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BEST SOCIAL MEDIA PRACTICE

D*igital transition is now a constant, it's complex, ever-changing and competing for the consumer's diverse interests and engagement, says Edward Kostraby.*

Leading the pack and constant innovation seem to be part of the routine of managing any business venture, and this equally applies to libraries. The myriad of influences is simply overwhelming: the need to transition between platforms to access information, from open source products, cultural heritage and archival digitisation to digital text mining; publishers with ever-growing commercial interests; mobile apps; responding to various trends (whether surveyed or perceived); and the need to enhance and develop new generation library management systems.

Social media currently drives much of the need to be connected on an individual and business level. It is little wonder that the idea of a digital future seems meaningless, as the digital is well entrenched as a constant. Creating new library service contexts and connections, virtual and physical spaces as a direct connect requires exploring diverse mental frameworks.

The article on hand, Social Technologies in Public libraries: Exploring Best Practice, is a research project which explores social media best practice in the public library sector over two partnership library services, the Yarra Plenty Regional Library (YPRL) and City Libraries Townsville (CLT). It provides us with a pathway and innovative practice on using what is a significant social trend, and provides evidence to its effect.

It is an attempt to be part of the digital scene away from the commercial drivers (as these are in the background supporting the infrastructure), and to develop a participatory library service to engage users communities attached to the service and beyond). Building relationships is time consuming and an important psychological component to a service, 'including acceptance of the idea that they (users) added value to the library (rather than simply being a trend the library was following).'

The view is that 'users creating content and participating with the service, ever new time horizons will keep all on the edge of the next best thing and embedding what they already have.' There was a sense of the inevitable about social technologies melding into the networked society, so much so that YPRL established WikiNorthia, a user input into the 'creating stories about the region'.

Their report provided five emerging themes which were essential for strong community participation from connecting communities through social technologies, from 'allow[ing] users to have greater say in library direction and generate content' to 'fostering an organisational culture that allows social technologies to be used to create a participatory service, where the users are equally engaged as are the staff in providing dialogue, information and a sense of being part of lively and evolving services.'

Libraries are often framed in terms of a library's physical branches, but the emphasis here is to go beyond this, as this is now the reality, something YPRL state explicitly in their strategic plan *Yarra Plenty Regional Library from 2008*. So this has been an emerging environment for them.

During their engagement with participants, defining what they felt made a good social media message, participants identified similar features of a successful social messages: that messages should be interactive or engaging, fun, articulated in a personal tone, and most importantly, framed in terms of the users, so the message was about them, rather than just about the library.

This was evident in their social media interactions where their organisations were given a personality that was welcoming and personable. Their online personality had been planned by the services and while it was not described in their governance documentation, there was an awareness that they needed to find this voice to promote community engagement.

Both services decided to push the boundaries of their futures by connecting with their communities using social media and the essential role they can play within it. They do not have a clear vision of what they need to do beyond the current practice, but acknowledge that the future is digital and that they will be part of it.

Predicting any digital future is up for grabs. It is always a brave and measured move and can be argued that it may be well beyond Delphi forecasting or other methods, and perhaps is in the realm of stock market prediction – take your pick, but whatever you pick, make sure that you lead the push.

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