12-23-2019

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Recommended Citation

DeLooper, John P. and Ehrenpreis, Michelle, "Say You Want a Renovation: Using Instagram to Document a Library Renovation at Lehman College" (2019). *CUNY Academic Works.*
https://academicworks.cuny.edu/le_pubs/299

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By John P. DeLooper and Michelle Ehrenpreis

Abstract

This paper discusses how the Leonard Lief Library at Lehman College is documenting its renovation via the social media platform Instagram. It discusses the origin of project, why we chose Instagram and how we chose to highlight that social media platform on our Library's web page. We explain what choices we have made and what strategies we chose to effectively document the renovation. We also discuss the challenges we have encountered, and how we overcame those challenges to reach student audiences in new and engaging ways.

Keywords

Instagram, social media, renovations

Author Biography

John DeLooper is Web Services - Online Learning Librarian at Lehman College. He earned his M.L.I.S. from Rutgers University in 2010 and his M.S. in information systems from Baruch College's Zicklin School of Business in 2017. Michelle Ehrenpreis is the Electronic Resources Librarian at Lehman College CUNY. She has an M.L.I.S. from Pratt Institute and is pursuing a Masters in Business Management and Leadership at CUNY SPS.

Introduction

The Leonard Lief Library began a major renovation in December 2018, relocating its main service points, reference and circulation desks, and library faculty offices to the concourse level of the building. Recognizing that the Library's renovation would cause service changes and disruptions, the Electronic Resources and Web Services librarians (Michelle Ehrenpreis and John DeLooper) sought ways to keep students up to date and engaged in the renovation process and to create a documented record of the renovation process. These librarians decided to use Instagram for this purpose because of its visual medium for posting photos and popularity among students.

Background

Lehman College is CUNY's senior college in the Bronx, offering more than 90 undergraduate and graduate programs in the liberal arts, sciences, and professional

education. With a student body of more than 14,000, Lehman serves students from all backgrounds. The Library acts as a student center on campus, offering a space for research and instruction for the college community. The Library's website features many online resources for student, faculty, and staff research, and utilizes social media as its primary medium for promoting programming, events, and updates.

What Is Instagram?

Instagram is a social media network focused on sharing user-submitted photographs. Founded in 2010, it was originally released for iPhone, and added support for other platforms including Android in 2012 and desktop browsers in 2016. Instagram was bought by Facebook in 2012 and has hosted more than 40 billion photos since its launch (Alba, 2015). In the years since Instagram launched, many libraries have also begun to adopt Instagram for outreach and advertising purposes.

How Do Libraries Use Instagram?

Libraries have used Instagram since at least 2013. Early uses included creating a location-based photo stream (Kroski, 2013) and posting library information, events, and staff information ("9 Ways to Use Instagram for Your Library," 2012). Over time, libraries' use of Instagram has evolved: library and book-based communities have formed, and new features like library challenges and hashtags have become a staple of Instagram library pages (Jess, 2015). In addition, libraries continue to use Instagram to post updates about programs, services, and library history, and to share library-themed memes.

How Have Libraries Documented Renovations?

As far as documenting renovations, libraries have utilized many strategies to document progress and change. Methods have ranged from newsletters (Mwesigwa, n.d.; Probeyahn, 2017) to renovation websites ("Library Renovation," 2017; "Space Renovations," 2018) to LibGuides (Van Houten, 2013) to blogs ("Library 2.0," 2017). To the best of our knowledge, Instagram has so far only been used at the end of library renovations to showcase completed construction (Baez, 2016; Laurent, 2016).

Lehman Social Media prior to Instagram

In September 2018, the Web Services-Online Learning librarian, John DeLooper, conducted a website audit to determine the relevance and currency of material on the Leonard Lief Library's website. This audit was conducted in preparation for the college's decennial Middle States re-accreditation. As part of the audit, DeLooper examined the Library's use of social media platforms. He determined that the

Leonard Lief Library's social media channels had become stale and needed updating and a defined direction. Lehman had profiles on several different platforms, specifically Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, and Instagram, and a newsletter. While most of the Lief Library's librarians could edit each social media page (with the exception of the newsletter), they rarely added content. Post frequency averaged once a month on Facebook and Twitter, and less on Instagram and in the newsletter. Of these, Instagram was the most neglected, as it had only three posts and three followers and had not been updated at all in a year.

Getting Started

After surveying the Library's social media presence, we—the Electronic Resources Librarian and the Web Services-Online Learning Librarian—decided that we needed to be strategic about how the Library used social media and how this technology could better connect the Library with its students. We were also aware that with a renovation scheduled to begin in December, the Library needed a channel for communicating construction-related changes to students and thought using Instagram specifically might be a good way to do this. We chose to focus on Instagram because it has grown in popularity in recent years and because its audience skews toward young adults (Perrin & Anderson, 2019). In addition, several other libraries, including college and university libraries, have used Instagram to communicate and engage with their patrons (Mariam, 2015). The unit felt that a construction focus might be an especially good option for Instagram, as the platform is often used by home improvement aficionados, with tags such as #Renovation and #Renovations each having over a million posts. The goals for Instagram were thus to inform users about the renovation, attract users by engaging them in an accessible and appealing format, and experiment and develop something that had not been tried before.

To start this process, we sought out Instagram inspiration. We researched other libraries and found that other sites typically posted about events, services, collections, and library history. Many also participated in library-specific challenges like "Bookface" and "Shelfie." We also found that some sites surveyed or asked questions of students and encouraged student participation, while others were more of an information source. We considered both these approaches while devising a social media strategy.

Before beginning our foray into Instagram, we sought guidance from our chief librarian, the IT director of web services, the campus social media coordinator, and the director of facilities in order to better understand the college's preferred directions, the platform's limitations, and the lessons our colleagues had already gleaned from experience. We were given suggestions such as posting weekly, experimenting with stories, and regramming the college's main social media account to maintain and increase momentum. In addition, we were informed that we would not be allowed to go inside the actual construction sites or to take pictures

of active construction. Therefore, we chose to focus on areas before their renovation, newly redesigned areas, temporary areas, signage, and all other areas of the Library affected by the renovation. Once the goals and parameters were set, we began taking pictures and downloaded the Instagram app to begin weekly posts in December of 2018.

Discussion/Lessons Learned

During our adoption of Instagram, we learned a lot about what it takes to make social media successful, and we encountered several unexpected challenges. First, setup was complicated in that analytics needed to be separately activated via a function called "Business Insights." Luckily, this was relatively straightforward, and we enabled it quickly.

Next, we wanted to be able to "regram," or copy/syndicate content from other pages. However, unlike Facebook and Twitter, regramming is not built into the Instagram app. A page owner who wishes to regram content must therefore ask the content owner (the person who originally published the content) for permission, then copy their content. Since Instagram restricts the ability of end users to save images posted on the site, any regrammed post must either screenshot any included photos or ask the owner to send a copy of the photos. The extra steps required for this limited cross-promotional opportunities.

In addition, given that this was an experiment for the Library, we decided to commit only about an hour a week to this process, the rationale being that it would be helpful to schedule tweets in time crunches, and to ensure that we always had content ready to keep the feed "fresh." Some social media platforms like Facebook have tools for scheduling posts in advance. At the time of this publication, Instagram is beta-testing this functionality on its most popular accounts, and the Leonard Lief Library did not have access. Therefore, we decided to try tools such as Hootsuite, which the Lief Library had previously used for Facebook and Twitter. Unfortunately, due to Instagram's restrictions for posting content via third party application programming interfaces (APIs), Hootsuite posts can only include one picture and users are limited to 10 scheduled posts. Hootsuite also does not include the ability to add or edit alt-text in Instagram posts. There are also other social media management tools such as Buffer and Conversocial that allow for scheduling of content, but each of these is quite expensive, and we were unable to try them due to the limited availability of library funds.

As for adding alt-text in the Instagram app, the process for doing this is not obvious and requires changing an obscure setting (Herman, 2019). Our early confusion about the process meant that our initial photos did not include alt-text. Interestingly, Instagram uses artificial intelligence to identify contents of pictures and generate alt-text, but the new and untested nature of AI means that errors sometimes occur, so we have tried to manually add alt-text whenever possible.

Pervading the entire experience of using Instagram is its mobile focus. Not only did Instagram wait several years after its creation before developing a desktop website, many features—such as creating and editing posts and viewing analytics—remain unavailable except on mobile devices. Additionally, as advertising-supported business models of social media sites have matured, their developers have become extremely adept at integrating advertising into their sites. Instagram's advertising focus thus makes for some inconvenient features for institutions like a library. First, Instagram disables functional hyperlinks within post unless the poster has paid for advertising. Presumably, this is done because clicking a link is considered an "engagement" action and Instagram wants to demonstrate its value as click-throughs from Instagram drive traffic and/or purchases.

As noted previously, when we first started using Instagram, we had envisioned showing hard hats and active construction so students could get a better understanding of how the Library was changing and what new facilities would be available. Unfortunately, college administrators explained that we could not take photos of active construction sites or construction workers for safety and legal reasons. As a result, our strategy quickly evolved to incorporate additional content beyond photos of temporary areas, recently finished construction, and areas about to be renovated. We began to feature events and curated news on Instagram, which students have favorably mentioned during bibliographic instruction sessions.

Next, unlike Facebook and Twitter, Instagram does not allow us to automatically syndicate the posts to our home page via a "widget." While there exists a process for doing this via Instagram's API, this service was being transitioned from one platform to another at the time of our experiment, and the process was more complicated to implement than the web services librarian could tackle at the time. At first this limitation seemed to be an inconvenience, as any posts had to be manually added. However, this restriction quickly proved to have an upside: since posts were not syndicated, we were able to choose which post was displayed at which time. Since had long used Twitter for our news, we continued to use Twitter to display the latest news while we used Instagram to show a highlighted change or activity. Instagram allowed us to keep these highlighted stories visible for as long as needed, while still allowing us to post news, services, and changes on Twitter.

We did find it important to post consistently. By posting at least once a week, updates were consistent, and our colleagues informally reported that it kept the home page "fresh."

In terms of using Instagram to reach our users, the growth of our followers on the platform slowed in the second semester, and we are currently at 170. Since we do not pay for advertising, we do not have the ability to add hyperlinks and we cannot track engagements with our Instagram page. We have also seen relatively few comments on posts, which indicates that our patrons are not using Instagram as a medium for library interactions such as reference questions. In addition, a

significant portion of our followers are other libraries rather than students, faculty, or staff of our institution, and who presumably follow us for either entertainment or inspiration.

We have also tried experimenting with new tools such as stories. Feedback to our initial experiments with stories was positive, but we have only had limited circumstances where we perceived this to be of interest to our students. This feature will be revisited later, such as when the renovation is completed, and we can conduct a story-based tour of the new space.

Current Status

The Lief Library's renovation is expected to be completed in January 2019. After the renovation, we plan to continue to use Instagram to promote news and events. However, given Instagram's strong advertising focus, we must evaluate the Library's future direction with Instagram and all social media platforms. We must recognize that different platforms have different strengths and weaknesses, and certain platforms may prove to be better fits for a library. Social media platforms have been shown to quickly evolve and lose popularity over time, so we will have to monitor whether Instagram continues to be a good way to reach our patron community.

Conclusion

The Library's experiment with Instagram has proven successful in documenting the Library renovation and informing the campus about changes, and it is providing a foundation for continued library experiments with social media platforms and tools. We plan to conduct a more detailed study of Instagram and develop a comprehensive strategy for the future.

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