Using blogs and wikis to communicate with library clients

Kate Watson and Chelsea Harper

Recent Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 discussions have emphasised creating 'virtual communities', where interactions take place primarily online. Collaborative technologies such as blogs, wikis and RSS feeds have a large role creating these communities. So, how to use blogs and wikis within the framework of Web 2.0 and Library 2.0? What are the existing communication tools and how can we use them successfully?

Blogs, wikis and their differences

Blogs are often referred to as 'online journals' because their posts are arranged by date. Only specified blog contributors can add content, although posts can be opened to comments by all readers.

The content of a wiki is not necessarily arranged by date. Wikis consist of HTML pages that can be edited by anyone. It is possible to restrict the number of people who can edit, but the premise behind a wiki is online collaboration. The communication and collaboration online enabled by blogs and wikis has been the driving force behind emerging concepts such as Web 2.0 and Library 2.0.
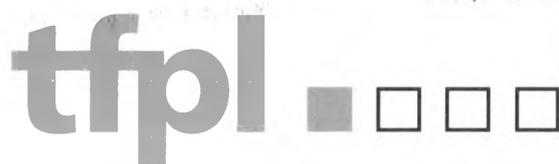
Web 2.0 is an attitude

'Web 2.0' refers to the evolution of the internet from a static place, where information is simply made available, to a collaborative space where information is created, published and distributed online. Michael Casey first used the term 'Library 2.0' in his blog (http://www.librarycrunch.com/), to describe how Web 2.0 technologies and principles might affect libraries. Library 2.0 is more than using blogs and wikis for library services, it provides a new model of contemporary library service using converging technologies.

If there is going to be a Library 2.0, the driving force will surely be Librarian 2.0.

Librarian 2.0 understands the power of Web 2.0 opportunities to communicate with clients and facilitate social management of information.

There are a number of Library 2.0 practitioners who have implemented blog and wiki technologies to foster online library communications. A wiki can function as a community library space, like the National Library of Australia's 'TAKE PART Initiative: Australia Dancing', or as a library website – Everest College Resource Center is an example of this http://everestlibrary.pbwiki.com/. Blogs can be an online newsletter (Bond University, "The Library Files" http://bulibrary.blogspot.com/) or an OPAC (Plymouth State University Library Catalogue, http://www.plymouth.edu/library/opac/). Both blogs and wikis can be used to reach a target audience – see the St Joseph County Public Library 'GameBlog' at http://www.libraryforlife.org/gameblog/; as a subject

or reference guide, demonstrated at the Ohio University Libraries Biz Wiki http://www.library.ohiou.edu/subjects/bizwiki/index.php/Main_Page; or they can have a major role in project communication – an example is the Epublications @ Bond Implementation Project, http://epublications.wordpress.com/.

Developing a successful communication tool

The ease with which blogs and wikis can be established means it's now a quick and simple process to create a new communication tool. However, a lot of planning and work is required beforehand to make it a successful and integrated part of a library.

Tip #1 - Manage your communication tool

Any new technology must be appropriate to the mission and goals of the institution. Nancy Flynn (2006, *Blog Rules: a business guide to managing policy, public relations, and legal issues*, American Management Association, New York) offers advice on managing corporate blogs that applies to all social software implementations.

- Be clear what the objective is
- Decide on and clearly state the mission
- Develop a strategic management plan, including policies regarding use and content
- Make all rules and policies publicly available
- Use written rules and policy to control content, maximise compliance, and reduce liabilities
- Instead of making it the responsibility of one person, create a management team
- Educate employees on all policies and guidelines

Tip #2 - Control 'technolust'

If a new technology doesn't fit in with your strategic mission and goals, it may be more appropriate to leave it alone. Plan and test initiatives internally and decide whether they are what you really need before release to library patrons.

Tip #3 - Have an agreed upon, honest library voice

Blogs and wikis provide opportunities to 'speak' to library patrons in the online arena, but what voice will patrons hear? An important aspect of any online voice is to be honest and genuine. Anything appearing false will be rejected, as Mazda discovered. A fake blog released by the car company to appeal to Generation Y was supposedly written by a 22-year-old Mazda M3 enthusiast. It was removed less than a week after publication as heavy criticism circulated through the blogosphere.

Tip #4 - Update often

Social software emphasises currency and communication. Leaving a blog or wiki untouched for days raises questions about its importance to the organisation. Content is the key to appeal, so making it fresh and inviting is essential.

Tip #5 - Enable comments, where appropriate, and respond

Particularly with blogs, readers' ability to comment can open important lines of communication between staff and patrons. However, staff need to be prepared to respond to comments, or remove them if inappropriate.

Tip #6 - Use RSS feeds or other promotional avenues

Communication tools, no matter how well planned and executed they may be, do not promote themselves. Many collaborative technologies have the option to include RSS feeds. RSS feeds can be used by readers for updating purposes, and by the library to promote their communication tools.

Many library patrons have made their way into the online arena for work or entertainment purposes, or simply to take advantage of the convenience online shopping, banking and other services provide. The question is no longer if we meet our patrons online, but how. Blogs and wikis provide an excellent way to reach out to patrons and invite them to become part of a library community. ⟨⟩

Chelsea Harper and Kate Watson are recipients of the 2005 ALIA Ray Choate Scholarship. Their research project is 'Investigating Blog and Wiki Technology for the Enhancement of Internal Reference Services Practices', which includes a survey of Australian university, public and special libraries on their uses of blogs and wikis. For further information on their research go to: http://www.seedwiki.com/wiki/libraryblogswikis/.

A longer version of this article was originally presented at QULOC 'Communicating With Clients Using New Technologies: Reprise and Update', 28 August 2006.