

Developing and Maintaining Successful Archives and Special Collections Blogs

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About the Speaker

- Dr. Francesca Marini, Programming and Outreach Librarian, Texas A&M University Libraries, Cushing Memorial Library and Archives
- Also co-editor of The Cushing Collective blog,
<https://cushing.library.tamu.edu/thecollective/index.php>

Problem Statement

- Many institutions and individuals who work with special collections, rare books and archival materials manage blogs dedicated to these topics.
- Blogs are part of outreach strategies, and have been around for a long time, and often pre-date social media efforts. Blogs are the main focus of this study.

Problem Statement

- Blog posts and social media posts are often coordinated, but not always.
 - Most study respondents indicated that they coordinate their blog and social media efforts.
- Blog posts generally provide more in-depth information than social media posts and may be longer-lasting.

Problem Statement

- Blog posts and different types of social media posts may address different target audiences and have different goals.
- This study inquiries about social media strategies only in relation to blogs, and further research about this interaction will take place in the future.

Problem Statement: Research Questions

- This study examines the following main research question:
 - How can we develop a successful special collections and archives blog?
- The secondary research questions are:
 - What kind of work is required to develop and manage a blog?
 - Are blogs effective and how is their success measured?

Research Methods

- Qualitative survey (online).
 - Findings are not meant to be generalized.
- Submitted to the TAMU's IRB: determined to be “not research involving human subjects.”
- After IRB assessment, the survey's validity was tested before sending the survey out.
 - No changes were needed after testing.

Research Methods

- Sample Criteria:
 - “Individuals who work with, or focus on, special collections, rare books and archival materials, and manage a blog dedicated to these topics, without commercial gain (for example, booksellers are excluded). The focus is on the blog and related processes, and not on the experience of individuals.”
- 27 open-ended questions (including contact information and technical details).

Research Methods

- 7 Sections:
 - Contact Information and Permissions (6 questions).
 - Blog Information (3 questions).
 - Vision, Scope and Audience (3 questions).
 - Marketing and Communication Strategy (2 questions).
 - Blog Development and Structure (8 questions).
 - Metrics and Success (4 questions).
 - Other Comments (1 question).

Responses

- Survey launched in mid-April.
- Distributed through national and international professional library and archival listservs.
- 17 complete responses received to date.
- Pandemic affected the response rate.
- Will continue the study, approaching potential respondents directly, instead of using listservs.

Responses

- Private and public institutions, of different sizes.
- Countries represented: USA (10 responses), Republic of Ireland (2 responses), UK (1 response), Canada (3 responses), Hungary (1 response).
- I am not directly identifying individuals and institutions in this presentation (some respondents granted permission to have their names used, and some did not).

Findings (Highlights)

- In this presentation, I am focusing on only a few findings:
 - What is success?
 - How complex is it to manage a blog?
 - Are blogs worth the effort?

Findings/Success

- The respondents showed that numbers are a factor, but they are not the only measure of success. Based on their experiences, the respondents defined success in different ways, including:

Findings/Success

- Engagement with the community.
- Establishing new social connections.
- Feedback received.
 - Including: mentions in social media posts; number of likes and comments.

Findings/Success

- The freedom to tell your story.
- Sharing what we do.
- Inspiring new teaching and research ideas.
- Represent everyone in the organization.
- Ability to re-use content (for example, in reference interactions and student worker training).

Findings/Success

- Attract new in-person visits and educate the public.
- Increased traffic (website and reference requests).
- Number of blog posts.
- Size of readership.

Findings/Complexity

- Most respondents indicated that blogs required careful planning, and run based on the coordinated efforts of multiple people; many also listed complex technical requirements.

Findings/Complexity

- Time commitment: 5 to 60 hours per month, with a lot of variation. Many respondents have a regular publication schedule, and indicated that they post between 1 and 40 times a month; many people post 4 times a month, but numbers really vary.

Findings/Is it worth it?

- Respondents agreed that yes, blogs are worth the effort!
- Some respondents would like to change their process, but many are happy with what they have in place.

Study Limitations

- Data are not meant to be generalized.
- Limited number of responses received to date (17).
- More countries could be represented.
- Pandemic affected the response rate.
- Will continue the study, approaching potential respondents directly, instead of using listservs.

How to Apply the Findings

- Blogs might seem an easy option to communicate with the public, but the study findings to date indicate that blogs require considerable and coordinated efforts to plan, set up and run on a regular schedule.
- If you are starting a new blog, take some time to plan and be ready to committ your time.

How to Apply the Findings

- Blogs may have considerable technical requirements: some respondents use “out of the box” platforms, but many have created their own, complex platforms.
- If you are starting a new blog, carefully assess the technical needs and the expertise required. If you are part of an organization, investigate what you are allowed to do.

How to Apply the Findings

- A couple of respondents indicated that their marketing teams are in charge of the blog.
- If you are starting a new blog, establish who will have primary ownership of it.

How to Apply the Findings

- Bottom line: blogs are not as simple as they may look, but they are effective and worth the effort, especially when part of a coordinated social media and marketing strategy.

Further Research

- Continue the study and increase the sample.
- Compare the presence of special collections and archives on social media with their blog presence.
- Further assess how institutions and individuals coordinate their blogs with their social media efforts.

Q&A

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