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The Long Tail of Information: Social Media and Opening up Information Markets in the Business Library

Business librarians have extensive knowledge that does not always fit inside the limited architecture of traditional instruction models. Due to limitations in space or time, the pathfinder, research guide, and the too-short instructional session must concentrate on the broadest skills and the most frequently asked questions. However the advent of social media – blogs, Facebook, YouTube, Xtranormal and other media – have opened up additional opportunities for librarians to share their knowledge in more depth.

Social media gives us opportunities for teaching with greater detail and addressing the large number of niche questions. Social media offers infinite instructional space, microtargeted knowledge entries, easy creation of those entries and remote patron access to a knowledge base. The librarian can blog, post material on Facebook, upload videos, post links and use graphics as teaching tools. There is an untapped information market potential that we can now reach. In other words, social media allows librarians to meet a greater number of information needs by answering many focused questions instead of providing one general instruction session covering only the basics.

Many readers will recognize this insight from the business bestseller ***The Long Tail*** (2006). This book shows the internet retailer revolution in increasing sales by tapping the “long tail” - the large number of niche products that together outsell the big hit. In fact, there is some evidence that the “big hits” actually are decreasing in importance, because “long tail” customers are more closely matched with more specific products. This changes consumer expectations to a more personalized experience.

Imagine sharing everything you know about business research with patrons. For example, if someone is starting a new business that falls slightly outside traditional industry data, devote some time relating psychographics to their business idea. Impart your knowledge of uncommonly used subject headings (my favorite is *informal economy* in place of *black market*). Make a tutorial for finding common sized financials in the company financials database. Or put in a word for that great but unfamous book (Elgin Groseclose's ***Money and Man*** anyone?).

The creation of social media is certainly not difficult. After all, it's material that you already know. Social media content should count toward performance appraisal as instructional material. Don't be surprised if you find yourself referring to your own social media for reference, or to push out answers to patrons on chat or email. After you have been blogging or Facebooking for a while, the accumulated content starts to look impressive. You look like an individual with answers to real questions!

Finally, social media instruction can be used as a knowledge base for other librarians. Business librarians are often asked about their subject by other librarians. Social media knowledge bases assist other non-specialist librarians in answering business reference questions. Instead of searching for e-mails or relying on chance conversations and meetings that fit no-one's schedules, non-business librarians can check the business librarians' social media output for help in answering a question. This allows the reference department to complete its core mission: using all available expertise to create a better product - a good answer. Knowledge management theorists would be proud.

References

- Anderson, C. (2006). *The long tail: How endless choice is creating unlimited demand*. London: Random House Business Books.
- Groseclose, E. (1976). *Money and man: A survey of monetary experience*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.