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Developing your social media accounts

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Social media now plays a vital role within libraries, no matter your sector. It's free publicity for libraries, it showcases what you have to offer as a service and can provide important engagement with your audience. To be successful however you need to provide more than just information, you need to give people a reason to follow you. This is where your unique voice plays a part.

Starting out on Twitter

At Manchester Met we started posting on Twitter in 2011 with just a few colleagues. It wasn't deemed particularly important at the time, just something we should be seen to be doing as other libraries were. Our account was pretty dull as it was mainly used as a way of telling people that things weren't working, mainly negative content. It wasn't very appealing to any potential followers. A team was then created later that year and after initially being told to just signpost and not answer queries, the team was expanded to post more regularly and respond to any questions coming through. At that point we could do our research and start to inject our own voice and personality. We looked at what other libraries were doing and what sort of tone they used. How could we have a sense a humour, whilst still being informative and relevant? We also didn't want to copy anyone else's unique style.

It was important that staff were trained on good practice so there was always a capacity to have a variety of voices but still a consistent message throughout the week. At the point when everyone more comfortable tweeting, we could start adding humour and that really came from the individuals rather than us all getting together to try and brainstorm what might be entertaining. It has to feel natural and not at all forced. That's why you need to pick your team or individuals carefully. It's also trial and error. Your best post might get no engagement at all, so you dust yourself off and try something else next time. There's nothing to lose when your following is quite small so it's the perfect time to test out different approaches to see what works.

Recruiting staff and running the accounts

I'm asked as part of people's inductions to talk to our new members of staff about social media and how we post. I can gauge interest and find out if perhaps they have used social media in previous roles. Sometimes staff can approach me to join the team and we can call on them when we have a vacancy. They may have started following us and liked what they've seen, or a colleague might suggest they'd be a good fit. It's not always the loudest colleagues that volunteer and you see their online personality develop as the weeks go by. I always recommend just reading what others have posted on our accounts that past week so they see our general tone of voice, and what has worked in terms of engagement or likes - I still do this and it really makes me step up my game when I see others posting great content. I give new team members our library social media guidelines which are mostly common sense but offer an idea of what is not acceptable. You always have to remember you're representing the library, and your institution, and the main purpose is to offer information and advertise our services to our followers. Within these guidelines there is an awful lot of freedom on what we can post however, and we can be much less formal than our main university accounts.

We currently have a team of 11 posting on our channels, including weekends. It's great that we have a mixture of staff from all grades and roles within the library. It brings a different perspective to our accounts. If it was only back room staff posting content could become very dry. You need staff members who see things happening in the library, who work on the helpdesk and who are

interacting more with users and the book stock. Straightening with a keen eye can help pick out amusing titles of books for example, and evening shifts can be a good time to bounce ideas off other colleagues. We have a staff rota, so our accounts are covered throughout the week and which compliment staff's other duties in the library.

Showcasing your personality and generating content

Not as a particularly conscious decision to begin with but as we're a large team we tend to post as 'I' rather than 'we'. This is something that has evolved over time. We don't go as far as introducing ourselves when we pass the social media baton, but we post as individuals rather than one voice, especially on Twitter. You might not know it's several people tweeting necessarily over the week, and I think we've done well to keep a consistent tone, but you can spot certainly spot themes on certain days according to who is posting. We're not afraid of posting photos of ourselves, again to show we're individuals rather than a corporation, and if a follower comes into the library they may well be helped by that very person they've seen on Twitter or Instagram. University especially can be quite intimidating when students first start, and I hope our accounts make us more accessible.

Over lockdown we embraced our individuality more than ever. It was hard not to as we were suddenly surrounded by all our own stuff rather than being in the same building at the same time. It changed what we could post. Finding content can be tricky at the best of times, especially in the summer when nothing much happens on campus. Lockdown certainly didn't help. It felt like a real struggle at first as we no longer had the library and all it contained to fall back on. On campus you can always find an interesting book on the shelf, take a photo of your building and its surroundings, or in our case promote our latest Special Collections exhibition. We couldn't do those things anymore, so we had to think of other, interesting ways to hold our audience.

Members of the team suggested different things we could post such as staff recommendations of things to watch, read and listen to, and early on we had a series of 'Museum at Home' tweets which showcased the weird and wonderful items we had in our houses. This was of course when museums themselves were closed. We involved all staff by asking for photos of their colleagues during lockdown – ie their pets, which they were more than happy to show off. And more recently to mark a year since the pandemic and to show our appreciation to students for wearing their masks in the library and around campus, we asked for mask selfies and for them to rate their masks out of ten with an accompanying review. It all started with our popular 'Pass the Chat Hat' video which featured team members throwing a hat to each other from our respective home offices, to let users know we were still available to talk to even when the library building was closed for so many months during the first lockdown, and that you'd be talking to real people.

Luckily, we did also have some evergreen content to use on our accounts, particularly useful for Instagram which is so visual, such as photos of campus or images of bookshelves. Now some team members are on campus we've set up a shared folder to add photos that anyone can use when they're posting.

Instagram

Instagram was used in a very ad-hoc way to begin with, we had a member of staff who was interested in photography so set up a library account. When we had an intake of graduate trainees five years ago a few of them started to create content and we started to post more regularly. There was more consistency, and it was aimed more towards our demographic. The split of our followers on Instagram is 65% women and 35% male, the majority in the 18-24 or 25-34 age bracket. You can find this in your insights if you have a business account, which is free to change to. It shows we're

aiming this at the right audience as Man Met's student base is a very similar split. We're now starting to use students to record videos for us, via the students' union, so it's not just librarians talking to students, they're getting information from their peers.

Our tone does shift from time to time as we've had a lot of team members come and go, whereas our Twitter team has more MMU lifers on it! We try to keep posts informal and text short as it's essentially a visual medium. We take photos of people as well as buildings and stock, though we have a lot of camera-shy colleagues. We try not to use the same people over and over again, so our followers don't think there are only around 4 people working in the library!

Engagement can be really hard on Instagram and is still something we're working on, but we find we get lots more interaction with our followers on Insta in Stories when we run polls on particular subjects, or ask for suggestions via the question sticker, for example Asking for LGBTQ+ book recommendations that we could compile into a list on Wakelet for LGBT+ History Month. It creates content for us but also makes our followers feel more involved. When there's something to physically press or type the app becomes a lot less passive. It's really important to keep an eye on developments within Instagram so you can make use of all the new features available.

Stories are also vital when we have a very timely message. Algorithms work differently for every user depending on how they use Instagram so it may well be that some of our followers won't see one of our posts for a few days – by then it's too late and a workshop will already have happened, or an announcement is no longer relevant. With stories only lasting 24 hours you know people are viewing the information at the right time. And because they're only viewable for a short time it also means you can be a lot more informal. If posts on your Instagram grid are perhaps a little more slick, stories are more of a glimpse behind the scenes. They can also back up a post with a bit more information. As we don't want to be too wordy in an Instagram post, a story can go into a bit more detail over several photos or videos. You can keep an eye on how many people drop off during a story too in your analytics so you can tweak how you post in future to retain your audience. The 24-hour limit can also persuade shyer colleagues to feature as they won't be a permanent fixture on our account.

Using scheduled posts

As platforms have developed it's also easier to schedule posts for those times you might not be at your computer or on your phone for the whole day. Posting can be tricky if staff are heavily timetabled or are involved in a lot of meetings. We used to use the scheduler Hootsuite a lot for Twitter, but now you can schedule via the native interface very easily. Instagram scheduling is a more recent development via Facebook's Business Suite. You can schedule posts, galleries and Stories, though Stories only have limited features compared to the app itself. Unfortunately, Facebook has to be linked to a personal account so if you have a bigger team like ours you don't really want to share your own password with everyone!

Using schedulers also means you can post when you have that moment of inspiration, especially if you only post once a week. You don't have to sit and go "right, I have to come up with something super entertaining right now" We also share ideas within the team via a mailing list if something is more timely, such as an event happening in the university later that day. We have a shared calendar of events and campaigns, so team members have some guidance about what needs mentioning on social that day or week. It's great to be able to put our own spin on a trending topic and repost content from other departments or local projects, but it's also helpful to know we have certain things we need to post about too.

It takes time to develop your social media accounts, and it's important to get buy-in from managers so you can dedicate staff resources to make sure your accounts are meaningful and engaging. It's worth the effort, and your followers will learn about all the great things libraries can provide. Good luck!