

Better Practices From the Field.

Micro-Blogging for Science & Technology Libraries

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When text messaging and blogging meet, sci-tech libraries win. Micro-blogs are social networks for broadcasting news with a very short character limit in the vein of text messaging. Increasingly popular micro-blog clients such as *Twitter* and *Pownce* offer a short-winded platform for sharing information with patrons by combining the interaction and push technology of blogs with the mobility of text messaging. The most popular micro-blogging client, *Twitter* (<http://twitter.com>), allows for posts of up to 140 characters in length to be uploaded AND read online or through instant messaging and even from mobile devices via text messaging.

Twitter is by no means the only, or even the most powerful micro-blog. *Pownce* (<http://pownce.com>) allows file sharing; *Tumblr* (<http://www.tumblr.com>) makes it possible to add tags to posts and even to post videos; and *Jaiku*'s (<http://www.jaiku.com>) recent partnership with *Google* promises further innovations that might include mash-ups with other products such as *Blogger*, *Google Talk*, *orkut*, *Google Docs*, etc.

These tools are great for library announcements, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. We can post news such as special events (always include start and end dates), holiday hours, exhibits, new book arrivals, updated resources or reminders of important resources, instruction sessions, and new reference services. Think outside the box by posting news from your parent institution or your library's constituencies.

A micro-blog account can serve as a dynamic FAQ by posting policies and answers to frequent questions and adding "FAQ" to the post. . Libraries can even answer questions peer-to-peer through the service and share the answers as public posts, or publicly using *Twitter*'s "@reply" feature, reply in the message thread in *Pownce*, or "Reblog" in *Tumblr*.

Maximize the strengths of micro-blogs by embracing the blurb format necessitated by the character limit, which forces us to create digestible announcements that can keep readers' attention. Be comfortable using abbreviations and shorthand, and don't feel compelled to use full punctuation.

I recommend the following practical suggestions for developing these services. Consider usernames that clearly identify your library, are recognizable to your patrons, and include a word or abbreviation of your parent institution and "lib." The chosen username will serve as part of the URL so the best will be short and simple.

Duplicating long press releases in the blurb format complements traditional library blogs and newsletters. Point out to the full story or resource by including a URL. Note that URLs longer than 30 characters are automatically translated into a Tiny-URL by *Twitter*.

That the simple URL consists of a username (<http://twitter.com/username>, <http://pownce.com/username>, or <http://username.tumblr.com>) makes branding a breeze and lends itself well to fliers etc: "Follow library updates at twitter.com/Sciencelib." Market this service though a presence in your webspace as a link or a widget, and use the same username across social networking applications.

The best marketing comes from actually engaging in this service as the social networking tool it was intended to be. The more friends you add or "follow" by subscribing to others' feeds, the larger your community and the more visible your account will be. Easily build an audience by inviting your friends' followers, and search for people in your potential audience by username and email as well as by location and interests in *Twitter*. Return the gesture of following users who follow you for the sake of netiquette and good marketing.

The widest audience can be reached by utilizing the multiple clients preferred by our patrons. Micro-blog aggregators help librarians avoid redundant work by providing a single interface for adding content to multiple clients. Unfortunately, neither of the most popular aggregators meets the service expectations of most libraries. *Hellotxt* (<http://www.hellotxt.com>) provides centralization for most major clients. However, because it does not provide a mobile posting application nor any help documentation, it does not meet the mobile and scalable needs of most libraries. *Twitku* (<http://twitku.com>) only allows for uploads to three clients - if you can get it to work. My library has opted to not use either of the above because of these deficiencies. Instead, we solely maintain an active account with *Twitter* until a viable aggregator becomes available.

Make the most of your micro-blog and allow patrons to read your updates from your library website or within your social networking profiles by easily embedding one of *Twitter's* or *Tumblr's* pre-coded widget badges or third-party applications for *Pownce*. Several *Twitter* applications for Facebook profiles allow the synching of both services. Integrate *Twitter* into your browser or desktop with any of the various applications and plugins (<http://explore.twitter.com>). Reduce redundancy further by feeding library blogs into *Twitter* or vice-versa.

Your profile, including name, location, email, and one-line bio, are the only searchable fields within *Twitter*, so it should include all the elements that will help patrons and potential patrons find it. With a 160 character limit, bios must be written strategically, clearly identifying your library and parent institution. Include the disciplines your library serves so they will be returned when searched as keywords, and add a link to your library's in-depth news page and/or

blog. Including a link to your library webpage in the “More Info URL” field makes it clear that this is an official service of your library.

Take advantage of the optional profile customization by applying a background image. The image should include soft colors that don’t overwhelm the feed and convey an obvious consistency with your library’s webspace by including a banner or a similar color scheme. Also add a recognizable and attention-grabbing picture as your buddy icon. This image is very small so it is especially important that it be bright, simple, and easily identifiable.

Twitter’s largest weakness is that it does not allow for selecting an audience, either all posts are public or all are only viewable by your followers. *Pownce* and *Tumblr* allow much greater granularity in choosing who can view each post, allowing you to post news you want your patrons but not the public to view.

Consider appropriate staffing models that account for responsibility for posting, replying to messages, maintaining the account, as well as training and creating help documentation. Most libraries assign a point person to update and maintain their micro-blog. Our library has alternatively opened our *Twitter* account to all librarians and some staff to allow for wider creative content and to ensure the sustainability of the service. If aligning your micro-blog with a shared email account, establish policies for checking and responding to its emails. Maximize your micro-blog for your library by activating the instant message and text messaging features for a department mobile device to allow you to post and receive updates straight through IM or text messages (not available for all micro-blogs). Not all IM clients are supported by any of the micro-blogs.

Micro-blogs are powerful communication platforms convenient for both librarians and our patrons. Several libraries, including the Lunar and Planetary Institute Library

http://twitter.com/LPI_Library, Maui Community College Library <http://twitter.com/mcclib>, and Northeastern Illinois University Library <http://twitter.com/NEIULibrary> represent great examples of libraries utilizing this tool. By sharing best practices for micro-blogs we work together to enhance library services and demonstrate the continuing relevancy of sci-tech libraries.

For more information, see - Twitter's FAQ

(<http://help.twitter.com/index.php?pg=kb.page&id=26>) and help document

(<http://help.twitter.com/index.php?pg=kb.book&id=1>) as well as Caroline Middlebrook's "The big juicy twitter guide" (<http://www.caroline-middlebrook.com/blog/twitter-guide/>) and Ellyssa Kroski's "A Guide to Twitter in Libraries" (<http://oedb.org/blogs/ilibrarian/2007/a-guide-to-twitter-in-libraries>).

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