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A Bitmoji Marketing Campaign to Connect Students with Subject Librarians

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Abstract: The University at Albany Libraries Marketing Committee launched a campaign using Bitmojis, cartoon avatars, to connect students with their subject librarians and to increase awareness of the role of subject librarians and the services they provide. The Bitmoji mobile app was the fastest growing app in the United States among adults in 2017; therefore, Bitmojis offered a potentially popular and recognizable way to represent subject librarians. Bitmojis are also highly versatile: they can be personalized, they offer librarians a digital likeness, and they lend themselves to a variety of other formats both physical and digital. This article will introduce the use of Bitmojis to promote subject librarians, identify hurdles to such promotion, present tips to get started, and outline the campaign's growth.

Keywords: Marketing campaign – case studies, academic libraries, Bitmoji, user perception, digital marketing

Students have long struggled to define the roles of academic librarians. To students, reference librarians who staff service points can be indistinguishable from their colleagues in access services or IT services. For some academic librarians, the opportunities to connect with students are limited to in-classroom sessions or individual appointments (Waters, 2012, p. 125). In their study conducted at the University of Sheffield, Rachel Bickley and Sheila Corrall found that the undergraduate population largely lacked an understanding of

librarians' responsibilities (2011). Most students were unaware that their discipline or major had a specific librarian who specialized in that field (Bickley & Corral, 2011, p. 238).

The University at Albany (UAlbany), similar to Sheffield in institutional size and scope, has also grappled with this challenge. In the fall 2018 semester, graduate students made up 13% of general search consultation requests, a service marketed toward the undergraduate population. At the graduate level, students are encouraged to meet with their subject librarian for research consultations. Library faculty and staff have found that students rarely knew of subject specialists, and on the occasions they did, they could not identify their major's librarian. This hurdle led the University Libraries to ask: How can subject librarians increase their visibility to students?

While Jeff Luzius and Nancy Roe (2003) recommended librarians advertise themselves, that suggestion was aimed toward increasing professional respect. Insofar as raising awareness among student populations, Norm Medeiros (2012) makes a more compelling suggestion:

Perhaps the inroad to student appeal is through self-deprecating humor. Music videos seem an increasingly important popular means of conveying library services while also imparting the helpful orientation of librarians. What undergraduate would remain nervous about asking for help after watching her librarian parody a hip hop tune? Innovative approaches such as these may break down barriers with students (p. 5).

With this idea in mind, the Marketing and Communications Assistant for the University Libraries searched for creative campaigns other institutions used to market subject specialists. Penn State's superhero trading cards (Popescu, 2017) and Carleton College's Japanese anime cards proved of interest (Wasley, 2006). It is exciting for students to spot a reference to popular culture, whether it is broad reaching or more obscure. Recognizing the value of incorporating popular culture in marketing, the University Libraries opted to use Bitmoji avatars for the subject librarians beginning in 2017 (Beer, 2019).

The Bitmoji mobile app is a platform for creating and styling cartoon avatars. As of June 2017, the application had the highest unique visitor growth throughout the United States, and it increased in popularity among users over 18 years old by 2,057% between 2015 and 2017 (Statista, 2017). This data suggests that Bitmoji avatars are highly recognizable, making them ideal for marketing subject librarians to college students. The ability to personalize the avatars lends them to both print and digital publications.

Trading Card Prototypes

The UAlbany librarian Bitmoji avatars originally appeared on a draft poster in October 2016. The 8.5x11" design featured each of the subject librarians' avatars, names, and disciplines. The idea was to share this in the building's display cases or feature the images at the end of book stacks. Shortly after designing the poster, the Marketing and Communications Assistant shared the poster with the libraries' Marketing Coordinating Committee. The group brainstormed and decided to produce librarian trading cards, similar in design to those produced by other institutions.

The Committee produced a small batch of subject librarian trading cards for the Dewey Graduate Library's Spring Welcome Back tabling event in 2017. Three subject librarians from the Dewey Graduate Library agreed to participate. All students attending the Spring Welcome Back event majored in a discipline covered by the pilot group of librarians: social work, criminal justice, and information science. The trading cards mimic baseball trading cards in size and style and featured librarian Bitmojis on the front, with a short questionnaire on the reverse side. Librarians supplied information on their cards, such as their areas of expertise or a favorite quotation, and a section titled, "How I can help you." Cards were displayed at the event with the image side up, next to a sign that read, "Can you find your subject librarian?" This invited students to look over and inspect the cards, making the identification like a game of Guess Who? (see Image 1). If students did not see the cards, staff at the table would engage with them, asking what program they were in and handing out the corresponding subject librarian card should they ever need to get in touch. Student response was overwhelmingly positive, with students and faculty enjoying the cards. Considering this enthusiasm, the libraries' decided to expand the initiative to the entire subject librarian faculty for a wide-scale launch in the summer of 2017.

Bitmoji Buttons

The soft launch served as an excellent opportunity to test the cards on a student audience. To increase mileage of librarian Bitmojis, who adapted the trading card design to create pin-back buttons, which were handed out at the Spring Welcome Back event. The remaining supply of buttons was moved to a bowl on the reference desk. In their article, "It all Started with a Button," Jill E. Luedke and Sarah K. Laleman Ward found that buttons "seem to appeal to all ages and disciplines" (2008, p. 6). Placement of buttons at the library's

reference desk found similar results; students would rummage through the bowl to find their specific subject librarian and sometimes come back with a friend who wanted their own button. The buttons sparked curiosity and kept the conversation about subject librarians alive at the desk (see Image 2).

Participants and Designs

The next step in building the campaign involved gaining support from various library departments. The Marketing and Communications Assistant and User Experience Librarian met with the Head of Collections, who then invited them to present the trading card campaign to the subject librarians at their June 2017 department meeting. The pair delivered a slideshow presentation to help visually explain what a Bitmoji character is and included photographs of the trading cards on display at the soft launch. Librarians had questions about the purpose and process of creating cards. All subject librarians were asked to schedule a Bitmoji-designing appointment. The pair distributed a form to quickly collect contact information, subject specialties, and quotations at the meeting. The forms helped speed up the process of designing cards. By July, 14 out of 17 cards were designed and ready for the press. Limiting response time to a four-week window helped create a realistic timeline for design and production, ensuring the trading cards would be ready for the fall orientation sessions and the University's kickoff event, Great DaneTopia.

Production

The university's on-site copy center was utilized for the first run of 300 cards. The cost was covered by the Collection Development Department. It provided a solid idea of the type, finish, and weight of paper needed. This first run also helped determine the proper sizing of the cards (based on baseball trading cards), as well as how to set up PDF files for duplex printing. Production moved to in-house (or in-library) printing for the second run of prints to reduce costs.

Using a large production copy machine owned by the library, library staff spent time adjusting print colors to match the quality of the university's on-site copy center. Based on the copy center's recommendations, a paper of the proper weight was selected and purchased for the cards, and tools from the library's preservation department were used to cut them to size. The fine-tuning of this process was ongoing for the first few months of producing cards but well worth the effort. With each run, the quality of the trading cards improved. The final

copies were distributed to each subject librarian and the Marketing Librarian for events (see Image 3).

Decks of Cards

Several subject librarians were members of other departments, and they inquired if their departments could have a set of cards. A great solution for multiple groups is trading card decks. A deck of subject librarian cards appears different in design from a deck of information literacy librarian cards. For the first draft of the new deck, we color differentiated the departments. Folders on the library's shared drive were created for each department that expressed interest in a deck, including the scholarly communications team, a group that does significant outreach with students and faculty. Over several months, decks were created for the information literacy, scholarly communications, and reference departments.

App Updates

In 2016, Snap Inc., the owners of Snapchat, acquired Bitstrips and their Bitmoji app. They released a major update to the platform in 2018 called Bitmoji Deluxe ("Introducing Bitmoji Deluxe," 2018). The new update provided hundreds of new customizations for Bitmojis, including hairstyles, eye color, and clothing allowing greater personalization to the cartoons (Hartmans, 2018; Snapchat, 2018).

After the update, the Marketing and Communications Assistant and User Experience Librarian offered the pilot program librarians the opportunity to redesign their characters. They all agreed and were able to further customize their Bitmojis, adding dynamic actions (e.g., waving, riding a bicycle), backgrounds, and accessories. Several librarians asked to be alerted about new updates to redesign their Bitmoji characters. Regular users of the app would recognize an out-of-style design. By updating their Bitmojis, librarians demonstrated that they are tuned into current trends and popular culture.

Campaign Growth

Beyond the trading cards, librarians started to use their digital Bitmojis in a variety of ways. Bitmojis appeared on the library's online staff directory in place of a standard headshot/portrait and as avatars on library Trello boards, an online collaboration tool. Bitmojis also appeared as profile images on LibGuides and as avatars in chat reference. A

walk around the library reveals print Bitmojis peering out from office doors. Some librarians wear their cards in badge holders on lanyards.

Librarians use the cards at one-on-one research consultations; trading cards can be shared with patrons, which include their contact information, rather than handing out standard business cards. They are displayed at orientation events. Bitmoji cards have made their way to some library service points and multi-service desks. The libraries' goal is to have them available at all library service points to be distributed as needed.

Several library committees have also used Bitmojis in creative ways. The Library Policy Group requested a special Bitmoji card to mark the launch of a new single-service desk. The card was designed featuring Circulation Department staff and distributed at the launch party. The Marketing Committee now creates an annual holiday card featuring the committee members as Bitmojis in winter wonderland scenes (see Image 3).

Conclusion

Bitmojis are a successful and sustainable initiative to help connect students with academic librarians. Since the 2017 acquisition by Snap Inc., Bitmojis have been embraced by applications such as Google Chrome and Gmail, Android Keyboard, iMessage, and Facebook (Moreno, 2017; "From Bitmoji to Spotify," 2017; Morse, 2017). In November 2018, Snap Inc. released physical Bitmoji merchandise, such as stickers and t-shirts, as well as Snap Comics, a throwback to the original Bitstrips designs allowing users to create comic strip like stories with their avatars (Constine, 2018). In December 2018, Bitmoji was featured as a recognizable major social media application on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert* (Colbert, 2018). Bitmojis have reached their largest audience yet via Snapchat, which is the sixth most popular social media app in the U.S. among users 18 and older. As of March 2019, Snapchat has over 49 million monthly users (Verto Analytics, 2019). The recognizability of the characters continues to rise with popular culture's embrace of the mobile app.

For the University Libraries, expenditure of staff time has been minimal even with the regular design updates to individual Bitmojis and to the trading cards. As new librarians join the team, they are contacted to ask if they would like a trading card made for them before arrival. Digital card templates have made it easy to update text, contact information, fun facts, and Bitmoji images as needed using Photoshop. Occasionally, librarians request on-the-spot changes to their avatar, which can be made quickly using the PNG file format provided by the app.

The subject librarian trading cards were featured at the 2017 ACRL Eastern New York Chapter conference. The presentation included distributing a Bitmoji Trading Card toolkit,

which covered ways other libraries could create their own collections. Several libraries expressed interest in the program and requested further information over the following summer. Universal Photoshop templates, tips, and tricks were shared with several regional academic libraries. Common questions included the overall cost of the project, the amount of time involved for staff, and the details of required programs or facilities to produce cards. Libraries that do not want to take on the full production of Bitmoji trading cards can start with a digital marketing campaign by collecting a set of Bitmoji PNG image files, creating avatar images with the Bitmoji app, then saving and sharing the files. LibGuides and academic blogs are a great space for librarians to start using their avatar. For any library interested in embarking on trading card design, the University at Albany Libraries' toolkit is available at <https://libguides.library.albany.edu/bitmoji>.



Image 1. University at Albany Libraries. (2017, February 1). First draft of Bitmoji trading cards with corresponding buttons on display at the Dewey Graduate Library tabling event. [Digital image]. Retrieved from https://www.instagram.com/p/BP_SQ5WDQUN/



Image 2. University at Albany Libraries. (2017, August 4). Bitmoji buttons. [Digital image].



Image 3. University at Albany Libraries. (2019, July 9). Bitmoji marketing campaign cards, decks, and holiday postcard. [Digital image].

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