



*Evidence Summary*

**Research into the Impact of Facebook as a Library Marketing Tool is Inconclusive**

**A Review of:**

Xia, D. Z. (2009). Marketing library services through Facebook groups. *Library Management* 30(6/7), 469-477.

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**Received:** 1 Mar. 2010

**Accepted:** 2 Sept. 2010

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**Objective** – To investigate whether Facebook Groups are useful for library marketing.

**Design** – Content analysis of membership and activity of university library-related Facebook Groups.

**Setting** – Two global Facebook Groups, and the Facebook Groups of two academic libraries in the US (Rutgers University and Indiana University, both with populations in excess of 30 000 students).

**Subjects** – A total of 28 Facebook Groups were analyzed.

**Methods** – Facebook global Groups are open to all users, while Groups based in a network (e.g., a university) only allow access for those in the network. Therefore, to collect data, the author used personal connections to log on to members' profiles within university networks.

The 26 university Groups were selected by searching Facebook for Groups belonging to the two university networks, using the word "library." Groups unrelated to library business

were discarded. A total of 11 Groups within the Rutgers network were analyzed. Of these, only one was organized by a librarian; the rest were organized by students. From Indiana, 15 Groups were identified, three of which were organized by librarians.

In Table 1 (p. 474), all Groups are listed: 2 global Groups and 26 Groups within the two university networks. The author then visited all Groups, read all posts, and recorded the total number of members; status of each member, divided into faculty, staff and students; dates of first and last post; and discussion activity. The author analyzed group activity by keeping a tally of how often each member participated in discussions, as there was no way to see the number of times a member returned. The author also paid special attention to Groups with a large number of staff and faculty members, to gain information about the efforts of librarians to support or start new Groups.

**Main Results** – There were a total of 652 members in the 26 university Groups (mean number of members was 25, ranging from 2 - 176). The two global Groups had a total of 12,665 members.

Students were most active at starting new Groups, but these were on average very small (around 20 members), with very little discussion. Most discussions focused on limited topics or were event-driven, and therefore failed to retain member participation. The most active Facebook Groups were the global Groups. These Groups had a high staff and faculty membership, and librarians played an important role in promoting and maintaining group discussions.

**Conclusion** – According to the author, a successful Facebook Group should be managed by active organizers, and discuss a broad range of topics. Good examples of active Groups were the two global Groups. Group activity should be diverse, include discussion topics and wall posts, as well as messages sent to group members. The messages were found

to be critical for library marketing as they appear as personal messages in members' inboxes.

### Commentary

The objective of this article was to investigate if Facebook Groups are conducive to library marketing. This reviewer finds that the objective was not met by the research, since the article does not provide evidence of successful university library marketing through Facebook use, and the impact of marketing via Facebook was not measured. The validity and reliability of the study are thought to be weak.

When evaluating the usefulness of Facebook Groups for marketing purposes, Facebook Groups are to be considered as a *marketing tool*, comparable to more traditional marketing tools (pamphlets, articles, web pages, newsletters etc), and not as marketing itself. This means that measuring the activity of Facebook Groups is not an indication of success when it comes to marketing libraries. To evaluate the usefulness of Facebook Groups for library marketing and to analyze these activities in comparison to other marketing tools, one would have to measure the *outcomes* of a marketing activity using Facebook Groups, thus being able to determine the usefulness of Facebook Groups to market libraries. One would need to:

1. Define the aim of the marketing activity (e.g., a certain number of "fans" of the Facebook Group, a number of new library card holders, an active Facebook Group discussion, a certain number of attendees at a function in the library, etc.);
2. Identify the target group for the marketing activity (e.g., students, staff, faculty, other librarians);
3. Examine one or more control Groups using other marketing channels/tools to reach the target audience.

A further shortcoming is the lack of statistics to validate conclusion two above. The author states that Groups were checked for “status of each member” (p. 472), which can be interpreted to mean whether the members are students, faculty, staff or librarians. In the article, no results are given of this status check; however the author refers to Table 1 (p. 473), while saying “particular attention was paid to Groups with a large amount of staff and faculty members.” However, Table 1 does not contain information about the number of members from each group in the Facebook Groups.

Furthermore, the author argues that “messages are especially critical for library marketing” (p. 475). This statement highlights a problem with research into new technology, as it changes frequently, and the applicability therefore varies. The time period when the research took place is unclear, but it probably occurred during the second half of 2008 and January 2009. At the time of writing, a library can set up a ‘page’ on Facebook, similar to a profile, where one becomes a ‘fan’ instead of a friend. Postings to the page will show up in the newsfeed of the fan. For libraries starting activities on Facebook, the reviewer thinks that a ‘page’ would be the more obvious choice instead of a group, where new postings would be visible to all fans without the use of messages.

The author compares three different kinds of Groups; 1) global Groups for librarians, organized by librarians; 2) university network Groups, organized by librarians; and 3) university network Groups, organized by students. The Groups in the first category are judged as successful by the author. No difference in impact can be found between category two and three Groups. The reviewer finds it biased to compare local non-professional Groups (category three) to professional Groups with a common interest

(category one). One can also question the decision to analyze Groups organized by students when evaluating the use of Facebook Groups for *library* marketing.

In spite of these shortcomings, the research offers additional insight (Connell, 2009) into students’ willingness to accept libraries as contacts in social media. The research could be interpreted as students being spontaneously engaged in library issues when setting up Facebook Groups, but with short-lived interest. Unfortunately, the article lacks information about the number of student members in library Groups, making it hard to determine the extent of student commitment in the more active librarian-run Groups.

The author comes across as a strong advocate of the use of Facebook in libraries, urging librarians to become more passionate about joining the ‘adventure.’ In the conclusion, the author states that Facebook Groups can be used “as a platform to support the teaching and research of faculty,” (p. 477) a seemingly isolated statement not discussed earlier in the article, but nevertheless interesting as a suggestion for further research.

Even though it does not meet the stated objective, the research presented may be useful to those planning to set up a Facebook Group to increase library visibility among students and faculty, by keeping topics general rather than specific, and by having proactive and enthusiastic organizers.

## References

- Connell, R. S. (2009). Academic libraries, Facebook and MySpace, and student outreach: A survey of student opinion. *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 9(1), 25-36.