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A SWOT Analysis for Social Media in Libraries

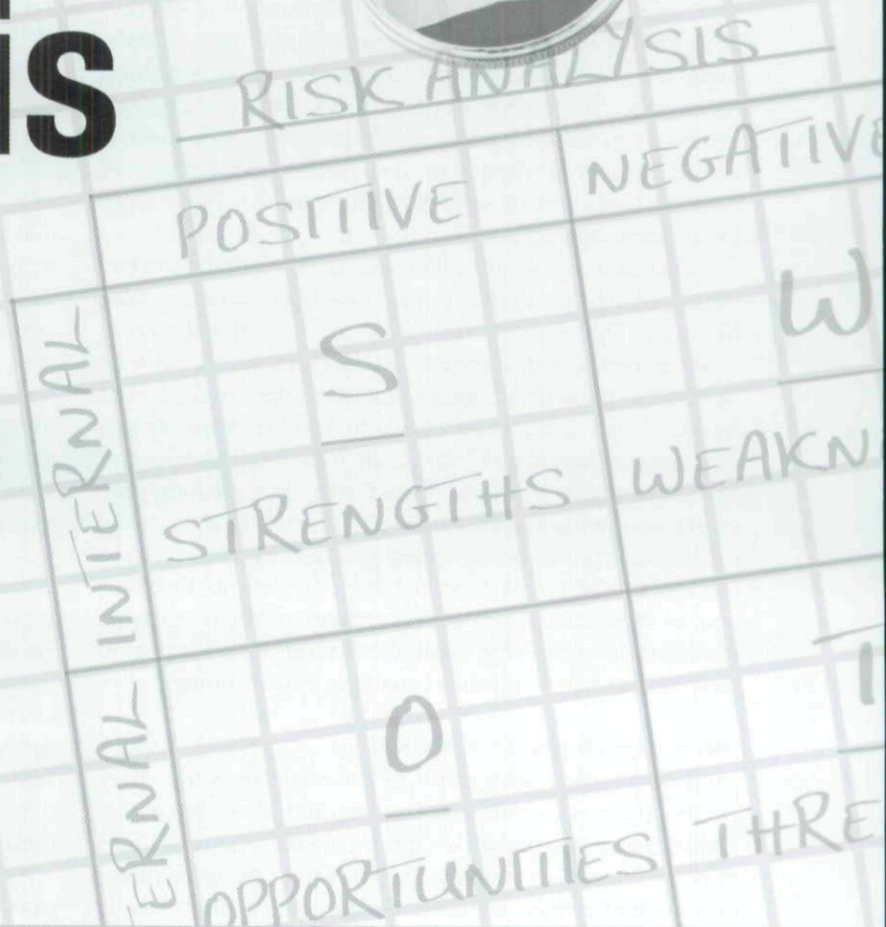
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A SWOT Analysis

for
Social Media
in Libraries



by Joe Fernandez

It's probably no secret that we live in an information-driven society in which people use information strategically for various purposes. Libraries are major information providers and facilitators. Moving from clay tablets to card catalogs and then to digital catalogs, libraries have always played a very important role in purveying information as a social commodity. In an extension to this traditional role, librarians have become some of the earliest adopters of social networking technologies in order to connect with their users. Although libraries have always connected people with information, social media is beginning to play an important role in marketing information to library users and in branding the library as a community hub.

Social media gained global attention with its very effective use in the political arena. The Obama presidential campaign will be studied for years to come as a very successful social media campaign. President Obama's campaign team basically crowdsourced his campaign in ways never before seen in the world of politics. He reached out to a large audience using electronic tools that are easily available to anyone.

Similarly, although on a different scale, librarians have been quietly marketing their resources and services and connecting with their users successfully using various forms of social media, in addition to their traditional communication tools. Librarians have realized the marketing potential of social media that sometimes bear frivolous-sounding

names—Digg, StumbleUpon, Flickr, Twitter, Delicious, Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Ning, and many others too numerous to be listed here. Library social media enable two-way communication between librarians and users; the input from users is crucial for libraries in making strategic decisions to provide optimum services to their clientele.

LIBRARIANS HAVE THE MOJO

Librarians have the mojo to change people's lives in unimagined ways thanks to all the information and information tools at their disposal. In their mission to connect with library users, librarians have adopted social media tools as part of the Library 2.0 movement. Interestingly enough, people, upon first encountering these tools, haven't always taken them seriously, writing them off due to the perceived silliness or frivolity of their names. Sometimes they have resisted using them only to find later that these social media tools are actually serious stuff. One of the greatest advantages of marketing with social media is that users can be anywhere to receive information-related news from librarians. They don't need to physically be in the library.

Social media offers libraries and librarians the opportunity to be more proactive in their outreach to their users. Just as businesses are using social media to develop customer loyalty, libraries are using social media to develop user loyalty. Considering that this kind of marketing is a growing phenomenon among libraries, a SWOT analysis of social media in libraries encourages librarians to take stock of their usage of social media, to guard against inappropriate applications, and to offer effective implementations. A SWOT analysis, presented in an orderly, methodical manner, will appeal to stakeholders hesitating about enabling the technology.

SWOT ANALYSIS FOR STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT

SWOT analyses are a staple of the business world. They enable business entities to understand their Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats. Such analyses drive businesses to strategically chart their business direction more effectively as they cultivate the customer loyalty that is ultimately crucial to their bottom line.

In a somewhat similar manner, a SWOT analysis of social media in libraries will give libraries the opportunity to use such media to develop a dynamic relationship between themselves and their users; they have the potential to produce more user-centered libraries that are constantly evolving to maintain their relevancy as they compete with other online resources. Such an analysis will allow librarians to take stock of their strengths and weaknesses, internal factors over which they have some leverage. It can be used to justify the use of social media to library management. The analysis will also allow librarians to recognize the opportunities that are out there that they can take advantage of, make them aware of the threats that they might face when they get into the Web 2.0 realm, and help them respond accordingly. This is a generalized SWOT analysis: You may want to adapt it to your particular circumstances.

STRENGTHS

First consider what strengths social media offer.

- Social media sites are usually freely available.
- They are easy to set up and ready to use almost immediately.
- Libraries can reach out to their clientele at large in the shortest time and in the most efficient manner.
- Users are able to contribute their own ideas about services and resources for libraries to consider.
- Social media allow librarians to think outside the box.
- Site administrators have some control over the content of their social media.

One of the greatest strengths of social media is the users' interaction with librarians. It is no longer a one-way flow of information from librarians; both librarians and users are actively engaged in the process of knowledge management. This also allows librarians to be very creative. For example, they can add pictures or video clips taken in the library that highlight the library's activities and resources; users will see that libraries are run by real people for real people with information needs. Many libraries post informative video clips on YouTube in very creative ways to reach their users.

Social networking applications such as Facebook and MySpace, for example, allow libraries to reach a wide range of library users because they are very common social tools used by millions of people. It is important to bear in mind that social tools such as Facebook and MySpace are used quite extensively by library users. And if users find the library's social media sites to be tastefully presented and useful, they would most likely add them to their own Facebook or MySpace so that they can do most of their research from one place; this is a great incentive for librarians to ensure that their social networking applications meet the needs of their users.

Many library users find pictures of the library quite attractive and oftentimes useful. Librarians can upload a limited number of photos to Flickr, for example, without any charge. These pictures can be great marketing tools if they are each captioned appropriately to reflect what the library has to offer. A picture of the reference desk, for example, could be captioned "Bring all your questions here." This is a great way to promote library resources and services.

Libraries have also started posting messages (or Tweeting) on Twitter, a microblogging service that allows quick, short messages to be disseminated. [For an expanded description of libraries on Twitter, see "Twitter for Libraries (and Librarians)" by Sarah Milstein, ONLINE, March/April 2009, pp. 34–35. —Ed.] Twitter has millions of users. It allows users to follow other Tweeters and re-Tweet (repeat) others' Tweets for the benefit of one's own library users. More and more libraries are beginning to make their presence felt on this microblogging social tool.

Librarians are also making their presence known on blogs in a big way. Blogs have been around for a decade, longer than most other social media. Many libraries use blogs to showcase their collections, workshops, and databases; they

also use blogs to make announcements. Blog tools such as Blogger, Typepad, and WordPress are very versatile. It is also possible to add library-related audio, video, and visual clips to these blogs, giving them greater user appeal.

Another of the strengths of social media is that librarians have the option to screen user input if they are deemed to be controversial or offensive.

WEAKNESSES

Offsetting the strengths of social media in libraries are the weaknesses.

- Social media tools have design constraints.
- Some social media have limitations on the amount of information you can input.
- Libraries may be exposing themselves to criticism.
- Some social media require downloading, which can be a problem in some organizations.

Blogs often limit your choice of website design to the ones offered by the providers. This, however, may not be a major weakness because librarians almost always find creative workarounds to these constraints. Flickr limits the number of pictures you can post to 200; beyond that number a subscription is required. One way around this limitation is to replace older pictures with new pictures and still remain within the assigned limit.

Twitter limits postings to 140 characters per post, but librarians tend to be very creative about how they Tweet their information and still stay within the designated limit.

Although social media also opens libraries to possible criticism, librarians should instead consider constructive criticism as an opportunity for them to improve their service. One factor librarians have to contend with, though, is that it takes a while for social media sites to build a large following among their target library users.

OPPORTUNITIES

Thinking ahead, there may be opportunities in social media that the library hasn't been effectively exploiting.

- Social media are excellent opportunities for librarians to market their services and collections to their clientele.
- Such media enable libraries to reach a wide range of their users and to attract new users.
- Libraries have the opportunity to hear from their users about the kind of services they want.

The return on investment (of time and skills) is huge. Librarians are reaching a huge audience of online users who are considered Digital Natives as well as those who are deemed to be Digital Immigrants. People who might not be familiar with the library, possibly viewing it as old-fashioned, can become users once they see the library using social media. Such media offer libraries greater outreach opportunities that were never available on such a scale in the past. These tools provide libraries with the capability of using a variety of means to connect with their users.

THREATS

It's not a totally rosy picture. To be objective, the analysis must include potential threats.

- Social media may be open to unsavory elements that can sabotage social websites in many ways.
- These sites are usually beyond the control of the librarians who manage them.
- Social media users can easily unsubscribe at the click of a button.

The threats faced by library social media are sometimes beyond the control of libraries. It is possible that your account, for example, can be hijacked and your social media compromised. Pranksters could post inappropriate comments that might slip through your filters. The providers can also change the rules of usage at any time without any warning, as Facebook recently did. The providers could make arbitrary changes to your website to suit their marketing agendas.

These changes are often in conflict with design priorities inherent in librarian-created websites; librarians can suddenly be stuck with redesigned websites that are not what librarians really want. Another point to bear in mind is that library social media that diverge from their original mission of connecting users with services and information will soon find themselves becoming irrelevant and without any followers; users can unsubscribe from social media sites very easily at the click of a button. Keeping social media sites relevant and current is crucial in maintaining followers.

A big threat is that social media providers may decide to fold up for any number of reasons, and librarians may lose all that they had invested in their social media. Oftentimes, these media tools are bought by other companies that may have different usage rules and layout designs.

SOCIAL MEDIA WIN-WIN

The use of social media in libraries is one form of relationship marketing that has the potential to pay great dividends in the form of user loyalty; they create an atmosphere in which library users are connected with librarians. Libraries are not just about tangible objects; they are also about people. As such, cultivating user loyalty is just as important as building library collections.

The two-way communication afforded by social media will go a long way toward creating dynamic libraries that are constantly evolving in tandem with their users' changing needs and expectations. Social media have the potential for information users and information providers to achieve a win-win relationship. A SWOT analysis will put this in perspective for your library.

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