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Feature - Waking up the library tour: Keeping it interesting with Instagram

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Introduction

For many students, the library tour is an inevitable stop on their orientation circuit. The tour model is very familiar, and looks something like this: a librarian leads a (sometimes cumbersome large) group of students around the library, acknowledging points of interest for those standing close enough to hear. This year, we approached our orientation on three premises: (1) library orientations can be repetitive and boring for students, (2) students are heavy users of mobile technology, and (3) mobile technology trends change very quickly. For the past few years, Dalhousie Medicine Librarians have introduced the incoming Medicine class to the library using a QR code scavenger hunt activity (see Parker, Helwig, & Phinney, 2012). While maintaining elements of the scavenger hunt model, we transitioned this year from QR codes to Instagram, one of the most currently popular social media tools used by the student-aged demographic. During Fall 2014 orientation, we used the activity successfully with Medicine, Dental Hygiene, and Social Work students in two campus libraries, with groups ranging in size from 10 to over 100. The energy and feedback generated have been outstanding.

Background

Instagram is a social networking application used for photo and video sharing. Users can "like" and comment on each other's posts and convey meaning creatively via hashtags. The Pew Research Center [PRC] (2014) reports that as of September 2013, 17% of online adults use Instagram. Instagram has become very popular with younger urban as well as non-white internet users, and appeals to men and women alike; most notably, Instagram elicits a high level of engagement and dedication from its users, who are accustomed to checking the site multiple times a day (PRC, 2013). Given the app's appeal for a youthful and diverse demographic who are also dedicated and engaged users, Instagram seemed like a natural fit for reaching out to first year students. While the Pew Research Center still reports Facebook as the most heavily-used social networking site, anecdotal evidence from our students and incidental observation of their habits made Instagram the right choice for this exercise.

Like many other popular social networking tools, Instagram is used widely for visual marketing. Many universities have recognized the power of Instagram for connecting with students and alumni. Instagram is used by many prominent universities to promote scenic and little-known spots on campus, student events, elections, achievements, and fundraisers. An established hashtag, #ThrowbackThursday, is now used by many universities when posting university heritage photos (Mollett & Fazal, 2014).

Academic libraries are also beginning to discover Instagram's value in engaging with students and promoting library spaces and services. Powell Library at UCLA has noticed more interaction and user

activity on their Instagram account than on any of their other social networking sites (Salomon, 2013). Beyond simply interacting with students by reposting their photos of the library, Powell Library photographed and allowed students to guess the identity of objects from a historical exhibit. Like institutions such as the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History, whose popular Instagram account is used for both education and interest (Salomon, 2013), Powell Library was able to promote objects of interest while also teaching their users. Mollett and McDonnell (2014) note that many libraries are using Instagram to ask readers about their favourite authors, and to show off their collections, events, and history.

The Dalhousie Libraries Instagram initiative is adapted from that of Lauren Wallis, a librarian at the University of Montevallo in Radcliffe, Virginia, and is an effective orientation activity for a number of reasons. The communal photo-sharing aspect of Instagram provides an interesting answer to the problem of library anxiety (Wallis, 2014). While many students may feel alone in their perplexity toward library resources, the user-generated content and the group nature of the activity allows participants to acknowledge and even joke about their common apprehensions. Hashtagging provides an opportunity for the students to think about and articulate what they have learned; as Wallis (2014) notes, this extra layer of interaction promotes metaliteracy, one of the new additions to the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy. As outlined by Mackey and Jacobson (2014), metaliteracy embraces the collective producing and sharing of information in digital environments as key information skills. The activity also allows students to teach each other, flaunt their ingenuity, and make each other laugh.

Design & tools

Session details

We provided the group of 115 Medicine students with a quick 20-minute introduction the day before the Instagram activity. During this presentation, we introduced some key points on our website and LibGuide, and recommended students view an introductory video about the library space and services before the next day's session. The Dental Hygiene and Social Work student groups were smaller, and preparation time was minimal. We provided these groups with brief introductions on the same day as the activity, and made sure they were aware of the location of the LibGuide to assist them with some of the questions.

We spent less than 10 minutes organizing the students into groups of five (maximum), describing the activity, and distributing instruction sheets. Each instruction sheet contained a set of locations or resources the groups would have to locate and photograph over the course of 30 minutes. The Medicine students were asked to find and Instagram five items or locations, and the Dental Hygiene and Social Work students, given the smaller numbers, were given seven items or locations. Students were instructed to ensure that at least one member of their group owned a mobile device equipped with Instagram (this was not difficult with any of the groups); the students with Instagram were instructed to log out of their personal accounts and log into an account we had created specifically for this activity.

During our introduction, we explained that the goals of the activity were to learn about the resources and spaces in the library and to share correct information with colleagues. Students were instructed to be both creative and informative in their captions and hashtagging.

Preparation

The first step was deciding to take the plunge and do something new with orientation. Falling into stasis with orientation activities in the busy month of September is easy to do, but considering that technology and resources evolve quickly, frequent re-evaluation of delivery methods and materials is important. After we committed to the switch, we set up an Instagram account and tested/confirmed that multiple users (in our case over 20) could be logged into the same Instagram account simultaneously. We also prepared the Library public services staff for the increased volume of questions they would receive; because of the high volume of Medicine students, we also posted an announcement to warn patrons about the temporary noise in the W.K. Kellogg Library. Lauren Wallis used a set of library-owned iPads for her version of this activity; this was not an option for us, so the success of this activity was contingent on enough students having Instagram accounts on their devices. However, we were not particularly concerned about this issue

given the evidence of heavy Instagram use among adults under 30 (PRC, 2013). This assumption proved correct; students both had Instagram accounts and required no instruction on how to use them.

Things you need

- Instagram account
- Instruction sheet with login/password information and 5-7 questions. Try to vary the questions and sequence so each group follows a slightly different route.
- Some knowledge of hashtags
- Prizes (optional)

Appropriate content -- Question creation

Lauren Wallis' questions were used as an inspiration for some of ours; in other cases, we either created new questions or adjusted our past scavenger hunt questions to fit the new format. The Medicine librarians decided that each group should have a question that fell into one of the following categories: something confusing (attributed to Lauren Wallis); using an online resource; using a service; and finding a librarian. The Social Work students were the only group that did this activity in the largest campus library, the Killam Memorial Library, and we ensured that their questions would have them travelling to different floors of the library.

Example questions

Find and Instagram:

- Your group successfully locating the following reserve book: Neuroanatomy: An atlas of structures, sections, and systems [Hint: ask the staff member how long you can keep a reserve item checked out. Indicate how long you can keep this book checked out in your caption or picture. Get creative!]
- The coolest/weirdest/most interesting book in the Social Work section [Hint: the Social Work section is in the HV range... you might have to ask somebody where that is!]
- Your group working hard in a study room [Hint: you'll have to book the study room. Hint: you'll have to find out how to do that...]
- Your group locating the following eResource: Dynamed. In Dynamed, look up the adult oral dose of Nexium for GERD. Include the suggested dose in your caption
- Your group printing something at the library
- Something confusing

Student & Staff experiences

As the photos indicate, the students had fun with this activity: <http://instagram.com/hellodallibraries/> [1]. They were creative with the hashtags and with demonstrating the resources and tools of the library. Informal feedback from the students post-exercise also suggested they had a positive experience. While the staff also enjoyed interacting with the students in this capacity, we may alter some questions in the future to avoid congestion at the service point. One minor hiccup we did encounter was that not everybody updates their devices regularly; a few students experienced problems uploading photos because their app or operating system was not updated. However, in these cases another group member took over uploading to Instagram on their device.

Future directions

We will continue to evaluate this activity as technology evolves. We look forward to continuing to introduce new orientation activities that match students' interests in social media and gaming. Social media apps like Drop Messages, which allow for location-based group messages, are of interest to us for future activities. Similar to Instagram, Drop Messages is very open and public; other options such as Seahorse may provide less public online spaces where sharing is limited to participants only.

Conclusion

Instagram has proven to be a valuable tool for outreach, marketing, and connecting with students and users. Incorporating Instagram into our library orientation was beneficial in a number of ways. As the photos and feedback suggest, the students had fun at the library. They interacted with staff, they learned about the space, they accessed and used some of the resources, and they got to wield a technology they are comfortable with and enjoy using. They got to teach, show off their knowledge and creativity, and make us and their classmates laugh. The learning process felt more social, and the exercise gave us an opportunity to dispel the idea that the library is a cold and intimidating place. Their engagement with this activity also left us with an artifact: an Instagram feed filled with inspired pictures of students from different programs discovering spaces and resources in two different campus libraries. The success of an activity like this teaches us how important it is to stay alert to the trends in mobile technology, and to be able to distinguish between those technologies students actually like to use and those that are no longer of interest to them. We look forward to continuing to update and refresh our library orientations to incorporate new trends and interests.

Acknowledgments

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More information: Drop Messages and Seahorse

- <http://techcrunch.com/2014/08/05/drop-the-location-based-messenger-closes-1-25m-from-atlas-ventures-spark-capital/> [9]
- <http://techcrunch.com/2014/09/04/seahorse-lets-you-collaborate-with-friends-to-build-lasting-photo-and-video-albums-shared-privately/> [10]

Source URL: <http://apla.ca/?q=78/2.feet1>

Links:

- [1] <http://instagram.com/hellodallibraries/>
- [2] <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2014/04/08/five-ways-universities-are-using-instagram/>
- [3] <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/lseviewofbooks/2014/04/12/editors-column-5-ways-libraries-are-using-instagram/>
- [4] <http://apla.ca/?q=76/2.qr>
- [5] <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/12/30/social-media-update-2013/>
- [6] <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>
- [7] http://ecommons.udayton.edu/roesch_fac/20
- [8] <http://www.slideshare.net/lmwallis/library-instruction-with-instagram>
- [9] <http://techcrunch.com/2014/08/05/drop-the-location-based-messenger-closes-1-25m-from-atlas-ventures-spark-capital/>
- [10] <http://techcrunch.com/2014/09/04/seahorse-lets-you-collaborate-with-friends-to-build-lasting-photo-and-video-albums-shared-privately/>