

Online Connecting Librarians¹

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***Abstract.** An interesting report about librarians' usage of their personal social media account for work-related messages, where the not only connected with their patrons, but also with colleagues in discussing developments within the field of libraries, librarianship and information science, sharing news and things that are happening in their library or organisation and responding to each other's posts. This way librarian keeps each other up to date and informed and connected.*

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1. Introduction

Do you use your personal social media account for work-related messages? According to marketing expert William Toll the best answer to that question would be “Yes”. He states that employees who use Twitter and Facebook for work related messages are the greatest asset to an organisation. “*Your employees can tell your story much better than any marketing person could do*”.² But not everyone agrees with Tolls findings. Most employers are hesitant about using social media, because they cannot control what their employees are saying online and messages can go viral in an instant. So who is right? Should employers encourage or discourage their staff to talk about work online? This article shall try to give an answer to that question, based on a recent scientific research by Stichting Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek Commerciële Communicatie (SWOCC) on the one hand and our own experiences with social media in the library of the University of Applied Sciences in Amsterdam (Hogeschool van Amsterdam) on the other hand.

2. The SWOCC research

SWOCC is a Dutch institution that does research on brands and communication. They carried out extensive research into the online behaviour of employees of 8 different companies. They first sent the employees a survey and got a response from 375 people. Most of them were active on one particular social network: Twitter. The researchers also analysed 3700 tweets from the most active employees. They wanted the following questions answered:

- How many employees are active and how active are they?
- Why do the active users publish about work on social media?
- What do they tweet about?
- Do the companies have a social media policy?

The outcome of SWOCC's survey (Verhoeven, 2012) will be explained below.

2.1 How many employees are active and how active are they?

Out of 375 respondents, 337 said they were active on social media. On average they had 300 contacts and / or followers and about 1 in 3 of their messages was work-related. Based on the response, the SWOCC researchers divided the employees into two groups: consumers and producers. The majority of social media users were

¹ With contributions from Wilma van den Brink and Patricia Manrho

² See the interview with him on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JDi_fcyxNa8

consumers. This means that they spent less than 5 hours a week on social media. They were mostly interested in reading (consuming) posts, blogs or tweets and less in writing or responding. A minority (16%) was very active on social media. This meant that they spent more than 5 hours a week on social media writing blogs and contributing to online discussions. They were highly educated and had a strong job commitment. They mostly used Twitter and produced a lot of content. They each had more than 1000 followers, so in a way they had an extensive professional network. This is why the researchers called them the producers.

2.2 Why do they publish about work on social media?

The producers published about work on twitter for two reasons: to communicate and to share. For them it was a way to share (mostly) positive messages, to stay in touch with their work relations and manage their network. It was all about job commitment and job identification. *“My work is part of my daily life and I write about my daily life”*, *“I am proud of what we do and it is an important part of ‘me’ ”* and *“The organisation is a part of who I am and what I represent”* were statements that were giving on the question. So these committed employees or producers could be called the brand ambassadors or the employee ambassadors of an organisation.

2.3 What do they tweet about?

The SWOCC research showed that brand ambassadors have a preference for Twitter. To find out what they tweet about their work, the SWOCC researchers analysed 3700 of their tweets. About a fifth of the tweets were work-related. The messages dealt mostly with the daily work (30%) and about professional content (28%). The tone of voice was generally in a neutral or positive way. Just 4% of the messages had a negative tone.

2.4 Does your employer have a social media policy?

A way of finding out if employees were aware of the organisation having a social media policy was by asking them about it. 41 Per cent said “yes” to this question, 35 per cent claimed the company did not have a policy and 24 per cent did not know. A note should be placed to this result: employees of the same organisation gave different answers to this question. Some said they did have one, but their colleagues were sure they did not. This means that there is a lot of confusion regarding the possible existence of a social media policy at their organisations. The employees who responded that there was a policy felt positive towards it.

Why should an organisation have a social media policy? The SWOCC researchers were convinced that regulation creates awareness of the impact that brand ambassadors can have on the public (opinion) of an organisation. Employees did not always realise the impact they could have and that made a policy essential. They furthermore found that it also created awareness on how the organisation wants to position its brand. The ideal situation according to them was to involve the brand ambassadors with making a social media policy to create awareness of both positions. This way brand ambassadors would have enough freedom to post, tweet or blog about work and management would know that the position of their brand is safe.

3. Employee ambassador programme

Beside the SWOCC research, there are more examples of brand ambassadors within organisations. PepsiCo management learned from an employee survey that 65% of the employees were regularly asked by family and friends about their employer and its products. More than half of the employees said they would like to have information about PepsiCo that they could share with their friends and family on Twitter, Facebook or other social media platforms. PepsiCo management concluded that 85% of the content in internal newsletters turned out to be useful for sharing. The results from the survey led to PepsiCo’s Employee Ambassador Program: a training program that taught the employees what they can and can’t share on social media. PepsiCo wanted to ensure employees could safely talk about PepsiCo and its products. Newsletters posted on PepsiCo’s intranet are now easily shared with the help of social sharing icons (Carr, 2012); (Brand ambassadors, 2012).

Another successful story is that of express transportation provider, FedEx. Despite a negative incident, (an online video in which a delivery man tossed a computer screen over the fence went viral) the company used social media with the help of employees to turn things for the better. FedEx enabled employee ambassadors to tell the company's story through video and social media. This strategy helped them to be in the top of the best companies to work for (Power list, 2012).

4. From research report to library practice

What can librarians learn from this research? No libraries were included in the SWOCC research. So what are our experiences with social networking sites at the Library of the University of Applied Sciences in Amsterdam? Do we have employee ambassadors among our librarians? Let's start with why Twitter is so popular with the ambassadors.

Facebook and LinkedIn are popular social networking sites as well, but not to brand ambassadors according to the SWOCC research. The reason as to why lies in the different ways people connect on those social networking sites. LinkedIn is mainly used for business relations. Users connect to people they have met at conferences for instance. The networking site also clearly states that you should only connect to somebody that you know. The same goes for Facebook. Because this network centres on a personal environment with personal photos and updates, users connect to others they know well, or "friends" as they are called on the website. In contrast to these sites, Twitter does not centre around people that users know personally. People make a connection on Twitter on the basis of mutual interests. It could be a librarian from another country, a publisher but equally a famous writer.

What about corporate accounts and connecting online? The library of the Hogeschool van Amsterdam (HvA) has its own Twitter account (@HVABibliotheek). It is set up to support students and teaching staff with their education and research. One librarian manages the account and she noticed that our Twitter messages are read and retweeted, but that there was no actual communication with our followers. Hardly any question or comment comes our way. It is mainly one way of communication. So is Twitter a failed project for the HVA library? The librarian, who manages the library account, has made her own private Twitter account (including photo, name and profession) visible on the HVA Library account. This gave the "corporate" account a personality and made followers not only follow the library Twitter account, but also her private account. They started using the private one to get answers to their questions. What the library account did not succeed in doing, the personal account did: connecting with patrons. This showed us that the more personal an account is, the easier it is to connect with your patrons. A personal account can give an organisation a personality: "You cannot have a conversation with a brick wall". And thus a brand ambassador is born!

HVA librarians, who use their personal account for work-related messages, do not only use it to connect with their patrons. They also use their personal account to connect with their library colleagues: discussing developments within the field of libraries, librarianship and information science, sharing news and things that are happening in their library or organisation and responding to each other's posts. This way librarians keep each other up to date and informed. They also talk about their daily work, showing others what task or project they are working on. In other words, it could give outsiders a real and genuine inside look into a library (or any other organisation) and therefore possibly create a positive attitude towards the organisation. People like to share and communicate and librarians are certainly no different!

5. Does a social media policy work?

According to Dutch newspaper Het Financieele Dagblad (Heb ik wel, 2012) many companies are still worried that confidential information will become public. However this almost never happens: people use their common sense. The article also states that a code of conduct is hardly necessary as most of these are already written down in an employment contract. In spite of this low number of negative incidents, setting up a few guidelines is still beneficiary for an organisation. It will make things clear for everyone involved. But refrain from making it too strict or your brand ambassadors will walk away and use their social media platforms for personal use only. You will then have lost your engaged employee. Better yet, involve your brand ambassadors when making a social media policy. As the SWOCC

research suggests it can create support for your policy and employees could be more willing to live by the guidelines. Therefore set up a few guidelines which do not invoke fear, but stimulate a desired behaviour.

6. Appreciate your brand ambassadors!

So should employers embrace the fact that their employees are tweeting and posting online about work? The answer is yes! The SWOCC research and the PepsiCo employee survey indicate that employees want to share information from and about their work. They are proud of what they do and want to share that with the rest of the world.

So, appreciate your brand ambassadors. They are committed to their work and the greatest asset an organisation could have. Involve them in creating policies and let them share experiences with colleagues. Encourage, train and give your employees a choice of platform to be a brand ambassador. In return the employer will have an engaged employee. A win-win situation.

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