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Patrons and the Pandemic: How we are serving, connecting, and communicating with library patrons during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Patrons and the Pandemic: How we are serving, connecting, and communicating with library patrons during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced many libraries in the United States to focus on providing

remote services and reimagine on-ground services. At the same time, many of our patrons are

not or cannot visit us and may not be easy to reach. We are communicating new service

methods, protocols for health and safety, new and changing hours, policies, and more. The

NMRT November discussion asked the question of how libraries are serving, connecting, and

communicating with library patrons during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Special Website Content

Members shared that their libraries are reaching out to patrons in a variety of ways, from using

social media channels, email communications, website alerts and banners and new signage in

the buildings. Alert bars have become a staple on library homepages since March 2020. One

member noted that "there's a link at the top of our website linking to information about using the

Libraries during the COVID-19 crisis" (Birkenhauer, 2020). Alert bars may include text or icons

and links to dedicated pages about new policies or important changes to library services, events

and hours (Pomer, 2020). Alerts bars can be quickly updated as local situations change. They have been commonly applied to websites of all types of institutions and businesses with COVID-19 content. This widespread usage of alert bars helps users visiting the webpage; they can quickly scan the homepage for the alert at the top, where they expect to see it, and quickly locate the important information.

Pages dedicated to COVID-19 specific information are also used by many member libraries. Some libraries are using stand alone pages to outline updates and changes or creating sets of static Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) to help users find answers quickly. These self service webpages not only help users find important information quickly, but also decrease email volume and phone calls, freeing up staff time for managing other areas of change. (McKendrick, 2013, p. 17).

Social Media

All respondents noted that their libraries were using social media to connect with patrons during the pandemic. Popular platforms include YouTube, Twitter and Instagram. One member's library used Instagram posts to help make patrons aware of new policies the library had set prior to reopening to the public.

University at Albany Libraries [@ualbanylibraries]. (2020, September 8). "Hey there, #UAlbany students!"

[Photograph]. Instagram.https://www.instagram.com/p/CE483zuB8DV/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

The sudden move to online learning was a challenge many academic libraries faced over the

spring at institutions across the country. While administrations and teaching faculty grappled

with mode and digital delivery of courses, library staff had to adjust or create services for newly

remote patrons (Gallagher & Palmer, 2020). Educating those new to remote learning about what

services a library offers to distance students and how students can access them is a big task.

One member noted that their academic library designed "a library crash course on blackboard to

show students about our services" (VanDyne, 2020).

Email

Mailing lists are an excellent way to send out communications to library users. Most participants'

libraries used email to communicate to patrons over the spring and summer. A member library

had their Personal Librarians "email all first year and transfer students weekly and a lot of this

year's content has focused on new services, protocols, etc. during the pandemic" (Birkenhauer, 2020). Personal Librarian Programs aim to help "students to view the librarian as a person that was approachable with whom they can connect on campus" (Henry et al., 2012, p. 399). A consistent email from them can help remote students connect with a name at the library while sharing important changes related to the pandemic.

How much email is too much? "I have noticed open rates on our Personal Librarian emails are not as high as years past. I'm wondering if our students are overwhelmed by email (since almost everything in their lives has gone virtual!) and our messages are just not a priority at this time." With so many people facing the realities of Zoom fatigue, which Wiederhold (2020) describes as any "tiredness, anxiety, or worry resulting from overusing virtual video conferencing platforms" (p. 437), it is not unreasonable to assume many patrons are also facing email overload. Email overload is defined as "the feeling of being overwhelmed by the constant flow of messages appearing in the inbox and the inability to manage the high volume of messages effectively" (McMurtry, 2014, p. 31).

Signage

Libraries that reopened or changed physical layouts and spaces relied on signage to help patrons navigate the buildings. A participant shared that their academic library designated a team to determine what types of signs would be needed, where signs would be placed and how many had to be printed. "Before reopening, we had a Signage team that developed signs on topics such as mask-wearing, handwashing, closed stacks, and food policy changes." (Puzier, 2020).
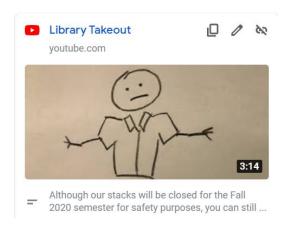
Library Signs: Example of messaging for library patrons. Lowe, A. M. (2020). *Masks are required* [digital image]. UAlbany Libraries.

Advice

Most participants found that social media was the best way to get messages across over the spring and summer. One noted that academic faculty were most receptive to email communications. Students tended to open emails from the library less often than prior to the pandemic (Birkenhauer, 2020). Another library saw an increase in mask compliance by making regularly scheduled announcements over the loudspeaker reminding patrons of new policies in the library. Finally, a participant suggested "I would say try to think outside the box. My ideas are to be more entertaining than educational but it's the connection that's most important." (VanDyne, 2020).

While we struggle with Zoom fatigue, email overload and the COVID-19 pandemic, a little

entertainment can go a long way. Proof of that may be the 900,000+ people who hit play and

now know the steps and rules of Duke University Libraries' new "Library Takeout" service,

designed to help patrons access library collections safely (Schramm, 2020). The entertaining

music video and song already has 808,000 views on YouTube and 127,000 plays on Spotify.

Duke University Libraries [@DukeUnivLibraries]. (2020, August 14). *Library Takeout* [Video]. YouTube.

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