

Christopher Chan

Your mileage may vary

Facebook advertising revisited

Can money buy you (Facebook) love? More specifically, is it worthwhile for academic librarians to spend their limited time and budgets on placing adverts with Mark Zuckerberg's social media juggernaut? This piece is intended partly as a response to the September 2014 *C&RL News* article by Scott W. H. Young, Angela M. Tate, Doralyn Rossman, and Mary Anne Hansen that concluded: "We are sceptical of the long-term value and cost-effectiveness of [Facebook] ads, and therefore cannot recommend that libraries invest deeply in ads."¹

Their conclusion was based on the results of a pilot advertising campaign at the authors' institution, Montana State University (MSU). Although their advice to engage cautiously with paid social media advertising is sound, it will be argued here that Facebook ads can, with the right approach, be a cheap and effective way to build a library's social media audience and create awareness of its resources and services.

To support this view, the results of Facebook advertising campaigns conducted by Hong Kong Baptist University (HKBU) Library will be presented. In contrast with MSU, HKBU Library has had a fairly lengthy experience with paid Facebook advertising campaigns. These have generally been positive. The first were conducted back in 2010, and proved successful enough for the library management to approve a small recurrent budget for social media advertising. Over the years, a couple of guiding principles for the library's advertising campaigns have been established. Before detailing the results of the

latest campaigns, a brief discussion of these core strategies is warranted.

Targeting and timing

In just the last three months of 2015, Facebook generated advertising revenues of US\$5.64 billion.² A principle reason why companies and organizations are collectively willing to spend this immense sum on Facebook advertising is the platform's ability to serve adverts to a tightly defined audience. This is made possible by the tremendous amount of personal data provided to Facebook by its users. Although some are profoundly discomfited by this aspect of Facebook's advertising model, the privacy and ethical implications of social media advertising are not the subject of this paper. For this discussion, it is important to understand how Facebook advertising allows advertisers to target their audience with an extreme level of precision.

This targeting goes beyond simple demographics such as age and gender. Advertisers can take advantage of other information that Facebook users typically provide. Of particular utility from our perspective, adverts can be targeted only to those who indicate that they attend a particular university. For a typical advert, we will specify that only HKBU students be targeted (see Figure 1). It should be noted that if our students do not

Christopher Chan is head of information services at Hong Kong Baptist University Library, email: chanccp@hkbu.edu.hk

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tell Facebook that they are affiliated with the university, they will of course not see targeted adverts. However, judging from the number of people our adverts reach, most of our students have provided this information to Facebook. Depending on the goal of the advert, other limiters may be used. For example, if the advert is to build our fan base, we will exclude existing fans.

Young et al. mention targeting, but took the different approach of targeting everyone aged 16 and above in the 12 states where their institution had more than 100 students enrolled.³ It could be that they were keen on engaging the wider community, or perhaps their institution was not included in Facebook's targeting options at that time. However, this strategy may have spread their advertising too thin, especially given the limited budget they had committed. In the HKBU Library experience, specific targeting of our own students has had much better results.

Another conclusion reached by the MSU team was that Facebook adverts are subject to sharply diminishing returns.⁴ This has been true of the HKBU experience, too, and in general we will never run a single advertisement for more than one month. HKBU Library also strategically chooses when to run advertisements. The beginning of the first semester seems to

be the best time to run campaigns looking to increase the number of fans. This is likely due to the number of freshman students arriving at the university, all hopefully eager to connect to their new home in a variety of ways, including online social media.

Fall 2014 ads

The paid adverts campaign run by HKBU Library in the fall of 2014 employed the principles outlined above. As just mentioned, the start of the academic year is prime advertising season. Figure 2 is the mobile version of the advert that ran beginning September 2014. As mobile views are

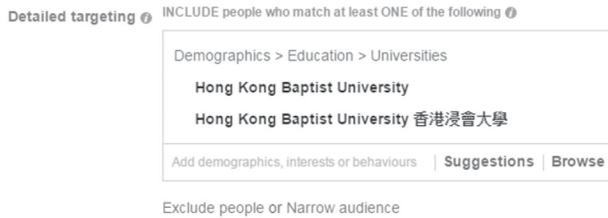


Figure 1: Facebook's advert options allow for the specific targeting of students at your institution. View this article online for more detailed image.

increasingly important, it is vital to ensure that adverts look attractive on smartphones.

A budget of HK\$1,500 (US\$193) was allocated to this advert, and was set to run only for the first month of the semester.

Apart from a generic advert designed to generate more likes, we also selectively boosted posts made to our Facebook page. This essentially means that our page content is promoted to our targeted audience, even if they have not connected to our page. This can be a great way to increase

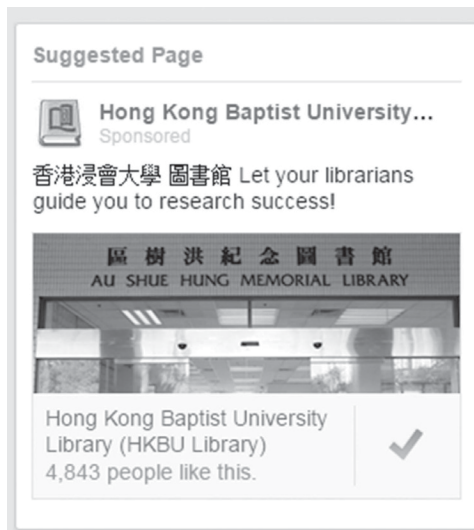


Figure 2: An example of an HKBU Library Facebook advert as displayed on a smartphone.

the visibility of specific content in the news feeds of students, and Young et al. are also cautiously optimistic about promoting posts in this way.⁵

While we boosted several posts, a couple of examples have been selected for the sake of brevity. One was to highlight the library's recent acquisition of the physical Facebook fan counter known as Fliike (see Figure 3). In keeping with the principles of tight targeting and timing, this promotion was aimed at HKBU students and ran for just 24 hours. A budget of HK\$160 (US\$21) was set. A second promoted the posting of a virtual library tour created using Haiku Deck. This advert ran for one week in the middle of September, and had a budget of HK\$250 (US\$32).

Results and discussion

The number of page likes generated by the generic advert was impressive, with 785 people liking the Facebook page after seeing the advert. This works out to roughly HK\$1.91 (US\$0.25) per page like. The Facebook adverts manager provides a tremendous amount of further data regarding the performance of the advert. The advert's reach (i.e., the number of individuals that were exposed to the advert) was 16,378, while the average number of times each person saw the advert was 4.37.

Even with the relatively short timeframe, the diminishing returns on the advert were clear. The first week saw high interest, but this declined steeply over the remainder of September. This highlights the point that an acceptable rate on return can be best achieved by running particular adverts for short periods of time only. In contrast, the MSU experiment used an identical advert that ran for an entire year in multiple campaigns, and thus suffered greatly from diminishing returns.⁶ The results they achieved in their later campaigns

generally exceeded US\$1 per like, but the outcome of their first campaign (US\$0.32 per like) is not dissimilar to what HKBU Library achieved with its generic advert. By taking a break between campaigns, and preparing new adverts with different images and taglines, it is the HKBU Library experience that this rate of return is sustainable in the long term.

One final interesting finding for this advert set was that 73% of the total budget was spent on adverts that appeared on mobile devices. This indicates that members of our target population are more likely to access Facebook on their smartphone rather than on a desktop or laptop. Perhaps this is not surprising given that it is now well-known that students and

others rely heavily on their mobile devices when accessing online content.

In the case of the Fliike promoted post, the goal was not to gain more fans, but instead to attract attention to the video that we had posted. In this it was tremendously successful, generating 695 video views, at a cost of just HK\$0.23 (US\$0.03) each. Almost as an aside, 26 page likes also resulted. The virtual tour promoted post was somewhat less successful, but

the performance was still satisfactory. It generated 179 views of the tour, at a cost of HK\$1.40 (US\$0.18) each. Again, running adverts for a brief time at a targeted audience proved to be an effective strategy.

Promotion of library content through boosting Facebook posts could be used to provide better visibility to the many e-learning objects that librarians now spend much of their time and effort creating. These are often underused, despite the best efforts of their creators. While



Figure 3: This advert was run briefly for 24 hours to highlight the library's acquisition of a physical Facebook-like counter.

not a panacea, social media advertising done right could be one part of a larger strategy to make sure the library's offerings reach as wide an audience as possible.

One lingering concern that is not addressed by the results here is the potential negative impact that Facebook advertising might have on our members' perception of the library. A survey by Stephen Lilley, Frances S. Grodzinsky, and Andra Gumbus of college students that used Facebook showed that they avoided advertisements as much as possible and opposed the data sharing/selling practices inherent in the Facebook advertising model.⁷ These findings contradict a claim made in 2010 by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg that social norms are shifting and people are becoming more willing to share information about themselves.⁸ From the HKBU Library perspective, one worry is that even if the advertisements are successful, as judged by their quantitative effectiveness, in driving up the number of connections with our members and their exposure to our content, there may be costs that are not so obvious. Library members might find the adverts annoying or intrusive. Although no complaints have been received over the years that adverts have been used, a future area of investigation could be to survey the attitude of the university community towards the use of Facebook adverts by the library.

Conclusion

The results of the fall 2014 Facebook advertising campaigns described above demonstrate that efficacy and value for money can be achieved through the careful calibration of the timing and target audience of adverts. Since then we have continued to make strategic use of Facebook adverts. New features have been added in the months since, such as the integration of Instagram adverts, and these have further extended the utility of Facebook's advertising platform. Admittedly, this is the experience of just one library, and there is insufficient data to make generalizable conclusions. There might be something unique about the member population at HKBU that makes these adverts effective—perhaps Hong Kong students spend

far more time checking out Facebook on their phones than U.S. students. At the very least though, these findings show that it is possible for academic libraries to make good use of paid social media advertising. HKBU Library's adverts were widely seen by our students and generated a large number of interactions at a low cost.

Facebook advertising has worked for HKBU Library. Of the seven government-funded university libraries in Hong Kong with Facebook pages, HKBU Library ranks among the smallest in terms of member population. Despite this, as of February 25, 2016, HKBU Library has by far the most likes—around 1,300 more than our nearest sister library. This is almost certainly due to the use of advertising. While caution and careful planning is certainly warranted, the use of paid advertising to help academic libraries connect with students on the social media platform where they spend much of their time should not be dismissed.

Notes

1. Scott W. H. Young, Angela M. Tate, Doralyn Rossman, and Mary Anne Hansen, "The Social Media Toll Road: The Promise and Peril of Facebook Advertising," *College & Research Libraries News* 75, no. 8 (2014): 427–34, <http://crln.acrl.org/content/75/8/427.full.pdf+html>.

2. "Facebook Reports Fourth Quarter and Full Year 2015 Results," Facebook, Inc., January 27, 2016, <http://investor.fb.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=952040> (accessed February 25, 2015).

3. Young et al., "The Social Media Toll Road," 428.

4. *Ibid.*, 429–30.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*, 429

7. Stephen Lilley, Frances S. Grodzinsky, and Andra Gumbus, "Revealing the Commercialized and Compliant Facebook User," *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* 10, no. 2 (May 11, 2012): 82–92, doi:10.1108/14779961211226994.

8. "Privacy 2.0," *The Economist*, January 30, 2010, S18–S19, ProQuest Research Library, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/223980690>. *ZZ*