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Emma Walton, Annette Moore

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“Suggest a Book for the Library”- using facebook for purchase suggestions at the University of Sussex Library

Emma Walton - Learning and Teaching Support Manager

Annette Moore – Technical Services Librarian


Background

“There aren’t enough books” is the perennial lament we hear from students, at student forums, course boards and, more recently, in the free-text comments of the National Student Survey. At Sussex, we have an adequate book budget but sometimes worry that we are not providing access to everything that our students need. We are always looking at ways to improve communication about what is needed for their study: with our academics, through reading list submission and with our students.

The Campaign

Early in spring 2012, we put together a marketing proposal to run a two week facebook campaign entitled ‘Suggest a book for the Library’. Initially, this was aimed at our undergraduates, following feedback and comments from the National Student Survey, although ultimately more purchase suggestions were received from research postgraduates than undergraduates. A facebook page offered several advantages: a two-way communication channel, an open forum and an opportunity to build a more informal relationship with our users. In addition, our then current purchase suggestion form was primarily used by academics and we wanted to reach a wider audience. We allocated a £5,000 budget from the book fund, as well as £150 for professional printing of the postcards. Staff from the Learning and Teaching Support team as well as Technical Services were involved in setting up the campaign, responding promptly to suggestions, placing orders and replying to posts.

Getting the wording right for the campaign and keeping the message clear and simple were two key objectives. To promote the facebook campaign, we came up with a design and text that we used on postcards, on the facebook page as well as via a range of University communication channels.

<p>Suggest a book for the Library Visit us at www.facebook.com/suggestabooksussex</p>  <p>US University of Sussex Library</p>	<p>Have we got the books you need?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Visit us at www.facebook.com/suggestabooksussex• Simply suggest the title and author of a book and tell us why you think it would be a useful addition to the Library• Post your suggestion to our wall <p>Learning and Teaching Support University of Sussex Library T +44 (0)1273 877199 E library.learning.teaching@sussex.ac.uk www.sussex.ac.uk/library</p> <p>US University of Sussex Library</p>
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With the facebook page set up and the promotional material in place, we launched the 'Suggest a book for the Library' campaign with a welcoming post, inviting students to tell us what books they needed. Our first book suggestion was received (with much excitement from the staff involved!) within 30 minutes of the page going live. Concerns about receiving *frivolous* requests for books, that did not fall within the Library's collection development policy, were mostly unfounded and the subject areas varied widely, from philosophy to poetry. New posts arrived at a swift pace during the first week of the campaign; the second week was steady and there was a final rush of requests in the last few days. The LATS team responded quickly to suggestions, engaging with users often within minutes of receiving a new post. The idea caught on quickly with some students who soon became repeat "offenders", asking for a second and a third title that they "really needed for their studies".

By the end of the two weeks, we had ordered 141 titles, spent over £4,500 of the book budget and many students 'Liked' us. Not only did we receive book suggestions, we also received 'Thanks', praise, 'Fantastic! I love Sussex', and even a short poem requesting a copy of the 'great Oxford Rhyming Dictionary'. Drawing the campaign to a close, our final post included a link to our Library Thing list of all the titles we had purchased as a result of student suggestions over the two weeks.

Evaluation

It was important that we evaluate the success of this method of both promoting our services and as an aid to collection development. Did we reach our proposed target audience? Could we run it again? Did it fit our work flow? Did staff engage with it? Is there money available?

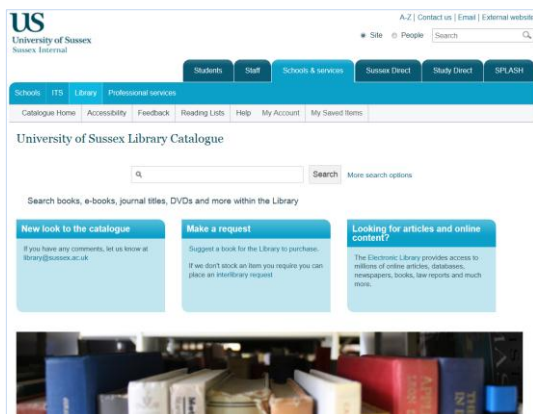
In order to gauge staff opinion I asked for feedback from those members of the Learning and Teaching Support team (LATS) who had been involved in answering posts and ordering books. Overwhelmingly the feedback was positive, but staff felt it was time consuming and that we needed to look for more efficient ways of running a permanent book suggestion service, that had the visibility and simplicity of facebook.

"I think the Suggest a Book campaign was very successful, the students seemed to like it and valued another way to contact and interact with Library staff as well as being able to get extra books that they needed."

"I thought the facebook campaign was met with a positive response from users. They seemed impressed by the immediacy of our responses and our general willingness to employ social media in a bid to connect with users, which indicates we need to continue to explore means to exploit these tools for our service."

Design of a new book suggestion service

As a result of the evaluation a new way of receiving purchase suggestions was clearly needed. Working with colleagues, we created a simple online form, linked from the Library catalogue welcome page. Details on this form are sent to a specified address to be picked up by LATS and items ordered accordingly, with a confirmation email sent to the requestor.



Library

Suggest a book

Think we should have a particular book or other item in our collection? Tell us!

Your name:

Your email:

Please provide as many details as possible: title, author, ISBN, edition (if relevant), etc.

Please reserve this item for me: ☐

Further information about this service

- If you are an academic wanting items for a reading list please contact readinglists.lib@sussex.ac.uk rather than using this form.
- Items suggested are NOT automatically reserved for you, if you would this service please use the tick box provided.

This new online form has also allowed us to include policy information, as well as other services such as reading lists links for academics or contact details for other queries .

So what did we learn?

- That facebook or other social media can be used to great effect for collection development.
- That this method of communication proved successful in marketing our services and building relationships with our users.
- That providing a sustainable method for purchase suggestions needs to replicate the simplicity and ease of social media.
- That staff enjoyed this interaction with our users, but extra time needs to be set aside
- That collection development can be fun.

The “Suggest a book for the Library” was an interesting journey into the world of social media for other uses than communication. It was successful as a one off but ultimately couldn’t be sustained in our institution. It was enjoyable, exciting and new, so our suggestiongive it a go!