Twitter FOR Libraries (and Librarians)

by Sarah Milstein

For many people, the word "twitter" brings to mind birds rather than humans. But information professionals know that Twitter (www.twitter.com) is a fast-growing, free messaging service for people, and it's one that libraries (and librarians) can make good use of—without spending much time or effort.

Twitter lets people send and receive short messages (called Tweets) via the web or via SMS using a mobile phone. Messages on Twitter are limited to a maximum of 140 characters, including spaces, and they're generally public. Because each message is just a sentence or two, a carefully crafted post can convey a good deal of information without taking a lot of time to read or write. In addition, because Twitter has millions of users, it's a good place to find and connect with people interested in your institution and your areas of expertise.

To automatically see what someone else is saying, you "follow" them. Those who regularly receive your posts are your "followers." You don't need to give each other permission to follow, and you can view Tweets without signing into Twitter, but you must sign in to follow someone.

Thanks to the brevity of messages on Twitter, people often refer to the medium as "microblogging." Like full-sized blogging, the pint-sized version is useful for exchanging many different kinds of information. Although Twitter users initially shared just personal updates ("Eating kale for lunch" or "Watching the Giants game on our new TV"), it's become common for people and organizations to Twitter about professional ideas and information too. Yes, organizations have now begun to use Twitter as a communications medium.

For example, a library could share all kinds of news that patrons want. Short messages can tell people about events such as readings, lectures, and book sales; newly available resources; or changes in the building hours. One message a day or one a week could share a tip on finding or accessing information online or in the building. Twitter posts can link to interesting news stories about literacy or about libraries. When appropriate, the posts can link to a library's own website and blog for more in-depth information.

LIBRARIES ON TWITTER

Libraries of all kinds are already using Twitter to good effect. Public libraries such as Ada Library in Boise, Idaho (http://twitter.com/adalib), and the Cleveland Public Library (http://twitter.com/Cleveland_PL) use Twitter to point out highlights on their websites—everything from exhibit announcements, to links for nominating "your favorite librarian," to holiday hours. The Missouri River Regional Library (http://twitter.com/mrrl) posts information about teen events and recently linked to research about the value of libraries in lean economic times. The Glendale (Ariz.) Public Library (http://twitter.com/GlendaleLibrary) Tweets about its programs.

University libraries have a somewhat different focus. The Undergraduate Library at the University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign (http://twitter.com/askundergrad), for example, lets students know about upcoming deadlines ("5 days left to return ALL media items"), service issues ("Access to EBSCO through wireless is down. You can still access EBSCO through desktop PCs"), and other topics of interest to its audience

("UGL is hiring for Spring 09! Applications @ the front desk"). The Yale University Science Libraries (http://twitter.com/yalescilib) announce workshops on library resources, provide links to online archives, and give tips on sending text messages to a librarian. North Carolina State University Engineering Library (http://twitter.com/NCSUEngLibrary) links to both university and external blog posts.

Twitter gives special libraries a new opportunity to share information not just with their internal clients but also with people outside the institution who are interested in their topics. The Lunar and Planetary Institute Library (http:/twitter.com/LPI_Library), for instance, has linked to the Carnival of Space blog, the International Year of Astronomy Discovery Guide, and a report on the National Science Digital Library (NSDL) meeting. Sun Microsystems' library (http://twitter.com/libraryresearch) Tweets about additions to its collection. The National Press Club (http://twitter.com/NPCLibrary) does a nice job of combining announcements of coming events with URLs and some personal observations ("Luncheon with Paul Krugman, http://tinyurl.com/5rqckl," "3 great book events at the club next week!" and "Thoroughly enjoyed the Billy Joel luncheon. Was a bit surprised when he walked by my office in the library beforehand").

Since people often look to see who a Twittering person or institution is following, libraries can add resources to the list of accounts they follow. The local newspaper, national and international news sources such as NPR (http://twitter.com/NPR) and BBC (http://twitter.com/BBC), and professional information sources (http://twitter.com/LibraryJournal) are all good candidates to follow. However, you can only easily see 36 accounts being followed, ranked according to when they joined Twitter. Libraries that find the list of their followed Twitterers is not terribly useful can create a background image that lists resources on Twitter.

There are, of course, many individual librarians who are on Twitter, combining personal posts with professional ones. In fact, if you plan to establish a library presence for your institution, you need to decide whether to include an employee's name on the account. Most Twittering libraries don't (Illinois' Undergraduate Library didn't even fill in the bio field), but library users want to know who's behind the Twitter account. The bio field has 160 characters available, and libraries should take advantage of the opportunity to explain their mission and highlight people.

EFFECTIVE USE OF THE TWITTERVERSE

The essence of Twitter is conversation. Libraries, however, tend to use it as a broadcast mechanism. Libraries on Twitter should encourage followers to interact with the library—ask questions, share links, re-Tweet interesting posts from others, and reply when people message you (those are prefaced with @ your account name). For professional development, look for conference coverage on Twitter.

Given the many potential uses of Twitter for libraries—not to mention the likelihood that your patrons are already on it—it's a great medium to embrace. And at just a few sentences a day, the lightweight format doesn't require much time to make a big impact. The accounts above will give you a feel for library Twittering (for more libraries that Twitter, check out www.libsuccess.org/index.php?title=Twitter).

Bear in mind that the medium is new, and libraries have only begun to skim the surface of Twittering. But as a service designed for exchanging information, Twitter holds great promise for libraries of all kinds, and your creativity will expand its utility.

Twittiquette for Institutions

Before you do anything else on Twitter, sign up for an account at Twitter.com (it takes just a few minutes), and then spend 5 or 10 minutes a day clicking around and learning how people use the service. Make it a point to follow at least a few interesting people and institutions. (On Twitter, you can get a feed of somebody else's messages by "following" that person; unlike on other social networks, there's no need to get permission from them.) After a week or so, you'll be familiar enough to start posting—particularly if you keep the following guidelines in mind:

Do fill in your account's Settings with the name of your institution and its URL. Then use the 160-character Bio field to give the name and title of the employee or employees who post to the account. Don't assume that people won't care who's behind the account.

Do treat Twitter as a conversation rather than a broadcast medium. Don't simply post information without also replying to people who send you messages in the system. How do you know they're talking to you? They'll start their message with the @ symbol, followed by your account name. For instance, "@Cleveland_PL: Where can I find a podcast of Sarah Vowell's recent reading?" Replies show up in a tab on your Twitter page. Although conversational Twittering is not yet the norm among libraries, it is common for other institutions on the service to interact with followers. Thus it's expected by many Twitter users, and it's a great way to connect with patrons.

Do search Twitter daily for mentions of your institution, using both Twitter Search (formerly Summize; http://search.twitter.com) and the Find People function on the main Twitter site, which actually will find institutions as well as individuals. Don't ignore the conversations that are happening about your library or your community. Reputation management is not just for businesses.

Do follow everyone who follows you. When somebody follows you, it's a sign that they're interested in talking to you; when you follow them back, you're signaling mutual interest and providing an important connection for many of your constituents. An additional benefit is that people who follow each other on Twitter can send "direct messages," which are private messages between two parties and can be good for customer service and other exchanges that may be specific to an individual patron.

Do post approximately once a day, or up to as many as five or six times a day. Don't let the account go inexplicably quiet for extended periods, and don't overwhelm people with too many posts.

Do sometimes ask questions and solicit feedback. Don't forget to follow up with a post on the results.

Sarah Milstein *(sarah.milstein@gmail.com; http://twitter.com/sarahm) is a co-author of "Twitter and the Micromessaging Revolution," a research report from O'Reilly Media. Her webcast on "Twitter for Business" is available at O'Reilly TV on YouTube (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUR2E8l3bi8).*

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