Sonoma State University Library, shares some innovative and fun ideas on how libraries can use the Instagram Stories feature to engage with their audience in multiple ways. We guarantee you will find a tidbit you can use in your own library.—*Editor*

Libraries have widely adopted social media to communicate with their public. Instagram, in particular, is increasingly used within the communities we serve, enjoying a popularity second only to Facebook. But is your library utilizing this platform to its fullest potential? Given the relatively recent introduction of the Instagram Story (colloquially termed “Insta-Story”) in 2016 and its many associated filters, features, and upgrades since, it may be worth revisiting your library's approach to social media marketing. Learn how to use Instagram Stories to not only successfully promote events and resources, but also deeply engage patrons in a way that enriches their experience and perception of the library.

WHY INSTAGRAM STORIES?

Instagram is a free, mobile, social networking application used for photo and video sharing. Take a picture, edit it, and then share it with your friends and followers. This is the routine that Instagram users—over one-third of the US population¹—follow and enjoy. In addition to content appearing on a user's Instagram feed or profile grid, Instagram also offers its users the additional layer of the Instagram Story. The Stories feature—which allows users to stitch multiple photos and videos into a short, ephemeral slideshow that vanishes after twenty-four hours—was launched mid-2016. Despite mirroring the pioneering model of Snapchat launched in 2013, Instagram Stories now counts 500 million daily users² to Snapchat's mere 191 million.³

The Instagram Stories of accounts you follow appear in a bar at the top of your feed. To view someone's Instagram Story, you simply tap on their profile photo, and their Story will appear full-screen, showing you all of the content they've posted within the last twenty-four hours. The content will play in chronological order, from oldest to newest, and viewers can navigate by pausing, skipping ahead, skipping back, or jumping ahead entirely to another person's story. Unlike regular posts, there are no public likes or comments, but there are opportunities for the viewer to engage with a Story. In an effort to drive greater engagement among its core young adult user base, Instagram recently revamped its

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Stories product with the roll-out of new, interactive features and functions. These include the ability to add text, hand-drawings, hashtags, mentions, filters, geotags, gifs, emojis, polls, slider scales, open-ended question bubbles, count-downs, music, and camera effects to one's content.

In contrast to its main competitors like Snapchat and Facebook, Instagram stands out as the only top photo-sharing or social networking platform that demonstrates consistent and continued growth within the last three years.⁴ So where lies the appeal? Regarding the Stories feature, Instagram has managed to successfully capitalize on ephemeral expression and perfect the formula for disappearing content. Experts cite a number of reasons for the popularity of impermanent social media content. The exclusivity or the you-had-to-be-there element of disappearing content plugs into "FOMO," or the fear of missing out: a big concern among Millennials. The ephemerality also offers an alternative to careful curation of a perfect social media image. Given it vanishes after twenty-four hours, the Instagram Story requires less commitment and alleviates pressure to post highly polished or on-brand content. In essence, Instagram Stories are fun and allow users to express themselves more authentically. They combat the redundancy of viral content found on other social media sites since their temporality forces fresh content and lends itself to sharing daily activities and more intimate self-expressions.⁵

The exclusivity, authenticity, casualness, and intimacy captured by Instagram Stories offers organizations like libraries an important opportunity to genuinely connect with and engage the communities they serve. Besides, marketing and Instagram Stories go hand in hand. In fact, 33 percent of the most viewed stories come from businesses and the platform offers highly insightful metrics. Instagram Story metrics are quite sophisticated when compared with competitors like Facebook and Snapchat, providing data around impressions, views, replies, and profile visits while also making it easier to poll followers and providing direct notifications for geolocations and mentions. So if your library is not already marketing through Instagram Stories, the brand benefits associated with disappearing content are compelling reasons to add this medium to your organization's social media strategy. As more and more Internet users choose disappearing content as a way to communicate and interact online, libraries should consider ways they can thoughtfully and effectively use Instagram Stories to reach, inform, and create dialogue with their respective communities.

A MARKETING TOOL

Libraries mainly use their social media platforms for traditional marketing—namely, to inform the public about library collections, services, and resources.⁶ Indeed, Joo, Choi, and Hyun Baek found that among the 151 US public libraries surveyed, nearly half of their social media content related to promoting library events alone.⁷ With more than 50 percent

of business accounts having created an Instagram Story in the last month,⁸ Instagram Stories are quickly changing the way businesses all over the world reach their target customers—creating new, compelling avenues for them to stand out. Similarly, Instagram Stories offer libraries new opportunities to promote and advertise to their audiences in a fresh, immersive, and concise way. But how do you launch an effective marketing campaign using the Instagram Story feature?

Less Effort, More Reach

Remember, Instagram Stories are fun to consume largely on account of their transience and low stakes. Viewers expect a less formal, less polished experience when viewing Stories. The authenticity that comes with Instagram Story's throw-away format should be applied by libraries as well. In short, effortlessness should be the name of the game. Capture or download a generic background photo, write some text, slap on some stickers or emojis, add a hashtag, and call it a day! Take for example, Sonoma State University (SSU) Library's (@ssulibrary) promotion of its Pan y Café event series, where the university library offers students free pan dulce (traditional Mexican sweetbreads), hot beverages, and a chance to decompress and chat with other visitors. To advertise the event, they simply enhanced a downloaded photo from Google Images using hashtags, geolocations, and a variety of text detailing event logistics. In total, this content took less than two minutes to create (figure 1).

Make Them Chuckle

Instagram Story viewers don't want perfection—they want personality. Oftentimes, the best stories are those that elicit laughter and brighten someone's day, so incorporate humor and quirkiness into your promotional content. In advertising the Pan y Café event series, the SSU Library has experienced great success publicizing those events using Mexican bread puns. For example, one Story featured a poll asking viewers to identify themselves as either "sweeter than *pan dulce*" or "self-*conchas*," a play on words of a type of Mexican sweet bread (figure 2). Not only did this playful presentation of an upcoming event elicit a high number of poll responses, it also provoked a number of heart, laughing, and clapping Emoji reactions—a quick-style response where viewers can send a reaction from a limited set of emojis directly to the person who posted the Story. Sharing a humorous, engaging Story will likely resonate with your social media audience in a way that enhances the promotional presentation of a resource or event.

Host a Takeover

Adding Instagram influencers to your social media marketing strategy is an invaluable way to not only increase your follower base but also drive promotional messaging and improve user awareness of library services, collections,

personnel, and events. Invite someone with a large following to take over your library's account for the day. In the days leading up to the event, be sure to build some hype to remind users where and when to tune in to the takeover. Throughout the day, the influencer leading the takeover can plug certain services or resources. This subtle type of promotion is quite effective for libraries looking to increase reach and generate understanding of library offerings. One of the most successful campaigns by the SSU Library was a takeover by Baby Lobo, the stuffed mascot frequently featured in Sonoma State University's general account (figure 3). The takeover occurred at the beginning of the Fall semester and intended to introduce new students to library policies, services, resources, spaces, and staff. The 'cuteness' factor of providing Baby Lobo with props greatly enhanced the takeover.

A TRANSFORMATIVE TOOL

While the Instagram Story can be useful for communicating to audiences about library offerings, don't limit yourself to just posting for promotion or advertising. Expand your social media objectives beyond marketing to include posting for the sake of improving user perceptions of your organization. We all know the deleterious effects of library anxiety on potential patrons, so take to Instagram Stories to help combat library misconceptions or stereotypes. Instagram Stories are a low-stakes platform open to experimentation when it comes to producing fun content that can render in-person library spaces and people more approachable and less intimidating.

Think Less About Posting and More About Programming

Rather than a place to just dump random information in no particular order, Instagram Stories are the perfect place to invite your followers along on a story that you might not otherwise be inclined to share on your regular feed. Remember that you can still be authentic AND curated at the same

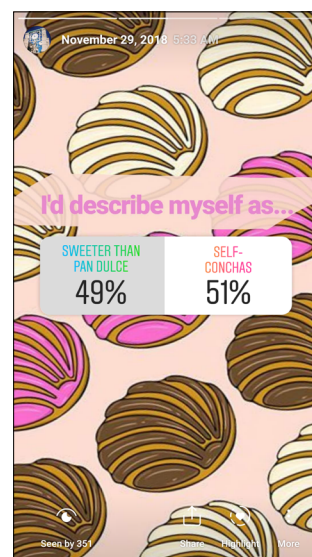
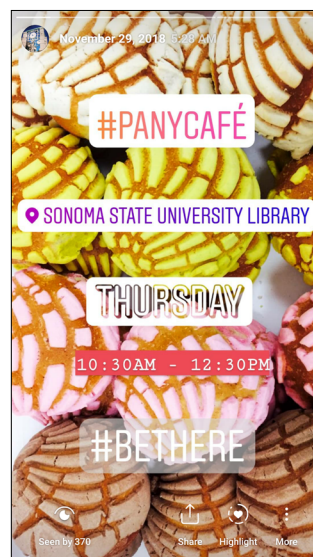


Figure 1. An Instagram Story advertising SSU Library's Pan y Café series that efficiently and attractively communicates all the necessary details within the allotted 15 seconds. Credit: @ssulibrary

Figure 2. Humorous, promotional content like this Instagram Story provide a charming complement to more descriptive or informational posts. Credit: @ssulibrary

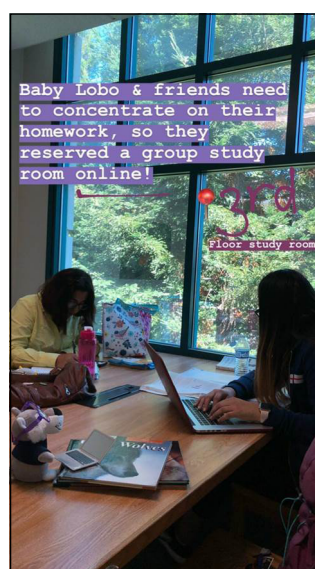


Figure 3. Baby Lobo, a prominent social media influencer at SSU, took over the SSU Library's account at the beginning of the Fall 2018 semester to inform students about library policies and support services. Credit: @ssulibrary

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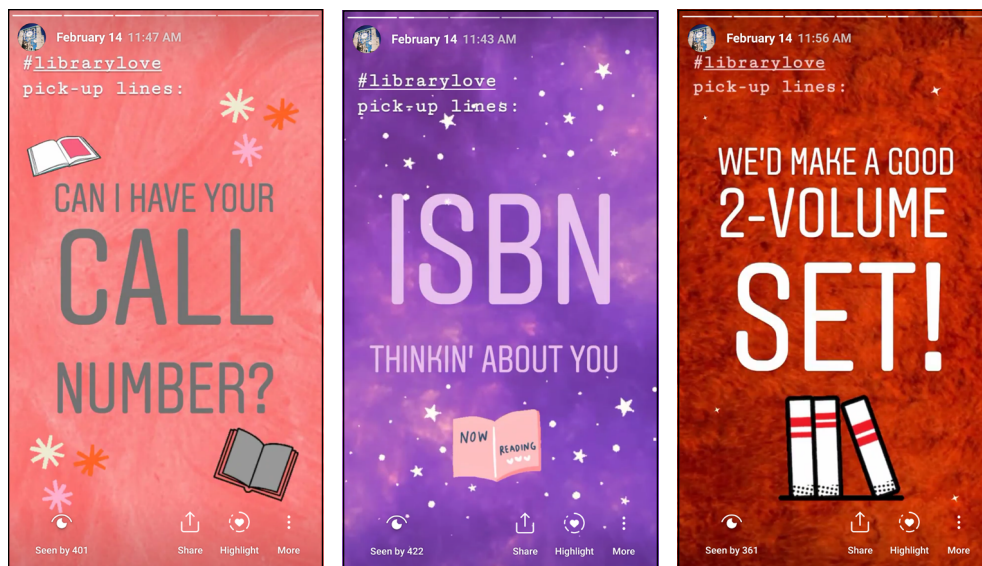


Figure 4. Posts can merely be fun and entertaining without specifically being tied to service or resource promotion. Credit: @ssulibrary

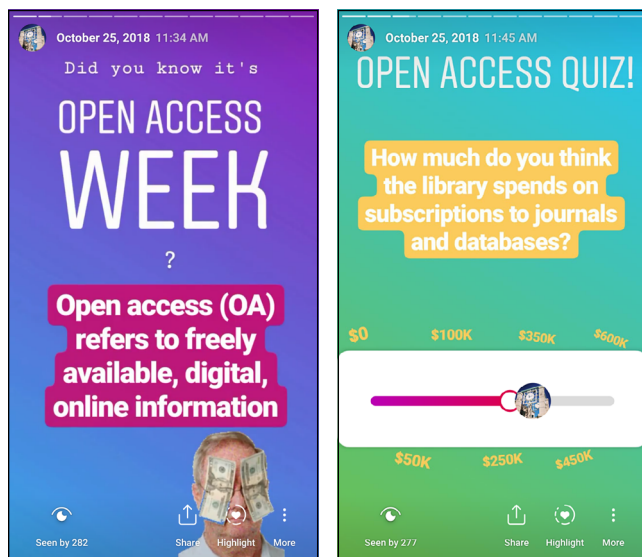


Figure 5. The SSU Library took to Instagram Stories to teach viewers about open access and that “Information Has Value,” an ACRL frame. Credit: @ssulibrary

time. Consider treating your library’s Instagram Story like a TV network with scheduled programming for the week or even recurring episodes that happen on particular days of the week. More importantly, think about the ways you can tie your posts into a theme with the ultimate goal of entertaining your audience. Thinking thematically about what kind of entertainment you’ll be sharing and how your Story will flow will help you craft a more addictive, cohesive, and consistent experience for your viewers.

Take, for example, the SSU Library’s recent #Library-Love Instagram Story series celebrating Valentine’s Day (figure 4). Instead of tying the post into promotion of

collections or services, the posts were merely a thematic series presented to entertain audiences. They were visually connected through the consistent use of a hashtag introduction in the upper left-hand corner: “#library-love pick-up lines.” Accompanying the cohesive visual template are humorous pick-up lines revolving around library-related elements.

Use the Right Accessories

Take advantage of Instagram Stories’ many features to enhance your content and stimulate your audience.

Instagram Stories boasts a

number of post-upload edits and add-ons that can increase the fun factor of your content. Consider adding a popular or library-related song to your next Story. Or perhaps integrate a few funny GIFs into your content (Kanye West facial expressions are a staple on the SSU Library account). Maybe even poke fun at the library by including a self-deprecating hashtag. The possibilities are endless, so you may be tempted to throw the whole kitchen sink at a single Story. Resist this urge and don’t let the text, filters, and icons and emojis distract from the story you are telling. Everything you add onto your Story images should complement the message, not distract from it.

If you’re attempting to break down the stereotype of libraries as dated institutions and librarians as stodgy, serious gatekeepers of information, incorporating a sense of humor into the library’s Instagram Stories can be key!

AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL

Beyond advertising and entertainment, Instagram Stories also furnish libraries with the opportunity to deliver educational content in a concise, refreshing way. Given that libraries are leaders of learning in many of our communities, it seems obvious that librarians involved in their organization’s social media strategy should also incorporate teaching into their content. The Instagram Story provides a quick, engaging format that appears perfectly suited to a mobile learning experience. Some emerging research appears to corroborate this. Davis, Snyder, and Widmar found that social media blends education, socialization, and entertainment in just the right balance to actively engage student learning.⁹ Furthermore, a 2018 study found that the visually dominant platform of Instagram was much more conducive

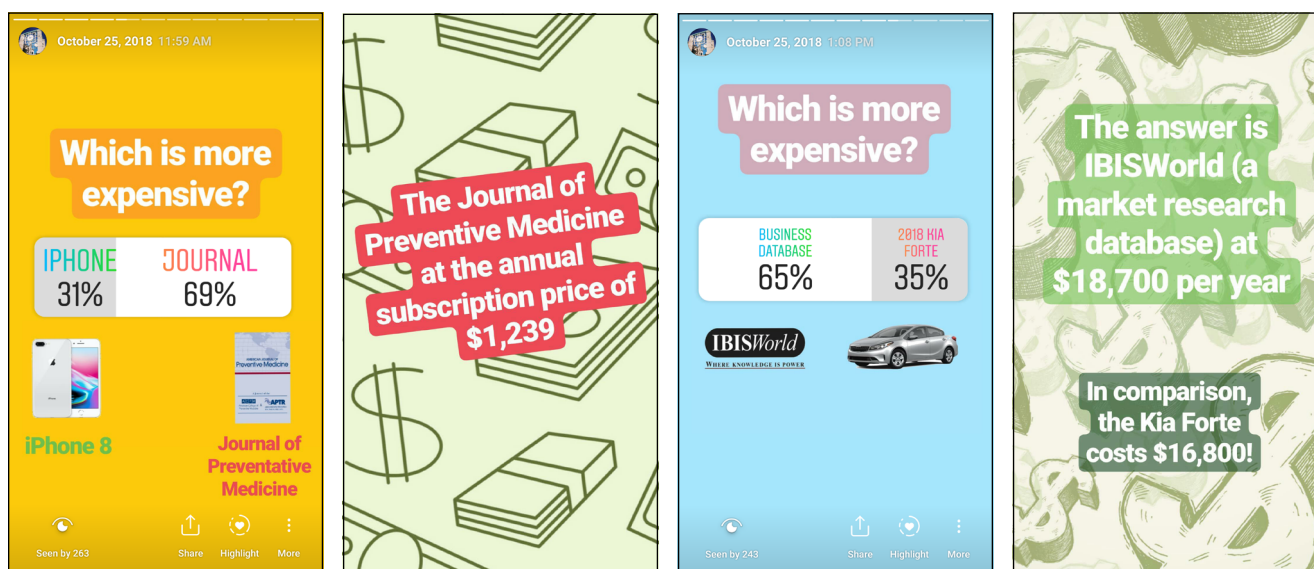


Figure 6. Interactive elements of the open access Instagram Story learning module. Credit: @ssulibrary

to long-term learning than text-oriented platforms like Twitter.¹⁰ Hence, Instagram Stories present libraries with a chance to reach learners where they naturally are and utilize digital storytelling to create a learning-friendly environment.

Incorporate Some #InfoLit

One type of teaching that can be folded into Instagram Stories includes information literacy instruction. Using ACRL's Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education as a guide,¹¹ libraries can begin to compile a series of informative photos, videos, and interactive elements that speak to these knowledge practices.

To illustrate, Sonoma State University Library created a learning module specifically for the Instagram Story format to celebrate Open Access Week and deepen audience understanding of the "Information Has Value" frame (figure 5). The module includes a definition of open access but is accompanied by activities that facilitate an understanding of the disproportionate pricing of the current publishing model in the United States and an appreciation for the advantages associated with open access publishing. These activities include a sliding poll asking viewers to guess the amount of money the library spends on journal and database subscriptions as well as a "What's More Expensive?" quiz asking viewers to guess between a household item's price and that of a scholarly publication (figure 6). By the end of the module, viewers had an understanding of information as a commodity (often an expensive one in the academic world), could articulate the purpose of the open access movement, and could recognize the library's role in purchasing and providing access to subscription-based publications.

Share Library Values

Libraries can also use Instagram Stories to teach viewers about issues and core values related to librarianship. Take, for example, the matter of intellectual freedom and protections granted by the First Amendment. For Banned Books Week in 2018, the SSU Library account posted to its Story explaining the destructive effects of censorship, the ethical implications of restricting information, and the significance of defending free speech rights. Along with informative textual posts, the series also includes a BuzzFeed-type quiz utilizing the Story polling sticker. The quiz asked viewers to guess the title of a banned book based on the complaint lobbied against the book (figure 7).

These are just a few approaches to integrating instructional components into an Instagram Story. Given how untested the waters are for libraries, the Instagram Story format is ripe for exploration and innovation when it comes to producing engaging, educational content.

A PARTICIPATORY TOOL

Your library's social media strategy need not resemble just a one-way dissemination of information. Instead, it can be a two-way conversation between you and your audience. The Instagram Story's latest feedback tools, found on the sticker menu, create various avenues for such dialogues that go beyond direct messaging. Ask your followers about their opinions on policy changes, how often they'd like to receive e-mails, their favorite authors, what suggestions they have for future programming, how library services can be improved, what kind of social media content they'd like to see from your organization in future, and so on. If you're looking for new ways to get real-time input from your audience,

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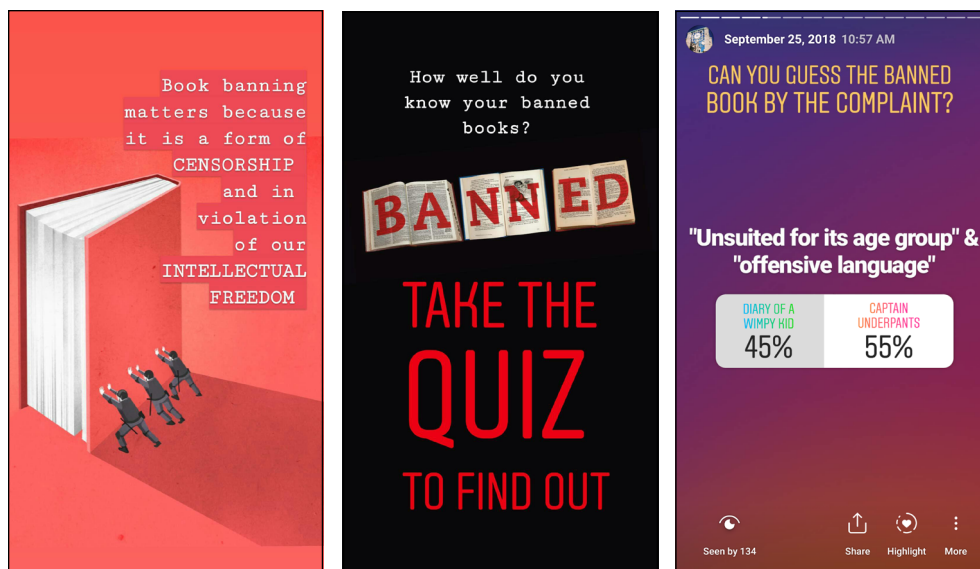


Figure 7. 2018 Banned Books Week Quiz. Credit: @ssulibrary

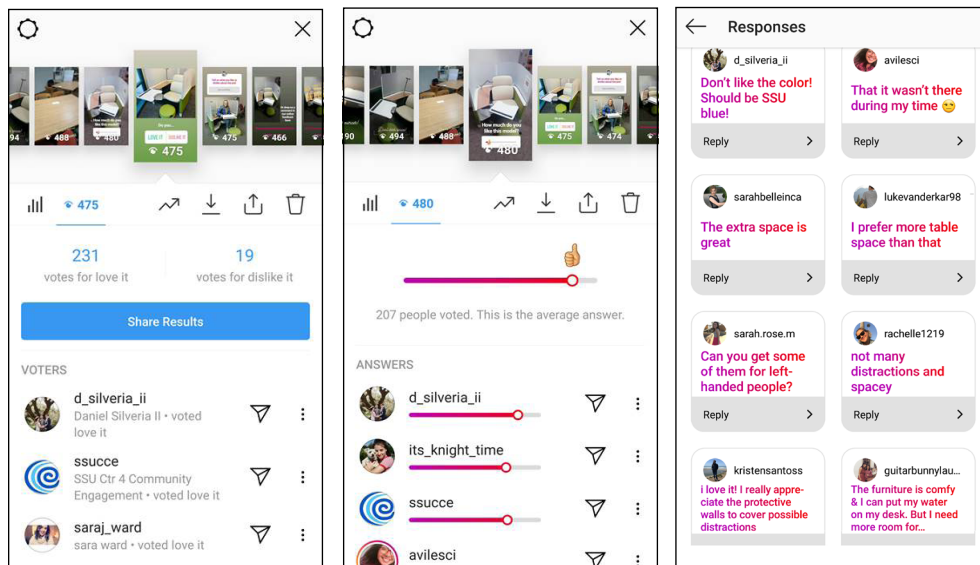


Figure 8. Instagram Stories provided key insights into furniture purchasing decisions. Credit: @ssulibrary

feedback features found on Instagram Stories will provide you with a wealth of insight and high response rate.

Elicit Useful Feedback

Including your Instagram followers in library decision-making is a great way to involve your audience and gain community buy-in. By asking questions with polls and questions, you can get direct feedback from your target audience. Be sure to ask the right questions and keep them straightforward. Customize your poll's answer options to capture more than just yes-no input and reflect truly useful data

points. To garner high participation, try to create eye-catching visuals and questions that will compel your followers to vote. To view your poll results, go to your own Story poll and swipe up. And don't worry when your Story disappears after 24 hours, you will still have access to poll results in your Stories archive, which can be accessed by the rewind icon located in the right-hand menu of your profile page. Once your Instagram Story poll is complete, do not forget to share the results!

The SSU Library has relied heavily on Instagram Stories for assessment and incorporating student voices in important library decisions. This feedback channel has proved particularly invaluable since last year saw the dissolution of the library's student advisory council due to poor attendance. For example, the library has been considering library furniture updates and received a sample workstation to test student response to the unit. We received a diversity of input regarding the library workstation, including both poll results and open-ended comments. Our multi-answer poll garnered a total of 250 responses, our sliding scale poll garnered 207 votes, and

we received 38 comments through our Open Question sticker (figure 8).

We also offered a virtual tour of the unit, presented with fun Superzoom filters (figure 9). This garnered feedback from our commuter and off-campus students—a significant demographic on our campus—who may not have tested the unit in-person during the demo's short stay at the library. Thus, the SSU Library was able to gather responses from a group of students offering a significantly different perspective on library furnishings and environment.

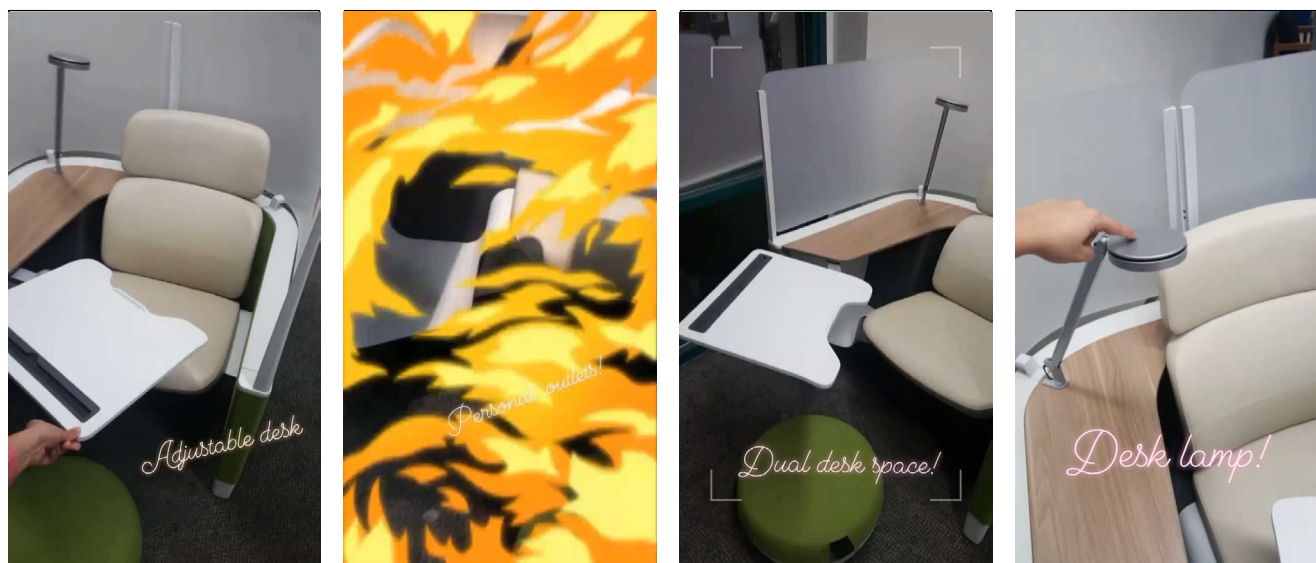


Figure 9. It is important to contextualize your assessment campaigns in a fun, engaging way. Open this PDF in Adobe Reader or view the HTML version to play the short videos. Credit: @ssulibrary

A REFERENCE TOOL

Nearly all libraries provide some form of reference services, oftentimes through various mediums including telephone, e-mail, chat, in-person, and even text messages. Virtual reference is embraced in one way or another by the majority of libraries as a way to meet users' online information-seeking behaviors and increasing preference for digital venues. Yet social media appears to be an untapped virtual format for providing reference services. Given the popularity of social media as a communication channel, it may be worth considering integrating reference services into Instagram Stories.

Host a Q&A or #AMA (Ask Me Anything)

One possible way to offer reference help through an Instagram Story is to host a Q&A or #AMA (Ask Me Anything) session. This can either be elicited asynchronously through an open-ended question sticker or by hosting a live, synchronous event. Instagram Live is a recent tool used to share a live video and connect with your followers in real time. When you begin streaming, Instagram notifies followers so they can tune in, and viewers can openly comment while you record. Question stickers, on the other hand, can be answered with less immediacy and at a librarian's discretion.

The SSU Library hosted a Q&A via Instagram Stories using a question sticker. The Q&A occurred just prior to the 2018 midterm elections and invited followers to ask any questions they had regarding the voting or registration process. A reference librarian answered the user directly in a private message but also shared the question and its corresponding answer to the library's Instagram Story so that

other users could benefit from those reference suggestions and resources (figure 10).

While Instagram Stories are relatively unexplored territory in library land, the medium's novelty should excite rather than intimidate. By traversing these new frontiers and embracing the Instagram Story's endless possibilities, your library can connect with its communities in engaging, enriching, and innovative ways.

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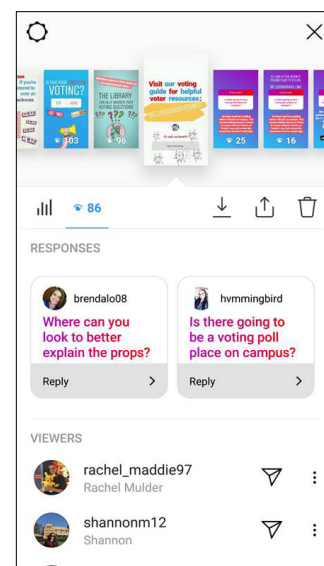


Figure 10. A Q&A hosted by the SSU Library in preparation for voting season. Credit: @ssulibrary

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