

## Chapter 12

# What's Old Is Marketable: Creating a Social Media Plan for Special Collections and Archives

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter will provide direction to special collections and archives looking to craft a social media strategy by including steps to guide archivists and librarians through the planning process. It will provide an adaptable approach to engaging special collections and archives' audiences with the unique treasures in the collection holdings and in initiating conversations about the opportunities and challenges associated with social media at their respective institutions. This chapter will also assist archivists and librarians in creating a practical framework to make informed decisions for their social media accounts, in crafting goals that advance their organizational mission and values, and in making social media outreach sustainable by considering questions of purpose, audience, platform, messaging, tone, content, and assessment.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Although social media is widely used by businesses, celebrities, and institutions as an essential component of outreach and marketing, special collections and archives often do not have the staff, time, or budget to dedicate solely to outreach efforts. These limitations can make creating and sustaining social media accounts a constant struggle. Without a strategy in place, staff members may find themselves frustrated and burned out on committing the necessary time and energy to support an active social media presence for their organization.

Managing successful social media accounts requires careful examination and planning prior to implementation. By thinking through the goals and planning for potential issues, archivists and librarians can create documentation to guide their institution's social media usage. Potential issues may include crafting a code of conduct for managing reputation or brand, ensuring a consistent institutional voice, considering inclusivity and accessibility, and posting appropriate content. Special collections and archives at

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larger institutions may be able to refer to greater academic or library-wide policies, while others may need to start from scratch. Social media can often blur the lines between personal and professional, so establishing these guidelines up front will help minimize potential confusion and conflicts down the road.

By writing an outreach plan, archivists and librarians can work through the practicalities of establishing and effectively managing social media at their institution. Documentation creates a place for logistical information, such as who will be responsible for overseeing the accounts, as well as the necessary background to understand how and why decisions were made. Since social media evolves at a rapid pace, it is essential to record the context and rationale behind current choices to allow for informed strategic growth.

In this chapter, archivists and librarians involved in crafting social media plans will examine the intended purpose of creating accounts, the target audience(s) for the accounts, and which platform(s) best suit the institution's needs at this time, drawing on examples from Grand Valley State University Special Collections and Archives' social media plan. A plan will also include a clear vision for why the account was created, criteria for evaluating content to post, the account's personality or tone, and metrics for success. Complicating social media usage is the fact that a "one size fits all" approach does not apply. Metrics for success must be defined by each individual organization; what works for one institution may not be relevant to another. Despite this variance, advanced planning and tracking of goals and progress can provide a useful means of assessment for organizations looking to grow their social media reach over time.

## **BACKGROUND: HISTORY OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SPECIAL COLLECTIONS AND ARCHIVES**

In recent years, special collections and archives have begun to pay increased attention to the importance of dedicated marketing and outreach, which has led to the rise of positions with these responsibilities interwoven in their makeup. Palmer and Stevenson (2011) noted the increasing role of outreach in everyday archival workloads, while simultaneously acknowledging that these kinds of activities "can often be undertaken in an *ad hoc* and nonstrategic manner" due to limited budgets and available expertise (p. 4). While outreach has recently been considered integral to maintaining successful archives, few archivists had the time, background, or funding to create strategic, sustainable, ongoing outreach programs.

Archivists have long argued for treating outreach as part of an archivists' normal workload rather than "a series of haphazard short-term projects undertaken as time and money permit" (Ericson, 1990-91, p. 115). In fact, outreach supports all other facets of the archival workflow, including acquisition and description (Ericson, 1990-91, p. 115). Successful outreach activities may increase awareness of the purpose of archives at an institution, which in turn aids archivists in bringing in new donations or transferring material from institutional departments. Posting photographs or documents on social media can help identify people or interpret difficult-to-read handwriting, which in turn improves archival metadata. In truth, outreach encircles the entire archival workflow, supporting it from start to finish.

Social media extends outreach further than archivists in the 1990s could imagine; archives have positioned themselves towards building collaborative online spaces that not only justified their existence, but destroyed stereotypes of dusty old basements, and created new representations of archives as vibrant and relevant in the modern world. One of the advantages of social media tools "is their ability to reach a self-selected, interested audience, without requiring expensive overhead or extensive experience" (Crymble, 2010, p. 129). This makes social media an attractive outreach strategy on several fronts.

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