

Explorations of Electronic Outreach – the Republic Polytechnic Library Experience.

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Abstract

The Republic Polytechnic Library explored the use of electronic platforms such as emails, blogs and Facebook to reach out to its intended audience. Survey results indicate that 13% of library users did not read emails from the library and steps should be taken to improve the library's outreach to users. It was found that about 60% of the students surveyed at Republic Polytechnic used Facebook. The results suggest that libraries should continually assess the effectiveness of their user outreach platforms and approaches, and whether new technologies and media should be adopted.

Keywords: Electronic Outreach, Email, Blogs, Facebook, Republic Polytechnic.

Introduction

The Republic Polytechnic (RP) was set up in 2002 as the fifth polytechnic in Singapore. The RP Library was conceptualized to be somewhat different from the other polytechnic libraries in Singapore – the key differences were in the staffing operations model and the emphasis to move away from paper-based media. As such, the library was challenged with attempting to reach out to its intended customer-base via electronic means as opposed to the traditional method of printed brochures and posters.

Emailing was thus used as its primary method of reaching out to its student population. But is email the best medium for this purpose? This question was raised as we began to notice reports of emailing being surpassed by other social media tools as evidenced by the following comment from Zachariah (2011) in a newspaper report:

“Too formal, too time-consuming to log on, too last century. That was the click-off given about e-mail by the next generation coming through, whom LifeStyle spoke to. And it was only 15 years or so ago that it changed the course of human communication.”

Users have been changing their communication environment away from email and preferring platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Foursquare (Lewis, 2010). The main reason appears to be that the social media platforms are places where the participants can both exchange information easily and play in while email communication is starting to be seen as equivalent to the old snail mail (traditional letters) and becoming reserved for “official” matters i.e. emails are no longer cool nor fun.

The Republic Polytechnic adopted a paperless environment. It was a big challenge for library promotions and publicity - it implied a minimal use of posters and absolutely no flyers. All the promotion and user outreach were sent by email or put onto multiple screens around campus.

The email received by our students could come from their peers, facilitators, and other parties. Being constantly bombarded with unsolicited content, students naturally tended to be very selective when it came to opening emails.

Another trend was the movement away from writing in diaries to putting things on online social platforms like blogs, micro-blogs (Twitter) and Facebook as observed by Pallis, Zeinalipour-Yazti and Dikaiakos (2011). In June 2008, the RP library took the opportunity to start its own blog. Publicity related to library events, new arrivals, library video and video games were published on this blog. The Blog was updated frequently but again a challenge was encountered as the alerts to new content to our blogs were sent to subscribers via emails.

RP Library also started a Facebook presence called Updates@RP Library in December 2010 as another means to connect to users. This was inevitable as Facebook had become extremely popular as reported by Carlson (2011), having breached the 600 million users mark.

Having tried three different platforms to outreach to students, the library decided to look closely at available data and, where information is lacking, to do a survey of what was happening with our target population and share our experiences using these three platforms.

Methodology

Study 1: General Survey of Students

A general survey of students was conducted comprising three questions covering:

1. Their academic year of study
2. Whether they read the emails sent to them by the library and
3. If they don't read or only read sometimes, the reasons why they don't read the emails from the library.

Of the 366 responses received, (261 indicated not reading or only sometimes reading emails from the library) and the results are displayed in Charts 1 and 2.

Study 2: Survey of usage of social networks

A general survey was conducted in which the students were asked whether they used social networks. Responses were received from 500 students. The results are shown in Chart 3.

Study 3: Analysis of Emails Notifications to Library Users

At RP Library, overdue notification were sent to users by email on the following occasions: – the first reminder seven day after the due date), the second reminder 15 days after the due date, the third reminder 30 days after the due date and a final reminder 50 days after the due date. We analyzed the number of such notifications over a 3-month period (Aug to Oct 2010).

The results obtained are tabulated in Table 1.

Study 4: Tracking of performance of changes in Library operations

Having obtained data from Study 1 and Study 3, which indicated to us that library users receiving third reminders were likely to be those who didn't read our emails, RP Library introduced a new procedure of contacting library users by calling them at the point when the second reminder was generated. The preliminary results (only 1 month's data) of this new process are shown in Table 2.

Study 5: Tracking of Blog

Data about access to the library Blog page were obtained from the administrative module of the blog system. The results are tabulated in Table 3 and presented graphically in Chart 4.

Study 6: Tracking of Facebook

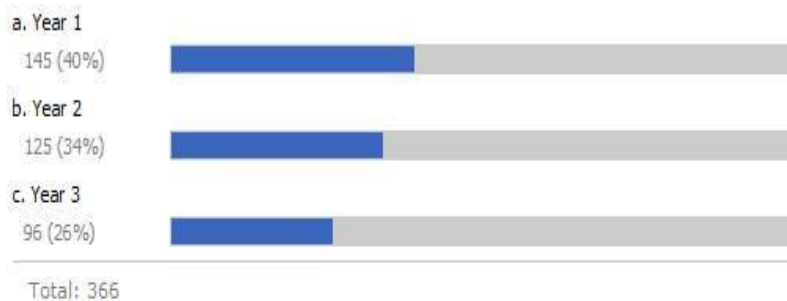
Data of the Library Facebook likes are tabulated in Table 4 in comparison to data of the Facebook presence of other polytechnic libraries in Singapore.

Results

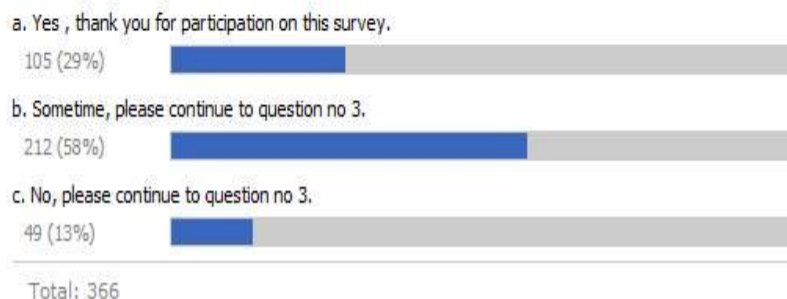
Study 1: General Student Survey

Chart 1: Breakdown of the respondents' year of academic study and whether they read the library's emails.

1. 1. Which year of study are you in?



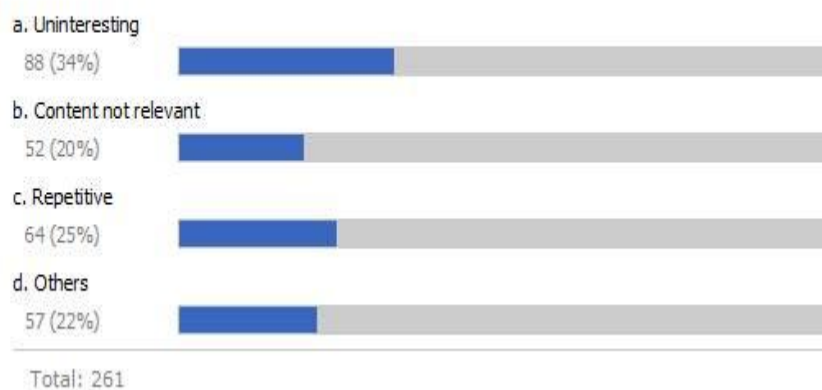
2. 2. Do you read the emails send by RP Library ?



The results indicate that a high proportion of respondents mainly were Year 1 students with a dwindling trend in engaging the more senior students in the school. Around 13% of the respondents indicated that they did not read the library's emails.

Chart 2: Reasons why they sometimes read or don't read the Library's emails

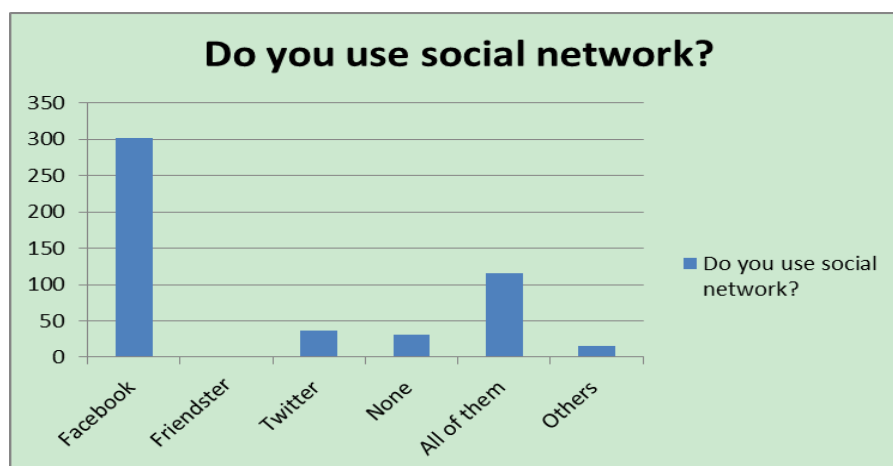
3. 3. Reason of not reading RP Library email?



The results show that 34% of the students perceived emails from the library to be uninteresting.

Study 2: Survey of Usage of Social Networks

Chart 3: Use Social Network Platforms



The results show that a majority (about 60%) of students used the Facebook platform as their choice for social networking.

Study 3: Analysis of Email Notifications to Library Users

Table 1: Number of notification of overdue emails

Data Period	Aug 2010	Sep 2010	Oct 2010	Total
1 st Reminder	232	203	135	570
2 nd Reminder	65	88	62	215
3 rd Reminder	36	34	25	95
Final Reminder	8	33	17	58
Total Sent	341	358	239	938

The results showed to us that in Aug 2010 (about 10.6%), Sep 2010 (about 9.5%) and Oct 2010 (about 10.5%) of the reminders sent out were 3rd Reminders (on average about 10.2% of total email sent). Taking into consideration with the data we obtained in Chart 1 – whereby 13% of our respondents indicated that they do not read our emails. We therefore suspected the library users that receive our 3rd reminders were very likely persons who did not read or pay attention to our emails and as such, an alternative approach at reaching out to them needs to be performed. (Our suspicions were confirmed when we subsequently contacted the library users whom were late in returning their borrowed items – most of them indicated not to have noticed the email sent to them by the library).

Study 4: Tracking of Performance Changes in Library Operations

Table 2: Comparison of email reminders before implementation of phone augmentation (Sep 2010) and after the implementation (Sep 2011).

Data Period	September 2010	September 2011
1 st Reminder	203	156
2 nd Reminder	88	54
3 rd Reminder	34	27
Final Reminder	33	9
Total Cases	358	246

The data indicates that the additional step of contacting users by phone with regards to their overdue items did help to reduce the number of final reminders (reduced the number of long overdue items).

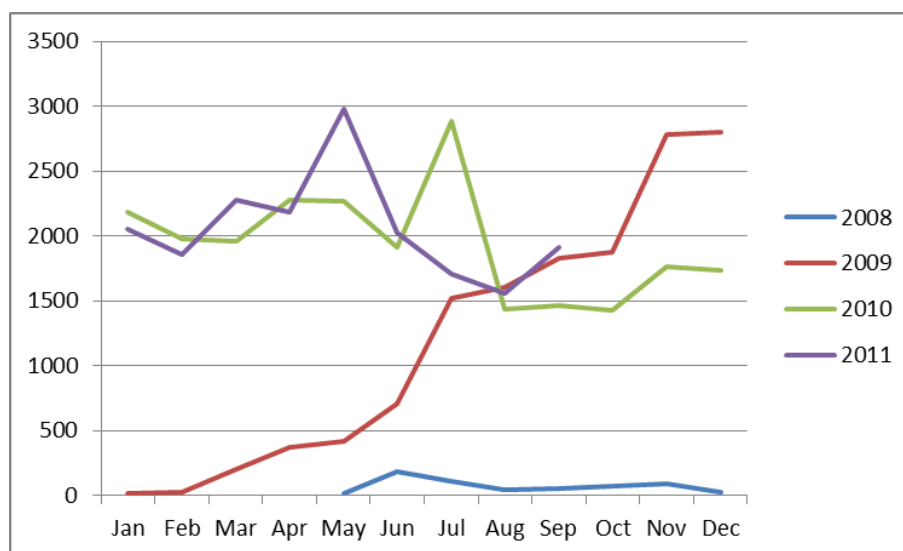
Study 4: Tracking of Blog

Table 3: Blog traffic from Jun 2008 to Sep 2011

Months and Years													
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2008					19	182	110	45	54	74	94	22	600
2009	19	22	207	370	418	712	1,521	1,609	1,826	1,875	2,786	2,796	14,161
2010	2,187	1,980	1,983	2,273	2,264	1,917	2,881	1,437	1,463	1,429	1,768	1,733	23,315
2011	2,051	1,853	2,274	2,184	2,978	2,026	1,707	1,559	1,910	202			18,744

Average per Day													
	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Overall
2008					1	6	4	1	2	2	3	1	3
2009	1	1	7	12	13	24	49	52	61	60	93	90	39
2010	71	71	64	76	73	64	93	46	49	46	59	56	64
2011	66	66	73	73	96	68	55	50	64	49			68

Chart 4: Blog traffic from 2008 to 2011



The data show that the traffic was only high during specific periods (November 2009, June 2010 and May 2011). These coincided with our hosting of a competition or event held in the library. The event ‘Design for cause’ was on 11 Jan -31 Mar 2010, the event ‘Hunt for Fun’ and ‘Photo-Poem Competition for Racial Harmony Day’ were in the month of July 2010 and a “Library Posters Competition” was held in the month of May-June 2011.

The monthly average number of visitors to the blog was around 1180 for the year 2009 and increased to about 1942 in year 2010 and to 2060 for January – September 2011. The blog traffic has been increased over the years but the rate of increase is decreasing.

Study 5: Tracking of Facebook

As the results of Study 2 indicated that a high percentage of students favoured the use of Facebook, the Library started a Facebook presence around December of 2010. Table 4 provides a snap shot of the number of “likes” obtained by polytechnic libraries’ Facebook pages in Singapore as of October 2011.

Table 4: Number of likes on Facebook for Polytechnic Libraries in Singapore (information correct as of 5th October 2011):

Polytechnic Library in Singapore	Number of "LIKES"
Lien Ying Chow Library* (Ngee Ann Polytechnic) (Oldest post on Jan 2010)	729
Nanyang Polytechnic Library* (Oldest post May 2009)	266
Republic Polytechnic Library* (Oldest post on Dec 2010)	1017
Singapore Polytechnic Library* (Oldest post on Apr 2010)	605
Temasek Polytechnic Library* (Oldest post on Aug 2010)	1051

*Links to the Polytechnic Library’s Facebook pages are listed in the References

As RP Library had noticed link between programs/events and increase in visitors to the library blog, it made use of two programs to

quickly raise the number of “likes” to its Facebook page from an initial low figure of 251 (initial starting week) to the current high figure of 1017.

As the library’s Facebook page is a relatively new initiative for the library, we shall be observing the trends further to see if improvements can be achieved.

Summary

Our study results suggest that email communication is beginning to lose its value as a tool to inform and engage our students and that it may be time for libraries to begin to look into other means to maintain connection with users. Nonetheless, there is still a need to retain email as an official tool to record that we have attempted to inform our users.

RP Library’s attempt at an augmented contact process over the existing emailing of notifications is meeting with good success at reducing the number of incidences of overdue items owed to the library. Libraries may want to consider additional means beyond the standard emailing as a means to reach out to their users who may not read them or only read them occasionally.

Blogs could be starting to lose their place as the medium of choice for our young users. Our students have begun to entrench themselves more into social media platform like Facebook and that would be the place where we can find them. The challenge is in how best to engage and connect with them; we have found that activities such as games and competitions do raise a reaction from them and would therefore provide opportunities for libraries to reach out and connect with them.

Mobile communication technologies have improved connectivity to social media platforms but are libraries moving likewise to the same level of connectivity? Cost is a major concern for libraries, as moving into the mobile arena entails the paying of mobile communications charges that can be high. Our results show that it is useful to engage our users through the mobile platform in

highlighting areas of concern to them, for example-- overdue items owed to library.

There is also the risk of platforms changing at great pace – just a few years back Blogs were hot, now interest in Blogs may be starting to cool. What's in fashion now are Facebook and Twitter, but how long will these trends last?

For libraries, it won't be possible for us to be continually chasing after the technology – it would bleed us dry trying to be cutting edge. The next best thing to do is to observe what has stabilized after the dust has settled and be prepared to go into them for short term gains. Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore Polytechnic and Temasek Polytechnic libraries have developed applications that reach out to their users in the mobile platform. At RP Library, we will be exploring the possibility of leveraging on our students to tackle these challenges as projects to mitigate the cost of implementation.

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