Engaging with a digital audience

One of the more forgotten aspects of communicating remotely is the way in which we engage with our audience. Historically, libraries have tried to get more people into their buildings, but in these unprecedented times, it has become more important than ever to engage people remotely.

This means you may have to do a bit of extra work to find out about the audience you're reaching, and be able to engage with them well, especially as they may not respond to you. This guide focuses on general best practice to improve your online engagement. For more information on using different types of social media, please see our toolkit for libraries.

A digital audience is very different to an in person one. As humans, we communicate in many ways, and there is a wealth of research that shows that body language and tone of voice are far more important that the actual words we use when communicating.

To complicate matters further, there are now a variety of different ways to communicate with your audiences online, including images/infographics, video, audio as well as live events. It's important that you choose the right method and channel to reach your audience where they are, and this may often mean using a combination of these communications. For more help creating videos for your audiences, please see the guide from Kingston Libraries.

The following points are designed to help you reach your audience in an appropriate way:

1. Know who you're talking to

Pay attention to how much interactivity your content on social media achieves. There is enough clutter on social media without adding more to it, so think of quality rather than quantity – if your content is getting few likes and no comments, rethink the layout or consider if there is another way to share the information. What is being displayed as text might reach more people with an infographic, or perhaps a video would help explain something better.

Don't just post content and move onto the next piece. Take time to see how the content lands and whether it has the impact and results you are looking for. Have a social media plan and create achievable goals to increase engagement. That might be to increase followers or increase likes and shares, or similar. Use experience to adapt and change.

> *"If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you always got"*
> *Henry Ford*

2. Signpost

As information providers it can sometimes feel improper to hold back information. However, you may need to share some important yet lengthy information with your users, and this is often unavoidable. Studies have shown that people will skim read the first few sentences of long communications and lose interest if it doesn't appeal.

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You shouldn't put a lengthy post on your social media, newsletters, and emails. People are unlikely to be interested in committing time to read it without knowing what the main points are beforehand.

A simple way to combat this would be to have the information available on your website (if appropriate) and use signposting to show your users where to find this information. This way, instead of having to read a long email to discover they're not interested, they can receive an email, newsletter, or see a social media post that outlines the basic points and directs them to where they can find more detailed information.

For example:

"We have made some changes to improve our children's services. To find out more click here"

3. Age of your audience

Think about the age of the audience you are trying to reach and the tone and language you use. The language used to speak to a child under five would be very different to the language you'd use to speak to a teenager, and again different to adults.

Post relatable content appropriate for the age group. Teenagers can see right thought a library service trying to be 'cool', so speak to them like they are adults while promoting your resources and let them find out the advantages of libraries for themselves.

The same applies for older generations – don't assume that there is a standard level of digital literacy for older people. Some are very tech savvy while others find it difficult, as in every generation. The best way to speak to all clearly is to use concise language, do not use jargon and avoid being condescending.

4. Two-way communication

While libraries are closed it's crucial to keep lines of communication with the public open. We need to be able to support our customers in the best way possible while they are not able to come into the library. This may mean phoning customers to provide support on how to install and use online resources, or to assist those who cannot or do not have the means to use online services. Some customers may have questions and concerns about the library service as it currently stands and speaking to a human being may help address their concerns.

Try to respond to comments and create discussions as often as you post promotional material on social media. St Helen's Libraries Lockdown House on Twitter is a great example of this. It's nice to build a two-way conversation with your audience, to find out what they really want. If you're only pushing library information outwards, you may be missing valuable chances to learn and build on your brand.

5. Quality assurance

This can be a slightly sensitive subject area, especially when there are library staff keen to help promote library services remotely, but who may have limited tools to create content. Make

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sure all content reaches a certain standard before it is shared. For example, a video of a story time where the viewer can't see the images in the books might not be as appealing as one where the book is held close to the camera. Content that is blurry, too quiet or crackly, will immediately cause a user to turn off, as well as creating a poor representation of your library service. Videos shot in landscape rather than portrait also look better across different devices.

It may be best to have a few members of staff who are able to keep the quality high a few times a week doing a particular task (such as live chats or story times online) than having every member of staff do a live chat or story time every day.

References

https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/beyond-words/201109/is-nonverbal-communication-numbers-game

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