About Facebook

Change at the social-networking juggernaut creates new opportunities for law library outreach

by Jennifer L. Behrens
Last fall, the social-networking phenomenon Facebook (www.facebook.com) announced a surprising change in policy: corporate entities would be allowed to create institutional profiles via the new “Facebook Pages” feature. Prior to the November launch of Facebook Pages, many librarians had attempted to infiltrate this student-rich online community by creating “dummy” accounts in the name of their libraries. These profiles were subject to deletion by Facebook administrators, under a company rule forbidding the use of “fake names” in personal profiles.

That rule still applies to individual user accounts, but librarians with a personal profile may now also build and maintain a Facebook Page for their institutions. Other Facebook users may access a page’s content and can choose to become a “Fan” (the equivalent of adding a personal user as a “Friend”) in order to receive automatic updates when the page changes (for example, when an administrator posts an announcement for an upcoming library event).

During the last few months, public and general academic librarians have welcomed this new opportunity to reach out to Facebook’s estimated 64 million users: the site’s search engine returns more than 450 Facebook Pages for libraries. However, the response from the legal community has been somewhat more reluctant, with fewer than 10 law libraries currently experimenting with the feature. This article explores some preliminary results of these experiments (including my own experience with creating the Duke University Law Library’s page) and offers practical guidance to law librarians who may wish to join in.

Why Facebook?
For most law library page administrators, the decision seems obvious. “That’s where the students are, so that’s where we should be to serve them,” says Jim Milles, director of the University at Buffalo’s Charles B. Sears Law Library. Milles first joined Facebook in 2006 and noticed that around 80-90 percent of his law students were also active on the site.

Karen Storin Linitz, head of reference services at the Harvard Law School, had a similar impression of her student body. “We know that the majority of Harvard Law School students use Facebook,” she says, “We see Facebook as one more door into the library.”

University of Kentucky Reference Librarian Sarah Glassmeyer, who created the first law library Facebook page, echoes these sentiments. “Why is the law library in the law building? Because that’s where the law students are. So it just makes sense to me that we should try and get ourselves into other places that the students ‘hang’ out, even if that place happens to be a virtual environment like Facebook.”

Of course, Facebook was not the first social-networking site to grab headlines, nor is it even the most popular site on the Web. As a result, some might question why a law library would opt to maintain a Facebook Page instead of create a profile in MySpace (the original, and still the most-trafficked, of the current wave of social-networking sites), build a “virtual library” in Second Life, or anticipate tomorrow’s next “It” community. A brief exploration of Facebook, however, reveals several unique features that currently make the site a “perfect storm” for many law libraries.

Most significantly, Facebook has always been synonymous with college-age students. Founder Mark Zuckerberg launched “thefacebook.com” from his Harvard dorm room in 2004, as a students-only alternative to MySpace. Originally, registration was exclusive to users with a “harvard.edu” e-mail address; the site gradually expanded to include other universities. Consequently, the student-centered culture on Facebook remains strong, even after the site opened to public registration in 2006.

Facebook now claims a presence at every university in the United States; studies have suggested that more than 85 percent of undergraduate students and about 25 percent of graduate students are regular users of the site. The undergraduates from these early studies are now beginning to enter graduate school, and there is little evidence that they are abandoning
Facebook. When we first considered creating the Duke University Law Library’s page, we were encouraged by the discovery that roughly 70 percent of our current first-year students had joined a social “group” in Facebook for the class of 2010.

Of course, nothing prevents today’s law students from also using MySpace, Second Life, or other communities. The major difference with Facebook is that librarians can actually find them. Because of Facebook’s strict policy against the use of pseudonyms, there is a culture of honesty that is not always found in other online communities. While one may stumble across the occasional profile for “Paris Hilton” or “Eli Manning,” generally Facebook users are who they claim to be.

Facebook promotes this candor not only through the deletion of obviously fake profiles, but also through a rather paradoxical commitment to privacy. Users enjoy a great deal of control over who may view their full profiles, add them as friends, see their News Feed (automatic updates to friends about changes to one’s profile), or even locate them at all in the Facebook search engine, Google, or other sources. The insular, yet open, nature of Facebook makes it an ideal place to find law students where they live. “It’s a fairly attractive interface that the students are familiar with,” says Linitz, “and we want to be there for them when they look for information.”

Additionally, Facebook offers libraries an unprecedented opportunity to customize their pages through its Facebook Platform. In early 2007, the company invited users to design their own applications, in order to better customize their pages. Libraries on Facebook may create their own catalog and database search functions, modify existing chat/instant message applications, and generally build a more sophisticated page than the limited templates offered by other sites. Several applications will even import content (such as library blog entries) automatically, meaning that pages require only minimal maintenance on the part of administrators. This particularly appealed to Glassmeyer. “A couple hours at the front end to set everything up, and then it pretty much runs itself,” she says.

### Finding Inspiration

Law library pages currently available in Facebook, with thanks to the administrators who share their experiences in this article:


Facebook Applications offer additional opportunities to customize a library’s page. These applications may be created by Facebook staff or by amateur programmers using the Facebook Platform. Some of the most popular applications for library pages include Simply RSS (which automatically imports entries from existing library blogs, new titles in the library’s catalog, or other designated RSS feeds), Meebo Me (an instant message window embedded in the library’s page), WorldCat, and JSTOR (search boxes for the perennial librarian favorites).

Some Facebook applications that were originally developed for use on personal profiles are still not available to place on institutional pages, although one can always appeal directly to the application’s creator to re-code the application. If this is unsuccessful, administrators may be able to modify the application themselves, through the use of Static FBML (an application that allows administrators to add and customize up to three new content boxes with either basic HTML or “Facebook Markup Language”).

For the Duke University Law Library page, we adapted an existing AOL Instant Messenger application (still available only for profiles) by placing the code into a Static FBML box. Finally, administrators can simply design the desired application from scratch through Facebook Platform, although this requires an intermediate knowledge of programming. “I keep hoping that someone more talented than myself...”
within UK will create an application that allows students to search our OPAC,” says Glassmeyer. Until then, the WorldCat application suffices for the University of Kentucky page.

Building a Buzz
While Facebook Pages are quick to create and customize, promotion may take considerably more effort. Students tend to use Facebook as a resource to communicate with friends, and some may recoil at the idea of librarians and professors invading their community. A clear and prominent user privacy policy may help to ease concerns; students should be assured that becoming a “Fan” of the page does not necessarily allow administrators to view their personal profiles (as it ordinarily would when they befriend another individual account). In addition, the “Insights” user data feature provides administrators with only general information about page views and visitor demographics; nothing is linked to an individual visitor’s identity.

Although Facebook Pages do contain an option for (fee-based) targeted advertising, administrators agree that law libraries should approach marketing with a light touch. Glassmeyer summarizes the typical page creator’s dilemma. “I’m torn between letting students find our page organically and really publicizing it and trying to get the fan numbers up,” she says.

Harvard has relied thus far on word of mouth; a networking application currently being developed by law school staff will give the page additional exposure. The University at Buffalo Law Library’s promotion has been similarly low-key, through announcements on several of UB Law’s school-related groups within Facebook. “We will be expanding our promotion gradually,” Milles says. “We don’t want to contravene Facebook custom by being too obnoxious about it.”

At Duke Law, our most successful “marketing” effort was entirely accidental. About a week after the quiet launch of our Facebook page in November 2007, the law school’s Web site was disabled by hackers. As our technical staff worked to clean and restore the entire site, they created a temporary home page of popular and useful links. Since our Facebook page contained direct links to many campus-wide library resources (unaffected by the hacking), such as the interlibrary loan system login and various legal research databases, we linked it from the temporary home page. Overnight, our user statistics increased by 600 percent, and many students opted to become “Fans” of the page.

While that is an extreme example (which I hope never happens to another law school), it does underscore the conventional wisdom among law library page administrators: the most effective way to promote a Facebook page is from the ground up. Word of mouth among the student community lends a page more credibility; if the page clearly meets an immediate user need, so much the better. Although Duke’s Facebook user statistics dropped sharply as soon as the Law School Web site was fully restored, new fans do continue to find us, as they notice the page linked from their friends’ Facebook profiles or discover it on the law library Web site. (See “Keeping Momentum” on this page for additional tips for promoting a library Facebook page.)

Worth the Effort?
Most law library page administrators would recommend Facebook Pages to their colleagues, especially in the academic library community. “Facebook pages are not going to replace traditional library Web pages or even library blogs,” Glassmeyer acknowledges. “However, they will supplement these presences.”

Linniz agrees. “Being accessible to our users through a variety of methods keeps us relevant and on the students’ radar screens,” she says.

While Facebook Pages may not be as immediately useful for court or law firm libraries, these institutions can still indirectly benefit from the open channel of communication between summer associates and their “home” libraries. New attorneys who fear asking a dumb or basic question at work may be more likely to do so anonymously through their law school library’s chat or instant message applications in Facebook.

Law librarians who may be pondering the creation of a Facebook Page are far from alone. Several library-specific groups within Facebook are excellent places to gather practical tips and best practices. These groups, which include “Librarians Using Facebook Pages” and “AALL Members on Facebook,” offer additional opportunities for networking and collaboration. Facebook neophytes might be surprised by how many of their colleagues are already there. With the arrival of Facebook Pages, it’s never been a better time to join them.

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Keeping Momentum
In order to keep a Facebook Page high on users’ radar, administrators must inform their communities of the page and periodically make meaningful additions that will be mentioned on fans’ News Feeds. The following are marketing suggestions from current law library page administrators.

1. Create a link to your Facebook Page on the library’s Web site, blog, and in staff e-mail signatures.

2. Mention your Facebook Page at the end of classes as another avenue for library assistance.

3. Post all library orientations and research trainings to your Facebook “Events” section.

4. Write a weekly “research tip” or other unique content on your Wall or Discussion Board.

5. Maintain and update photo albums of interest, such as virtual displays.

6. Hold a monthly trivia contest open only to your Facebook fans.