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Marketing Research Guides: An Online Experiment with LibGuides

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ABSTRACT. After migrating its research guides to the LibGuides content management system, the J. Paul Leonard Library at San Francisco State University conducted a marketing experiment to measure the impact of online marketing strategies on the usage of its guides. A team of librarians publicized half of a set of LibGuides in fall 2009 using home page listings, Twitter, Facebook, blog postings and e-mails, and compared their usage statistics between spring and fall semesters. While there was some difference between guide usage among the marketed and control group—with a 63% increase for the marketed guides and a 27% increase for the control group—analysis of individual marketing tactics using LibGuides and Google Analytics revealed an impact only in the case of direct e-mails. Additionally, marketing on behalf of subject specialists proved problematic given the primacy of the library’s departmental liaison model and the importance of fostered relationships in online social media.

KEYWORDS LibGuides, marketing, research guides, social media, subject liaisons

INTRODUCTION

San Francisco State University (SF State) has a user population of approximately 30,000 students, and the J. Paul Leonard Library maintains a strong online presence in support of both education and research. Instruction librarians provide course-integrated seminars in computer labs by request for undergraduate and graduate courses. Like many academic libraries, research guides are offered at SF State as a part of the library’s research and education services.
When LibGuides was introduced in 2007, SF State’s library was among the first institutions to experiment with and subscribe to the service. LibGuides met a number of immediate needs for guide authors including Web-based creation, content management, and outsourced Web design support. From the fall of 2007 through the spring of 2009 the library’s collection of research guides migrated from HTML to the LibGuides platform. In some cases guides had not been updated for many years, so migration involved revising content in addition to reentering pages. This was done by individual librarian authors and also by a team of five librarians assigned to teach their colleagues how to use the LibGuides system. In some cases the members of this LibGuides Working Group created much of the subject guides’ content as surrogate authors.

Usage statistics from the 2008–2009 academic year suggested that the amount of a librarian’s in-person instruction influenced the number of Web visits to their guides. Additionally, some popular topic guides had relatively high hit rates. A couple of online announcements had made certain guide visits spike, giving promise to the possibility of online marketing as an effective way to bring users to guides that were not typically used or advertised during instructional interactions. The authors developed a marketing plan to test the limits of this promising phenomenon.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature on research guides before the introduction of LibGuides questioned guide effectiveness overall, and sought to understand whether poor usage at some institutions was due to a lack of awareness about these resources. Literature from 2000 to 2006 reported a poor rate of return on the amount of time and energy spent creating and maintaining Web-based research guides. Academic libraries created in-house content management systems in order to streamline the editing process (Dupuis, Ryan, & Steeves, 2004; Reeb & Gibbons, 2004), while at the same time literature began to question the use and usefulness of guides modeled on pathfinder approaches and the print paradigm (Hemmig, 2005). Reeb and Gibbons (2004) seriously questioned the usefulness of subject guides specifically, and advocated for the creation of course-specific guides for undergraduates as an alternative. Additionally, an Amazon.com-style feedback survey at George Washington University “revealed a fundamental problem: many users did not consider guides to be helpful” (Courtois, Higgins, & Kapur, 2005, p. 195).

LibGuides (http://www.springshare.com/LibGuides) entered the scene in 2007 as an answer to content management problems and as the Web 2.0 solution that would make research guides useful again. A number of academic libraries have simultaneously evaluated and implemented the service (Horne, Adams, & Cook, 2009). In addition to confirming that LibGuides has made librarians’ lives easier, presentations have confirmed
that teaching faculty appreciate the resources created and believe that they have improved student assignments (Horne & Adams, 2009). LibGuides is both “wildly popular” and “amazingly popular” with librarians and content creators (Springshare, 2009). And why not? Its Web site states that “you, the librarian, are the key to successful research. Nobody knows research better! You’re the information superhero, the knowledge professional, the info sage” (Springshare, 2009).

While there is a great deal of enthusiasm for the promise that social media shows for library marketing, it is still early in the game; some libraries have been slow to adopt these Web 2.0 tools and technologies for a variety of reasons, while others are forging ahead to implement social media marketing plans, but do not yet have a great deal of evaluative data about their effectiveness. Several library pundits, including Blyberg (2006), Casey (2008), Houghton (2005), and Maness (2006) have offered definitions of what has been termed “Library 2.0”: the philosophical and tactical response of libraries to the rapid transformation of our digital and social landscape. Other authors such as Lepik (2007) and Mathews (2008) discuss the ways in which libraries must adopt a user-centered approach in their services and outreach in order to connect with the digital natives who use social media ubiquitously.

While these technology platforms and social spaces are new, the theory behind them is not; viral marketing is firmly grounded in both word-of-mouth (WOM) marketing and relationship marketing (RM). The classic definition of RM comes from Gronroos (1990, p. 138), who states that “relationship marketing is to identify and establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with customers and other stakeholders, at a profit, so that the objectives of all parties involved are met.” In a later article, Gronroos (1994, p. 3) adds that “this definition is supplemented by a statement that such a marketing approach should lead to a trusting relationship between the parties involved.” Naturally, this concept is not news to academic librarians, who have long worn the liaison hat, investing time and energy each semester cultivating connections with students, faculty and administrators. WOM marketing goes hand-in-hand with RM; WOM depends entirely upon relationships in order to function or hold meaning for those involved. Allsop, Bassett, and Hoskins (2007) describe the WOM process this way: an institution builds relationships with key stakeholders; the stakeholders then go out and participate in social networks and influence one another, possibly to the benefit of the institution.

What significance does all of this have for library marketing? According to Kenneway (2007), Mathews (2007), and Solis (2008), libraries must first acknowledge that they are participating in something that reaches beyond technology into social science, and approach social media tools opportunistically: as an inroad to gaining a deeper understanding of constituents. According to these authors, libraries need to listen before they interact, so that when they communicate, they do so authentically. This includes acknowledging that conversations about libraries are already taking place in the social media
realm (whether libraries participate or not) and that there is no controlled “messaging” (Casey, 2008; Solis, 2008). It also includes participating as individuals, not institutions (Axelsson, 2008), and embracing and using all available tools and strategies in order to reap the benefits of these platforms and achieve the ultimate goal by “going viral” (Braun, 2009).

The fact that people are influenced by peers with whom they have trusting relationships (but do not necessarily consider authorities) has significant implications for library service and outreach, particularly in how we bring our liaison and outreach work to the realm of social media. As Solis (2008) notes, “relationships are the new currency in Social Media.” This is good news for librarians who are already accustomed to building relationships. However, the social dynamics of Facebook and Twitter are very different from those at the reference desk or the department water cooler (whether literal or metaphorical), and a different approach is called for.

There are a number of articles describing concrete steps libraries can take to implement a social media–marketing program, including those by Cooper and May (2009), Draper and Turnage (2008), Germain (2008), Houghton-Jan (2007), and Stephens (2005). And, as Houghton-Jan (2007) points out, on the face of it, these start-ups should be quick, easy, and low-cost. Despite this, according to a recent report from the Association of Research Libraries (Mathews & Bodnar, 2008), most libraries are still using traditional marketing strategies. Those who are using social media are using the more traditional blogs, with a smaller percentage using social networking sites and fewer still (just 3%) using social bookmarking. Perhaps this is because there are a number of roadblocks libraries are encountering in doing so. As Casey (2008) notes, many otherwise enthusiastic librarians encounter resistance from higher-ups who are intent upon controlling library messaging or wish to maintain an institutional presence rather than capitalize on the “cult of personality” by allowing individual librarians to participate. In addition, Casey and others describe connecting with other libraries and librarians, rather than the students and patrons they had hoped to reach. Other authors echo the frustration of being unable to make contact with the intended audience. As Mathews (2009) tells us,

One problem that occurs with individual projects is that they draw the attention of other librarians. Many library profiles on MySpace are filled with “friends” in other libraries. Likewise, subscribers to library blogs and podcasts are often our colleagues for other institutions. ... That’s why we can’t trust the statistics (p. 72).

An increasing number of academic libraries are participating in one or more social media venues. These include: Wikipedia entries; review site entries on sites such as Yelp; profiles in Facebook, MySpace, Ning, and similar sites; listings in Web directories (e.g., free wi-fi listings, expert
listings); presence in gaming environments such as Second Life; search engine optimization; and photo, video and audio sharing sites such as Flickr and YouTube. As a recent ARL report (Mathews & Bodnar, 2008, p. 12) notes, however, it’s all investigative, and “what works best for one library will not necessarily work well for another. Furthermore, because many of these marketing and promotional initiatives remain experimental, librarians have not yet reached a consensus about how to assess their effectiveness.”

METHODS

Research Design

From the library’s list of over 80 published and public LibGuides, 66 were included in the study because they had been published in LibGuides prior to February 2009. Three guides were removed from the study set because they were not listed on the library’s list of research guides; they were guides for courses taught in only one of the two semesters; or they were taken down during the marketing period. The 63 guides were randomized, with the first half of the randomized list were half marked for a control group (32 guides) and the second half (31 guides) designated for online marketing strategies. Each member of the marketing team took informal responsibility for promoting seven or eight guides in the experimental group and for evaluating the statistics of a similar number from the control group.

SF State librarians answered surveys about their personal use of LibGuides and online-marketing techniques before the experiment began. The techniques applied to the experimental group included: featuring links on the library’s home page; tagging and labeling in LibGuides for search engine optimization; posting ads and links in Twitter; making selected comments on Facebook; featuring LibGuides on the library’s blog; and sending direct marketing e-mail messages. Usage data was collected by the LibGuides content management service for the full period, and from Google Analytics for the fall of 2009. The site usage statistics were compared over the study’s time period and also between the experimental and control groups.

Librarian Survey

In the summer of 2009, an exploratory e-mail was sent to librarian colleagues announcing the marketing project. In August of 2009, guide authors of both the control group and marketed guides were sent a formal e-mail and an announcement in a department meeting inviting authors to contact the team with questions. Accompanying this announcement, the authors distributed a survey to obtain information about the use of LibGuides in library instruction and reference, and to record the usual publicity and distribution of LibGuide URLs by individual librarians (see Appendix A).
Starting in August of 2009, the 31 marketed guides were rotated through a daily list of featured LibGuides (three guides per day). These were linked directly from the library’s homepage (see Figure 1). Throughout the semester each guide was listed approximately eight or nine times for a day at a time and rotated in first, second and third positions on the list.

Twitter

At the start of the fall 2009 semester, a library Twitter account was created specifically for the purpose of tweeting guide URLs and spreading the message about their existence. The library account tweeted sporadically in September and October. Of the 31 marketed guides, 18 were “tweeted,” with statements such as “Understand the fashionistas http://LibGuides.sfsu.edu/fashion #SFSU” and “Scholarly information about getting old? You bet! http://LibGuides.sfsu.edu/gerontology #SFSU.” All tweets included the guide’s URL and also the hash-tag “#SFSU” in order to direct users searching for SF State (commonly known as SFSU) content to the postings.

Facebook

We did not use LibGuides Facebook applications during this exploratory part of the study due to unresolved technical problems. However, preliminary
steps to make “friends” with appropriate groups were taken. Using Facebook accounts under their own names, one librarian on our team joined interest groups related to the subject of particular guides and posted the guide addresses on group walls, and another librarian posted five LibGuide links to a general SF State Facebook group.

Blog Posting

California State University employee furloughs began August of 2009, causing the SF State campus (among others) to be closed the week of Thanksgiving 2009—a time when students typically work on research papers due at the end of the semester in December. Using this extraordinary circumstance as an opportunity, we created an entry for the library’s blog (http://jpllspot.wordpress.com/), which included preview headlines on the library’s home page (http://www.library.sfsu.edu/). The blog post read, “Lost? Use a Libguide!: Need library help during the week of Thanksgiving furloughs? Use a research guide custom created by librarians for SF State students,” and included links to the LibGuides home page and the library Web site’s listing of research guides (see Figure 1).

Faculty E-Mails

Also during Thanksgiving week 2009, members of the marketing team sent direct marketing e-mails to faculty in select departments related to the marketed guides (see Appendix B). Prior to this, team members requested permission from the librarian liaisons to those departments, and either received lists of faculty e-mail or were told not to send these direct e-mails.

RESULTS

The methods used during the exploratory period of fall 2009 evolved as part of an experiment with the platforms, services, and efforts possible at little or no cost to our library. Despite the steep learning curve, we have been able to make some preliminary conclusions from the usage statistics available through the LibGuides Web site, Google Analytics, and the statistics kept through our library Web site’s usage statistics. The marketed set of guides had an average use increase of 63% from the February/March/April period to the September/October/November period, while the control set of guides had an average use increase of 27% during this time. Close inspection of statistics revealed a direct causal relationship between in-person instruction and the number of visits to subject research guides. The more a librarian teaches, the more their guide will be used regardless of whether they instruct students to visit the site during a library workshop.
The standardized collection of usage statistics by Springshare, the creators of the LibGuides product, has encouraged the ongoing evaluation process across institutions due to the ease of obtaining this information. However, it should be noted that while LibGuides’ home pages list the number of guide views to “Popular Guides,” these are not unique visits. In fact, they include all hits on individual tabs within LibGuides. A larger number of tabs can cause a guide to rank higher, though the number of individual visitors is actually the same or smaller. Keeping this in mind, our overall analysis used LibGuides reports, but we compared the changes from one semester to the next and from control group to marketed group. Our close look at the impact of particular tactics involved looking at daily hits to guide home pages via Google Analytics.

Librarian Survey

Fourteen of 17 librarians filled out the survey (see Appendix A). The questions were intended to record the instructional usage of research guides on a regular basis, and in particular during the spring of 2009. It also asked librarians about their knowledge, personal and professional use, and integration of particular Web 2.0 technologies, including MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Digg, LibraryThing, Delicious, and StumbleUpon.

Ten librarians reported mentioning the existence of library guides in general during every library instructional session. Twelve reported mentioning the existence of library guides in general either often or always when doing research assistance. Three used MySpace personally, but 11 did not use it. Eight respondents reported using Facebook personally, professionally (or both), and six did not use it at all. Of those surveyed, all knew about Twitter, nine did not use it, but four used it professionally. No librarians used Digg or StumbleUpon. They did not report using these platforms to publicize guides.

Homepage Feature

There are approximately 49 links on the library’s homepage at any one time (see Figure 1), and the placement of the featured guides was toward the lower right hand corner of the page. These featured links included some Web site redirect code in order to count the number of times users clicked on these home page links. From August 4 to December 11, 2009, the most a guide link on the home page got hit was 57 times total, while the average was 28 hits per guide over the course of 130 days. We also used Google Analytics to look at the number of visits to marketed guides for the days they were featured on the library’s homepage and there was no pattern of increased viewing. We concluded that this method had almost no impact on the guides’ usage.
Twitter

Again, the number of visits to individual guides was tracked using Google Analytics both for the day a guide was tweeted plus the following two days. Based solely on these numbers, we have determined that our initial attempts with Twitter were unsuccessful in the short term. However, our attempts in this regard were incomplete, since not all of the guides were tweeted during the marketing period. As of December 2009, there are 28 followers to this account, a small number that could grow were connections to be fostered. Using the term “#SFSU” in the tweets seems to have been successful initially in finding followers, but not in pulling significant numbers away from Twitter to SF State’s LibGuides.

Facebook

Before the marketing period began, none of our colleagues reported sharing LibGuide links through Facebook. Attempts at using Facebook were successful in cases where the librarian made postings as an individual to users who were related to the SF State department being marketed. For example, one author was able to market her own guide by sending a message to a faculty member who chose to communicate via Facebook instead of through e-mail. However, due to the purely social aspect of this networking site, the process would have taken on a level of disingenuousness when the resources were not authored by a member of our team or our members did not have a personal interest in the material. Furthermore, many of the Facebook “friends” were other librarians, which can have misleading impact on usage measurement and is a common complication for marketing through online social networks (Matthews, 2007).

Blog Posting

There were 22 hits to the blog posting during the 10-day Thanksgiving break period of 2009. Due to the small number of hits across so many existing guides, the effect of the posting remains unclear. However, an increase in LibGuide visits during this time showed that this method of marketing was successful in addition to direct emails to faculty.

Faculty E-Mails

Our most successful attempts at marketing LibGuides came from the opportunistic e-mails team members sent just before Thanksgiving break week to department faculty and student listservs. When members of our team sent e-mails for departments that they were not connected with formally, they
received some enthusiastic e-mail replies from teaching faculty—at least one from each department. Looking at month-by-month statistics for guide homepage views, the marketed guides were more popular than the control group guides in November 2009 when e-mail messages were sent out (see Figure 2).
However, one or two subject liaison librarians were not comfortable with a colleague contacting their departments independently, even if the intention was to proactively market their guides.

DISCUSSION

There were a number of factors that were problematic for the success of this experiment, and some of them were already evident in the literature on successful word of mouth-marketing campaigns and Web 2.0 marketing (Axelsson, 2008). The first obvious complication was that those of us doing the marketing were not usually the authors of the guides. Additional barriers to successful viral marketing were time, social media’s inherent cult of personality, and LibGuides themselves becoming direct competition to the library’s Web site.

Time

The time librarians spend teaching increases the use of their guides, and the reward for an effective librarian is more work. The time librarians spend fostering relationships with faculty and students may increase the use of their guides, but it will just as likely increase the amount of instruction and reference they are asked to do (either formally or informally). Anecdotally, our colleagues have reported an increase in student requests for in-person subject specific research assistance during the fall of 2009. The challenge may lie in the reality that research guides, in many cases, are created as a substitute for time spent by librarians in individual student research consultations, but are being interpreted as an invitation to more direct contact.

Additionally, our short term results likely would not measure the impacts of relationship marketing, because in many cases online relationships through social networks take time to create and foster. While those who are intimately familiar with social marketing sites, and who have integrated Web 2.0 features of all kinds into their personal and professional lives, may find these tactics natural or seamless, it takes time to join, embrace, establish and retool networks for a marketing process to begin. Also, there is a significant tedium factor to using bookmarking and tagging for marketing and search engine optimization purposes alone.

Cult of Personality

Online social-marketing techniques are based on the currency of personality. Our particular experiment involved a small number of librarians promoting the products of their colleagues. However, it did not involve promoting the librarians themselves. To promote the person we would have had to be that
person, or create a fictional alias (e.g., Irma Minerva). It was felt that the latter would not have been effective because transparency and authenticity are critical to successful relationships online. Guides are often created as a destination resource. However, users may not be interested in self-instruction over personal contact.

In-person instruction at our institution is the direct cause of most visits to guides. When a librarian fosters online relationships with faculty and students in the departments they serve, either through e-mail or any of the available social-networking sites, they have a ready-made avenue for increasing awareness of their LibGuides. However, if a librarian does not foster relationships inside or outside of the classroom, it is difficult to improve the chances that their LibGuides will be marketed or will play a role during in-person instruction. Given the structure of our institution’s liaison model, it was problematic for other librarians to foster surrogate relationships in a colleague’s subject area. This confirms the literature’s advice (Axelsson, 2008), but also provides a predicament for solving a long term publicity problem. More importantly, it implies that for the most part our LibGuides will not be effective as substitutions for our in-person instruction, research assistance, and relationships with students or faculty.

Becoming the Competition

The SF State LibGuides site (http://libguides.sfsu.edu/) is different from the J. Paul Leonard Library site (http://www.library.sfsu.edu/); this provides complications for users learning how to navigate two Web sites. This has become a pedagogical problem for teaching librarians who want to make students aware of the research guides while ensuring that first and foremost they leave library workshops familiar with the site architecture and offerings of the library’s Web site. At the reference desk some students have even asked for the library’s Web site expecting to see a picture of their library liaison because their librarian used a guide as part of in-class instruction. This confusion underscores the importance of understanding site architecture and content scope for students learning the extent of the library’s resources. Librarians see guides as a means to an end, and not a destination resource. Marketing guide URLs as online destinations may confuse distinctions between locations for content and the resources that provide context and instruction.

CONCLUSION

The use of library research guides and the effectiveness of most online-marketing techniques are causally related to the relationships between the guide author and their users, particularly those relationships fostered through
in-person library instruction. Because our methods were employed solely for the purpose of marketing the product (LibGuides), the relationships critical to success were poorly fostered and our surrogate efforts fell flat. Marketing done by individual librarians as an extension of the online professional personality is more appropriate for any promotion of research guides, such as LibGuides. This confirms the statements and principles of WOM and relationship marketing, but may be problematic for institutions where librarians are not encouraged to promote themselves as library personalities, or who do not have formal relationships established through the subject liaison model. At SF State’s library, future attempts at online social marketing will likely focus on marketing select librarians and not the guides themselves.

REFERENCES


APPENDIX A
LIBRARY SURVEY (SAMPLE QUESTIONS)

For any workshops you taught in the spring 2009 semester, please check which actions you took for the LibGuides listed below. Please say y for yes and n for no, and NA for not applicable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Guide</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Listed the guide on a handout you distributed to the class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wrote the guide URL on a whiteboard or chalkboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displayed the guide on monitor/projector during a classroom visit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(students did not have computers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displayed or showed the guide on monitor/projector during a hands-on workshop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clicked on links listed in your guide during a classroom demonstration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directed the students to visit the guide as part of their classroom exercises or activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How many times did you send the guide link to your faculty during the spring 2009 semester? (please give #)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think faculty and students visit the guide when you send the link for it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think this LibGuide is used enough for the time the Library faculty spent making and maintaining it during the spring of 2009?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

General Questions (Likert scale)

- Did you mention the existence of library guides in general during any library instruction in the spring of 2009?
- Did you mention the existence of particular LibGuides not authored by you during your library workshops in the spring of 2009?
- If yes, which guides do you remember mentioning in seminars during the spring of 2009? (Please list them below.)
- Do you mention the existence of library guides in general when you do research assistance?
- If yes, which guides do you use and recommend most frequently? (Please list them below.)

APPENDIX B
FACULTY E-MAIL

Dear [subject/discipline] Faculty,
For your students doing research in [subject/discipline] this semester there is a library research guide available at [guide URL]. It provides information on how to take advantage of our library’s sites and sources.

We’d appreciate it if you would send this link to your students. It might be especially useful next week when librarians are on furlough.