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# Twitter at Canterbury Christ Church University



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Towards the end of the 2011–12 academic year, Library Services at Canterbury Christ Church University decided it needed to find new and effective ways of communicating with library users in order to promote and improve its service and increase user satisfaction. As a result of the National Student Survey findings, Library Services identified a need to become more visible and relevant to its users and to increase awareness of the services and facilities it provides. Use of social media is one of the key means by which such an aim may be achieved. It offers exciting potential for libraries as it provides a unique opportunity to conduct both proactive and reactive communications with students, engaging in a two-way discussion that can help enhance students' perception of the service. All this is achievable in an efficient, cost-effective way, the only substantive impact being on the time taken to manage whichever social media tool one chooses to employ.

When contemplating the use of social media by Library Services, five main justifications for its use emerged:

- 1 Social media is a prime method of communication for students and its use will help establish Library Services in spaces they inhabit.
- 2 It fits within the broader university strategy to recognise students' communication preferences.
- 3 Social media can help advertise our services to library users in a non-intrusive and informal way.
- 4 It provides a useful mechanism for collecting feedback from students and other service users or stakeholders.
- 5 Other departments across the university use social media to communicate with students;

Library Services may be perceived as being out of touch if it does not also engage with these channels.

In light of these considerations, Library Services agreed to the adoption of a pilot scheme to explore the potential of social media for improving communications with students.

Following approval of the working group's strategy document, the group then set about exploring the available tools, researching how they had been used in other institutions to help inform the decision-making process. The experience of other universities in using social media was instructive in how we moved forward with the pilot. We talked to individuals at other universities to gauge how they used social media, what problems they encountered and what worked for them. Addressing some of the issues others had encountered helped us to develop our strategy.

We considered whether to use Twitter or Facebook during the pilot as both were familiar to the group and popular and widely used by students. We chose the former as it appeared to offer most of the functionality that we required, particularly the ability to engage with students regarding the service and deal with feedback in a proactive and effective manner. Unlike Facebook, Twitter enables us to seek out comments from students about Library Services and to address issues raised in a way that reflects well on the department. Facebook, on the other hand, relies on students coming to the library space to engage. For a 'quick win', it therefore seemed that Twitter would be more effective.

At the start of the process we developed and wrote a pilot proposal for the introduction of the Twitter account. It gave the group the opportunity to think carefully about a number of aspects. What should be tweeted? What kind of tone should we adopt? How would we deal with complaints? How would we ensure consistency across other communications channels? How would we evaluate the success or failure of the account? Consideration of these questions helped us to clarify our approach ahead of the launch of the pilot.

In terms of what we tweeted, we were obviously keen to tweet things that promoted certain aspects of the service. For example, this might include highlighting existing or upcoming services, improvements made to services, advertising drop-in sessions, library news and renewals reminders

in the run-up to vacations. We would also try to deal with tweets in a timely fashion, but while we wanted to ensure as comprehensive a service as possible, we also wanted to avoid dealing with queries outside working hours. Therefore we resolved to deal with calls at the earliest opportunity within office hours.

As the project was a pilot, we did not have the advantage of a budget with which to promote the account and raise awareness of its existence among students. We were, however, given a space to place an advertisement on the flatscreen TV behind the main student service desk. This was particularly beneficial, as at the start of term a significant number of students tend to be queuing at the desk throughout the day.

Because of the lack of dedicated funding, we were aware that we needed to be smart in the way we used Twitter to build awareness. We did so by following established, official university Twitter accounts and encouraging them to point students in our direction; we also tried to utilise effectively the tools available via Twitter, one of the most useful of which is the search functionality.

As well as conducting basic searches across Twitter, buried in its web pages is an advanced search form which has a number of useful features, including the useful location search. This enables the user to enter terms and search near a specific location. So, in our case, we entered the term 'library' and used that as a basis of a location search in Canterbury. This enabled us to track any mentions of the word library in the Canterbury area. Of course, there is more than one library in Canterbury (and there are, of course, other types of library that people could refer to) so tweets referencing the word 'library' were to be treated with care.

Not only did we need to make sure that users were referencing our library rather than one of the others in the city, we also had to make sure they were our students before engaging with them. Cross-referencing their name with our library management system appeared to us to be a little intrusive from the point of view of the user, so we relied purely on what was written in their Twitter bio, the short description of themselves users submit. If it didn't clearly state in the biography that they were a student at Canterbury Christ Church University, then we did not interact with them. If, on the other hand, it was clear that they were, then we interacted with them, seeking to address any problems raised or acknowledging

any positive feedback made. Whilst this would seem a little intrusive, students were, without exception, pleased that we had engaged with them. This is consistent with research that has shown that 50% of users expect a response on Twitter regarding a complaint and 83% liked or loved getting a response to a complaint.<sup>1</sup> Whilst it can seem uncomfortable to approach a user when they haven't directed their comments to you, users do appear to welcome the proactive approach and, furthermore, engaging in this way has the added benefit of spreading the word about the library's presence on Twitter. Many users followed the account after our engagement and some even pass comments on our interaction to their followers, broadening the audience.

We evaluated the success of the pilot towards the end to see whether the Twitter account had both met the aims that we had set out at the beginning and proved to be a popular tool with students. When drafting our pilot proposal we decided that the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data would be useful in evaluating the pilot effectively.

In terms of quantitative data, we decided to collect weekly data on number of followers, number of 'mentions' (tweets directed towards our account), retweets (tweets that were re-posted by others) and favourites. We also initially tried to keep track of how our followers broke down by student / staff / other. Whilst not scientific by any stretch of the imagination, it gave us a useful early indicator as to whom we were reaching and how successful our strategy had been in attracting our target audience (students). Up until we hit around 200 followers, around 75% of our followers were students.

In terms of qualitative data, we used Storify to create a record of all our interactions with students. We discounted simply 'favouriting' the tweets sent to us by students, as retrieving tweets in this way isn't particularly user-friendly and didn't provide much opportunity to contextualise the tweets we were sent. Storify enables users to pull tweets together to create a linear narrative. This helps to put the tweets in a logical order and, with the ability to insert additional text, allows for a degree of context to be added, explaining the nature of the conversation and any related outcomes. Furthermore, once added, the tweet is stored on the template, so even if it is deleted by the user, or if the user's account becomes defunct, the evidence of the conversation remains.

At the end of the pilot, the stored tweets were grouped together into common themes and added to the final evaluation document. A brief analysis of each interaction was added to the main body of the document, indicating the nature of the interaction and what we learnt from it. Fortunately, there were plenty of good examples of the ways in which we had interacted with students, including dealing with account problems, locating online resources, providing advice on technical issues and proactively engaging with various issues raised by students about library services.

This combination of qualitative and quantitative data was particularly effective. By presenting examples of interactions between the account and our students we were able to draw firm conclusions about what worked, and relate this to the outcomes of such interactions. We were able to demonstrate clearly how the Twitter account could be used to resolve certain issues as well as highlighting other issues that students were experiencing that perhaps had not been identified previously. Whilst the quantitative data was useful (in demonstrating number of followers, etc.), it was the qualitative data that was most effective in demonstrating the value of the Twitter account and reinforcing the need to maintain and develop our presence there.

Overall, we learnt a great deal from our experiences throughout the pilot. We felt the process of setting out a formal pilot proposal provided us with a good focus on how the account should be used and how we could get the most out of it. We also felt that keeping qualitative data was very useful in helping to formulate an effective evaluation, making it easier to provide valuable evidence demonstrating its value to Library Services. However, we have also found it difficult to strike the balance between tweeting too much and tweeting too little, and specifically what we should be tweeting about. Spending a bit of time on planning ahead has helped a great deal; we use a timetable in the form of a shared document broken down by weeks incorporates various things that will be happening across library Services on all our campuses. It is, however, very easy to slip into tweeting solely about specific library 'news', which results in a series of tweets about, for example, online database services that are unavailable. Whilst sometimes this is unavoidable, more time spent planning content would help. That said, given our experiences, we would certainly recommend the development of a Twitter account as a way to address the need to improve communications with users. Just make

sure you spend a bit of time planning: it isn't enough simply to tweet content about problems with services – content needs to be interesting and varied, not merely duplication of a library news page. This is perhaps the biggest challenge, but success in meeting it will result in a popular Twitter account that students value, will lead to better communications and generate a strong, positive perception of a library's services.



#### REFERENCE

- 1 'Are you listening? Twitter users want complaints read, addressed'. Available at: <http://www.maritzresearch.com/shared-content/Press-Releases/2011/Are-you-listening-Twitter-users-want-complaints-read-addressed.aspx> [Accessed 1.10.13]