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Do you Facebook?

Networking with students online

Online social communities have exploded with popularity across the Web. Social networks, such as Friendster, Myspace, Hi5, and Tribe, enable millions of messages, photos, and comments to be shared daily. Each site caters to a unique niche, but among college students, Facebook is king.

Perhaps the major lure of Facebook is its exclusivity, since it requires an .edu e-mail account to register. Members can restrict access to their pro les from outsiders as well as parents, adding a level of security that the other sites do not provide. Facebook is extremely exible to use, and expands opportunities for socialization. Members can search for other students in their discipline, as well as their dormitory, keep up with old friends and make new ones, irt, gossip, complain about classes, and post an unlimited amount of photos. Students can also form study groups, nd out about upcoming events and parties, and stay connected with campus clubs and organizations. With more than 2,000 institutions participating and nearly 9 million registered users, Facebook has become the ubiquitous online social network for higher education

Reaching out

During my time on the reference desk, I discovered many gaps in students familiarity with the library. Could the popularity of Facebook be used as a marketing tool? I started by searching within the Georgia Institute of Technology directory on Facebook for the keyword library and discovered Sleeping in the Library, a community group whose members share their favorite locations to take a nap. Next I searched globally and found that a handful of other libraries had created pro les. I considered a similar approach, but did not want to duplicate the traditional you come to me reference model. I wanted to be proactive, and to interact with the students in their natural environment. I also wanted to appear as myself, rather than a faceless organization.

The plan

One of my primary duties in my current position at Georgia Tech is to provide outreach to the School of Mechanical Engineering. I had previously used posters, yers, campus e-mails, workshops, and subject guides, but these seemed to generate only minimal interest. Could Facebook be used to promote resources and services? With the undergraduate enrollment for mechanical engineering around 1,700 students, I was surprised to discover that more than 1,300 of them were on Facebook. This presented an intriguing opportunity to directly market the library to more than 75 percent of my target audience. I was curious to see if students would respond differently to a Facebook message than they had to my of cial campus e-mails.

Since Facebook does not offer a mass mailing feature, I had to send individual e-mails to each student. After setting up my pro le and uploading a few photos, I crafted an informal message, emphasizing the nontraditional aspects of the library, and attempted to appear

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friendly and approachable. One autumn after-noon, a few weeks after midterms, I started the e-mail process and was able to send out 80 messages in under 20 minutes, but then I ran into a problem. As a measure to prevent spam, Facebook set a rate limit of 80 messages every six hours. This was definitely a setback, however I adapted by sending out an initial batch every morning, followed by a second batch later in the afternoon. Over the course of ten days, I was able to deliver my message to more than 1,500 graduate and undergraduate students in my discipline area.

The payoff

Responses came back almost immediately. Some simply said cool or thanks, while others asked questions about building reno-vations, online renewals, library classes, and group study space. Software however, was the predominate interest. Of the 48 messages received back from the students, 20 of them asked about the availability of software pro-grams in the library, such as: which computers had AutoCAD, was there assistance for MAT-LAB, where could EndNote be downloaded, which video editing applications did we support, and did we offer Linux? It became obvious that the computers were the primary draw for this segment of students.

While it was satisfying to receive these messages, the response rate seemed low. However, other measures of success can be applied. For instance, I was asked to be friends by several students, which is a sign of acceptance. I also received a handful of AOL instant messages inquiring about journals and conference papers. Perhaps most surprisingly, however, were the students who approached me around campus, at the student center, the gym, and even a football game, to say hello and that they had seen me on Facebook. Overall, the effort effectively helped me to expand the goal of promoting the library and my role as subject liaison.

The future

I intend to continue using Facebook to reach out to students and have started encouraging my colleagues to do the same. Since mechani-cal engineering students do not traditionally rely upon the library as much as other disci-plines, student interest could potentially be greater for others. I also want to avoid sending out too many unsolicited e-mails, and intend to focus on posting messages to appropriate academic groups. In addition, I created a Face-book community called The GT Library: More Than Just Books, and in less than a day, three people had joined. This will provide another venue to push out information, however it is secondary to actually interacting with students directly, which I feel is the primary benefit of Facebook. There is also the potential of target-ing incoming freshmen and graduate students and offering them individualized assistance.

Rather than waiting for students to ap-proach us, it is perhaps more beneficial to be proactive and approach them. By using online social networks, librarians can increase campus visibility and update the stereotypi-cal image, but, most importantly, we can let students know what the library is really all about. ♫