Will Boosting a Post Bring Them In?: Promoting Library Programs with Facebook Advertising

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Introduction

Facebook continues to be the most popular social networking site, particularly among college age students. In 2016, 88% of online 18-29 year olds were Facebook users, and 77% of those with some college education were users (Greenwood, Perrin, & Duggan, 2016). This suggests that Facebook has potential as a marketing tool for academic libraries. In the spring of 2015, The University at Albany Libraries (UAL) undertook a pilot program to investigate the effectiveness of Facebook advertising for academic libraries, with a focus on the promotion of specific library programs and services.

Facebook's "Boost a Post" option allows advertisers to select certain posts to be seen in the news feeds of a target audience. Facebook offers a variety of targeting options such as age, location, education level, school, and interests. Budgeting options are equally flexible, a post can be boosted for as little as a dollar a day, for as many days as desired. The budget determines how many times a boosted post will be included in a Facebook news feed, this includes views by unique users as well as multiple views by a single viewer. UAL decided to focus on boosted posts because they offer a subtler option than the more traditional advertisements that appear on the right side of a user's news feed.

The primary goal of this pilot was to promote UAL's iLearn Workshops and PAWS (one on one reference consultations) program. Secondary goals include attracting new Facebook followers and increasing the visibility of library collections and service within the University at Albany (UAlbany) community.

Literature Review

Academic libraries have long been using Facebook for outreach and marketing. Libraries can create a page and set about attracting followers with no money and minimal effort. The

number of followers a page attracts is the most basic measure of a page's success (Glazer, 2009). The number of followers is a direct determiner of the number of Facebook users who see a page's posts. Attracting followers has proven difficult for many academic libraries. A 2011 study of the pages of 115 Association of Research Libraries member libraries showed that the median number of followers was 135, with 67% having fewer than 200 followers. Only a scant 3% had more than 500 followers (Wan, 2011).

Librarians have tried many strategies for attracting new followers. Constant promotion of a Facebook page through library blogs and websites as well and during face-to-face interactions has proven successful (Connell, 2009; Mack, Daniel, Behler, Roberts & Rimland, 2007), as have contests, quizzes and giveaways (Glazer, 2009). However, these efforts require a large amount of staff time to administer and, in the case of contests and giveaways, a budget for prizes, minimizing the return on investment.

Some academic libraries have turned to Facebook's paid advertising program as a means of attracting more followers and improving their marketing efforts. Christopher Chan (2011) of Hong Kong Baptist University Library has conducted several studies examining the efficacy of Facebook advertising. In 2010, he conducted a two-month campaign using an ad promoting research help that was displayed to the right of the news feed. His expenditure of less than $60 resulted in 55 new followers at a cost of $1.08 per follower. In 2012, Chan conducted a study to compare the efficacy of the type of ads he had used previously to Sponsored Stories, a new, more social advertising option. The more social ad was more successful, resulting in a cost per follower rate of $0.97 versus $1.80 for the traditional ad. Other researchers also found that this more social type of advertising option was more successful than the traditional (Young, Tate, Rossmann, & Hansen, 2014). Chan revisited Facebook advertising again in 2016, when he was able to confirm certain best practices that he had drawn from his previous studies, namely that

carefully timed, tightly targeted advertisements run for a short period of time are most efficient (Chan, 2016).

Other librarians have been less enthusiastic about their Facebook advertising results. Some of this can be accounted for by the fact that means of evaluation differed from Chan's. While Chan focused on the number of clicks and followers and the cost per action, others zeroed in on the fact that only every 2,000[th] ad view generated a click (Mumenthaler, 2010).

These studies mostly focused on attracting new followers with some focus on clicks to the library website. None of these campaigns, however, focused on promoting specific programs or services. This paper explores the efficacy of such promotion with the goal of increasing the usage of two specific services.

Methods

During the spring 2015 semester, the UAL ran two ad campaigns, one promoting the iLearn Workshop series and the other promoting the PAWS program, a one-on-one reference consultation service. These campaigns were run concurrently throughout the semester on alternating weeks. Each campaign consisted of a series of promoted posts, each of which ran for seven days on a daily budget of $5.00 maximum (Facebook charges a variable per-view rate that is determined by the amount of competition from other advertisers). The posts were carefully designed to attract attention and invite viewer engagement. Each post featured a picture of people with at least one person smiling directly at the viewer. The text was designed to be similarly engaging. The ads were also designed to drive viewers to the UAL website—clicking on the images brought the viewer directly to the signup page for the advertised program.
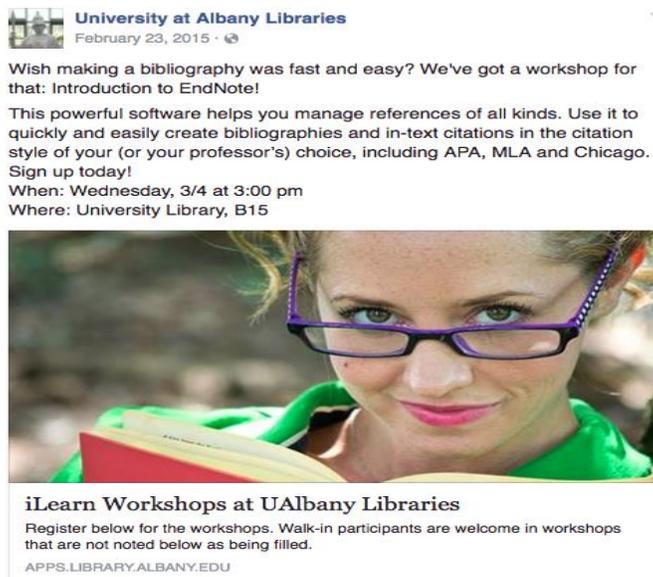
Figure 1: EndNote Post

iLearn Workshop Campaign

Four workshops were selected from the workshop series for this campaign for their

potential to appeal to a wide audience from across disciplines, as well as for when they were

scheduled. Originally, a post promoting the workshop series as a whole was supposed to kick-off

the campaign, however, the project setup took longer than expected, so the campaign started with

the EndNote post, with the workshop series overview post running second.

Introduction to EndNote	Feb 23-March 1
iLearn Workshops Overview	March 9-15
Making Posters with Publisher	March 16-22
Getting Started with WordPress for Classroom and Personal Use	April 6-12
Maximizing your Research Impact for Graduate Students and Faculty	April 13-19

Table 1: iLearn Workshop Campaign Schedule

Each of these posts targeted undergraduates, except for the Research Impact post, which was targeted at faculty and graduate students. The undergraduate audience was defined as Facebook users between the ages of 18 and 25, who live within 25 miles of Albany and who have identified the UAlbany as their school. The faculty and graduate student audience was defined as those between 25 and 65 who live within 25 miles of Albany and who indicated that they are employees of the University. Each ad ran for seven days the week before the class took place at a budget of $5.00 a day for an average of $32.70 per post, and a total of $163.50 for the campaign.

Figure 2: PAWS Faculty/Staff Post

PAWS Campaign

While planning the PAWS campaign schedule with the librarian who administers the program, it was determined that many of the students that have used PAWS in the past had been referred by professors and other groups on campus (e.g., The Writing Center, advisors, and counselors). In light of this, it was decided that targeting one of the PAWS posts at faculty and

staff could be an effective way of reaching students. This was followed by a post introducing

PAWS to the students, and then a second post a few weeks before finals to encourage students to

get help with their research papers before the end of semester crunch.

PAWS Faculty/Staff	March 2-8
PAWS Student Intro	March 30-April 5
PAWS Student Finals	April 20-26

Table 2: PAWS Campaign Schedule

The targeting strategy for these posts is the same as that used for the iLearn campaign.

The ads also ran for seven days at a budget of $5.00 a day for an average of 33.07 per post, and a

total of $99.21 for the campaign.

Results

The Facebook AdsManager offers a variety of very useful analytics for advertisers to

assess the success of their ads. For the purposes of this pilot, UAL focused on engagement,

website clicks and new followers.

Engagements

Engagements refers to the total number of user interactions with a post. The two

campaigns generated a total of 295 engagements at a cost of $0.89 per engagement. Overall, the

EndNote post was the most successful, generating 55 engagements, followed by the iLearn

Overview post (47), the PAWS Faculty post (44) and the Posters with Publisher post (36). The

PAWS Student Finals post was the least successful, generating only 22 interactions.

Campaign/ Advertisement	Cost	Website Clicks	Cost/ Clicks	Page Likes	Cost/ Page Like	Total Engagements	Cost/ Engagement
iLearn Campaign							
EndNote	$33.53	26	$1.29	15	$2.24	55	$0.61
iLearn Overview	$33.11	31	$1.07	11	$3.01	47	$0.70
Posters w/ Publisher	$31.23	18	$1.74	13	$2.40	36	$0.87
WordPress	$31.99	11	$2.91	9	$3.55	24	$1.33
Research Impact	$33.64	18	$1.87	11	$3.06	32	$1.05
iLearn Campaign Total	**$163.50**	**104**	**$1.57**	**59**	**$2.77**	**194**	**$0.84**

Table 3: iLearn Workshop Campaign results

Website Clicks

The two campaigns generated 150 clicks to the Libraries' website at a cost of $1.75 per click. The iLearn campaign created 104 clicks to the workshop's registration page at a rate of $1.57 per click, while the PAWS campaign generated 46 clicks to the PAWS information page at a rate of $2.16 per click. The iLearn Overview post generated the most clicks (31), followed by the EndNote (27), Making Posters with Publisher, and Research Impact (18 each).

Campaign/ Advertisement	Cost	Website Clicks	Cost/ Clicks	Page Likes	Cost/ Page Like	Total Engagements	Cost/ Engagement
PAWS Campaign							
PAWS - Faculty	$33.47	17	$1.97	15	$2.23	44	$0.76
PAWS - Student Intro	$33.51	15	$2.23	12	$2.79	35	$0.96
PAWS - Student Finals	$32.23	14	$2.30	1	$32.23	22	$1.47
PAWS Campaign Total	**$99.21**	**46**	**$2.16**	**28**	**$3.54**	**101**	**$0.98**

Table 4: PAWS Campaign results

Page Likes

Between the two campaigns, the UAL Facebook page added 87 new followers at a cost of $3.02 per follower. Over the course of the semester, 8 users unfollowed the page. It is impossible to determine whether some of these users decided to unfollow the page because they were annoyed by the advertising campaigns. The EndNote and PAWS Faculty posts generated the most page likes (15 each), followed by Making Posters with Publisher (13) and PAWS Student Intro (12).

Campaign/ Advertisement	Cost	Website Clicks	Cost/ Clicks	Page Likes	Cost/ Page Like	Total Engagements	Cost/ Engagement
Totals for Both Campaigns	**$262.71**	**150**	**$1.75**	**87**	**$3.02**	**295**	**$0.89**

Table 5: Results for both campaigns

Program Usage

Paid advertising had little apparent direct impact on PAWS and iLearn usage. Both campaigns drove a large amount of traffic to the Libraries' website. Website clicks account for 51% of the 295 total engagements generated by the project. However, there is no evidence that

this traffic resulted in program signups. Of the PAWS appointments that took place over the semester, only three users indicated that they had found out about the service from Facebook. For those referred by a faculty or staff member, there is no way of knowing if the referring individual found out about PAWS from Facebook. Only one iLearn attendee indicated finding out about a workshop from Facebook. It should be noted that for each advertised class there were a number of people who signed up but did not actually attend and there is no way of knowing how many, if any, of these people were referred by a post on Facebook. It is unclear why users did not ultimately use the advertised services.

It is worth noting that the posts that generated the most new followers, EndNote, PAWS Faculty/Staff, and Posters with Publisher, also generated the most engagements and website clicks. The only instance where this was not the case was with the iLearn Overview post, which was a top generator of engagements and clicks, but was not among the top generators of new followers.

Conclusion

This project was designed to assess the utility of paid Facebook advertising for the UAlbany Libraries. The stated goals were to increase PAWS and iLearn usage, attract new followers, and increase visibility of the libraries. The results show that the project was more successful at meeting some of these goals than others. It proved very successful in attracting new followers. The 87 new followers the project generated accounted for 98% of the new followers gained during the spring semester. It was also fairly successful in increasing the Libraries' visibility as demonstrated by the large number of engagements generated. As stated above, while the posts drove a significant amount of traffic to the website, that traffic did not lead to a directly attributable increase in the number of PAWS and iLearn signups. It is possible that a large number of users clicked on the post link using a mobile device, then found filling out the signup forms difficult in the mobile environment. The appropriate website analytics might be able to shed light on the disconnect between the number of clicks to the site and program usage. This pilot demonstrates that Facebook's boosted post advertising option can increase page followers, post engagements, and website clicks for a relatively small amount of money. It does not demonstrate that boosted posts have usefulness for increasing usage of specific programs.

This study is limited by the fact that the UAL website was not setup to track the activities of users brought to the site via a Facebook boosted post. Additionally, one of the posts in the PAWS campaign was designed to have an indirect impact on usage by targeting faculty and staff in hopes that they would influence students to make an appointment. It is possible that the workshops chosen for promotion were, ultimately, unappealing to most users, or that the timing of the ads was not optimal. Further testing of these elements could provide better insight into campaign planning. It is also possible that the design of the posts was not as attractive or interesting to users as intended. A library investing in Facebook advertising would be well

advised to experiment with some small focus groups or test different post designs on the same topic in small-scale campaigns. Another issue is that Facebook is constantly changing its ad types, targeting function, and budgeting options, making it a constantly moving target for evaluation.

While the results of this study are mixed, there is clear evidence that Facebook boosted posts have potential as an effective marketing tool for academic libraries. A well-designed campaign on a small budget can have a big impact on followers, engagement, and website clicks. More experimentation with promoting specific programs and services is warranted to determine if online engagement can be translated to in-person usage.

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