



From the Selected Works of Sarah Elizabeth Miller

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Connecting and Communicating with Students on Facebook

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Title: Connecting and Communicating with Students on Facebook

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“I’m on Facebook, I’ve created a Group for my library, now what?” This is the question surfacing on many of the Facebook Groups created by librarians to share ideas and to debate how to use this potential marketing and/or reference tool. Based on conversations among these librarians, it appears that student response to library outreach on this medium is lackluster at best, with a few students requesting books here and other students asking reference questions there. We think our practical, everyday knowledge of Facebook can turn this situation around.

We both joined Facebook during our senior year of college in the spring of 2005, learning to use it as students before we ever thought about wielding its power for library services. As librarians at small liberal arts colleges and experienced Facebook users, we would like to share some guidance on the finer points of social networking via Facebook. Originally, many librarians bypassed creating personal Profiles and created them for their institutions instead. Unfortunately, Facebook firmly outlines in its terms of use that a group or entity cannot register a user Profile, including libraries. Librarians were encouraged by Facebook to replace their deleted institutional user Profiles with new personal Profiles and to form Groups to promote library services to patrons. We disagree with this approach: as daily users, we think Groups are one of the weakest Facebook communication methods. In general, Groups are just a simple way to express an opinion. Students join a multitude of Groups but do very little to participate in any of them. For example, Sarah used to be in a Group called, “Against Socks and Sandals.” She never returned to the Group after joining, she just used it as a way to tell her Friends that she is against the fashion faux pas of wearing socks and sandals at the same time. We recommend a more powerful approach to social networking called Friend and Feed.

Making Friends

It’s a cold, lonely world on Facebook without Friends. As a social user, there will be few Profiles accessible to you outside of (or possibly even within) your own Network, hampering your interaction with others and the growth of your social network. As a librarian hoping to promote activities and services, your efforts will be futile. By definition, Facebook is a social network connecting people with other people. You have to connect with your patrons before you can effectively promote your library services to them. Fortunately, there are a variety of ways to build your community on Facebook.

We recommend the following:

- 1) Friend all of the student workers at your library. This will make you more visible to them and their Friends.
- 2) Facebook allows students to list their courses. Join the ones you are doing instructional sessions for and ask all of the students in them to be your Friend.
- 3) Display your Profile during instructional sessions and invite students to seek you out.
- 4) Friend new students at your fall welcome festival by making a laptop available or taking names on a sheet of paper. Remember, many freshmen sign up for a Facebook Profile as soon as they receive their email address at orientation.

Understanding the News Feed

Having Friends is the foundation of our next topic, the Feed. Introduced in the fall of 2006, the Facebook News Feed is now a core feature automatically generated for all Facebook users every time they sign-in. The News Feed employs RSS technology to display Profile information that has been updated by the Friends of a Facebook user. The result is an easy-to-read customized digest of recently edited digital content. Each Profile also has a Mini-Feed displaying the last 10 updates made by the user. The feeds present users with two ways to stay abreast of content changes: one lists updates made by Friends and the other chronicles personal Profile updates. The presence of the News Feed means that most students spend time reading information that Facebook puts in front of them, not what they seek out on their own. We believe this is a critical point that can make or break a librarian's efforts to utilize Facebook. A static Profile, or a simple Group, will never appear in the News Feed. Additionally, if you don't have Friends the information you share will never be posted in a News Feed. Our simple Friend and Feed advice will help you avoid these missteps and take you down the road to Facebook nirvana.

Be dynamic. After you've become Friends with your entire student body, you've got to keep adding current information to your Profile. It's important to remember that students keep coming back to Facebook because the information on it is constantly changing. A quick check in the morning shows them who has been posting insightful Notes in the middle of the night. Another look after lunch reveals that their cousin at Ohio State has posted pictures of her cute new boyfriend. When we make a Friend on Facebook, we generally give the new Friend's Profile a quick once-over for interesting tidbits and never return unless we are notified by the News Feed that it's been updated or changed. The Profiles we read the most are the ones that are frequently updated. Sarah has a personal story to this effect: "Erinne was a classmate of mine as an undergraduate, but she transferred to another school after our sophomore year. We haven't met in person since 2003, but I read her Profile every day because of the way she uses Facebook. In the past year Erinne has uploaded 243 Notes and 31 Albums of pictures. I see her name almost every time I log into Facebook in the infamous News Feed. I can't help but think about Erinne, it would be impossible not to."

The Applications

Used properly, the News Feed is an amazing asset! Lauren is currently experimenting with Facebook as a tool for connecting with her students. "At the end of May 2007, I adjusted my privacy settings and opened my personal Profile to the students on my campus; I asked several student workers to become my Friend, while several others asked me to be their Friend before I could issue the invitation. When I make changes or updates to my Profile, they appear on the News Feeds of all of the students who are my Friends. If I post photos from a conference or update my Status to show I am working at the reference desk, the students will be aware of changes in my Profile. The News Feed will put me and the library out there again and again for my students to see." We favor four specific Applications to grab students' attention: My Profile, Notes and Posted Items, Albums, and Events.

My Profile

A Profile on Facebook is a short biography of an individual containing personal, educational, and work information. When this information is updated, it will appear in the News Feeds of a user's Friends. As a librarian it's a big opportunity to allow students get to know you better. The Mini-

Feed outlines recent updates to your Profile, such as the creation of an Album of pictures from the Student Worker Appreciation Picnic. The Wall, a personal bulletin board where others are able to post messages that can be viewed by all, offers an opportunity for students to make contact with you or ask questions. Finally, by updating your Status, you can let your students know what you are up to at the moment or for the day, such as, “Sarah is working the reference desk from 2-4,” or, “Lauren is ready for the beginning of the semester.”

Consider trying the following to make your Profile active and inviting.

- 1) Update your Status! It takes mere seconds and will be seen by many in the News Feed.
- 2) Post up-to-date contact information and office hours.
- 3) Share favorite books, TV shows, interests, or quotes.
- 4) Use the Wall-to-Wall feature to reply to questions from students on their own walls. Students who are Friends with your patron you will be notified of the exchange in their News Feeds, heightening your visibility on Facebook.

Notes and Posted Items

Notes, a cross between a Post-It note and a blog, can be used them to make brief statements or daily entries about almost anything. Capabilities include limited HTML formatting, photo uploading, and the ability to tag people you mention. Posted Items are very similar, but take care of the picture and comment formatting for you by using information from the website you want to share. Beth Kraemer, a librarian at the University of Kentucky and Friend Sarah acquired on Facebook, used a Note to share information with graduate students about preparing electronic theses and dissertations.

These Applications are relatively limitless, but here are some ideas to get you started.

- 1) Get the word out about a new database or resource.
- 2) Share holiday reference and building hours.
- 3) Upload the library’s blog.
- 4) Announce events that are open to the public, such as film series or exhibits.
- 5) Post a weekly trivia question and offer a prize to the first person who messages you with the correct answer.

Albums:

Albums have several defining characteristics. Users can include a description of the photo, tag people therein, and allow others to comment on their photos. Of particular note is the ability to organize photos and make the Album available to people who are not members of Facebook via a public URL. The Sharing function allows users to highlight, share, and comment on photos of particular interest with their Friends even if they themselves did not post the picture. For promotional purposes, you might want to consider adding your Albums on a weekly basis, even if you take all of the photos in one sitting.

The following ideas just scratch the surface of this Application’s potential.

- 1) Photograph your new books. Have student workers pose with the books and tag individuals in the Album so their Friends see them and the new books.

- 2) Introduce library faculty, staff, and student workers. Tag them by name and include a brief description their role at the library, their favorite book, and contact information when appropriate.
- 3) Place photos from the conferences you attend into albums. Not only will it get you into the News Feed, it will also help your students understand just what it is you do every day.
- 4) Create a library building tour featuring hot spots in the library and guidelines for their use such as how to reserve a room.
- 5) Describe how to use library technology including software and hardware. This could include screenshots of citation management software and the instructions for using it.

Events

The Events Application allows you to publicize a party, workshop, fundraiser, or gathering that you will be hosting. General information about the Event, including the host(s), type, time, date, location, and purpose will be included in the electronic invitations that you can send to all or a select few of your Friends. Invited Friends can then RSVP that they are “attending,” “maybe attending,” or, “not attending,” to assist the host in anticipating the number of people coming to the Event. Those invited can see who is attending or is not attending if the guest list remains public; the host has the option of keeping the list private.

Consider hosting one of these great Events at your library.

- 1) Plan a drop-in workshop on a new tool at your library; the RSVP feature will let you know how many students to expect.
- 2) Create Events for book groups, exhibit openings, or student appreciation festivities.
- 3) Invite freshmen to take library orientation tours at times when a guide is available.
- 4) Publicize Banned Books Week celebrations, National Library Week activities, or Friday afternoon library coffees.

Facebook Platform

The brevity of this list may leave some of you wondering why we haven't mentioned the new Facebook Platform capabilities. Introduced in May 2007, the Platform allows individuals, companies, and organizations to create new Applications for user Profiles. One example is the federated search Application created by the Undergraduate Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, which allows patrons to query library resources directly from their own Profiles. At this time, the addition of an Application to a Profile will appear in a News Feed, but the information managed by the Application frequently does not (new Applications manage favorite movies, Flickr photos, etc...). With this in mind, we decided to stick to the potential uses for the original, core Facebook Applications that regularly display updates in the News Feed.

Conclusion

Facebook is about making connections. If Facebook is going to work for your library, you have to make connections with others and develop them with the strategies we've discussed. Be prepared to make simple updates several times a week. If you are too busy, student assistants can help with the legwork by taking photos for Albums or inviting people to Events. In your Profile, let students learn a little about you. It will make you more approachable and will show that librarians have moved “beyond the bun.” Remember, the most active Profiles are the ones that will reach students over and over again. Finally, take some time to read your News Feed and the

Profiles of your Friends. Facebook is a great way for you to learn more about the wonderful students you work with everyday.

Brief Biographical Information

Sarah Elizabeth Miller is the Visiting Electronic Resources Librarian at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington, IL. Lauren A. Jensen is the Public Services Librarian at Monmouth College in Monmouth, IL. Both hold degrees from the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. Their email addresses are smiller2@iwu.edu and ljensen@monm.edu.

Sidebar:

Brief History of Facebook

2004: Facebook launched in a Harvard dorm room

Groups are added

Membership hits 1 million active users

2005: Expanded to include high school and international school networks.

Album Application is introduced

2006: Registration opened to the general public

News Feed and Mini-Feed are introduced

Membership hits 12 million active users

2007: 100,000 new users register every day

Platform allows third-party developers to create Facebook Applications

Facebook is a social technology that currently connects over 27 million people. According to its Press Department, Facebook originally began as an outlet to bring together college students on different campuses. Today, it is currently the sixth most visited website in the United States and more than half of its users return daily to the site.

Picture caption: An example of a typical profile, including the Mini-Feed. Portions Copyright (c) Facebook, Inc. 2007. "Facebook" is a registered trademark of Facebook, Inc.