

The Next Generation Research Guide: LibGuides Training and Marketing at SFSU

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Abstract

In Spring 2007, a group of 5 San Francisco State University librarians undertook a project to revolutionize more than 90 academic research guides. Realizing that the traditional static pathfinder was growing less and less relevant to younger, more Googlecentric users, we decided to bring these guides into the modern Web 2.0 age. Using Springshare's LibGuides content management system as well as some good old fashioned training, support and cheerleading, we successfully accomplished our goal. In this paper, we'll discuss how we shepherded both our research guides and our librarian authors into the LibGuides platform, describe the training we offered and the set of best practices we developed. We will also discuss the methods and findings of our capstone research project to publicize our LibGuides using no-cost social media marketing techniques.

San Francisco State University (SFSU) has a user population of approximately 27,000 students, and the J. Paul Leonard Library maintains a strong online presence in support of both education and research. Instruction librarians provide course integrated seminars in computer labs (by request) for undergraduate and graduate courses. Like many academic libraries, SFSU offers research guides as a part of the library's research and education services.

When LibGuides was introduced by Springshare in 2007, SFSU's library was among the first institutions to experiment with and subscribe to the service. LibGuides met a number of immediate needs for research guide authors, including web-based creation, content management and outsourced web design support. From fall of 2007 through the spring of 2009 the library's collection of research guides migrated from HTML to the LibGuides platform. In some cases guides had not been updated for many years, so migration involved revising content in addition to re-entering pages. This was done by individual librarian authors and also by a team of five librarians (the LibGuides working group) assigned to teach their colleagues how to use the LibGuides system.

We offered librarians a variety of training tools to appeal to different learning styles, including:

- A printed handout with detailed instructions for creating a basic guide
- User-friendly workshops providing demonstrations and opportunities for in-class practice using private sandbox guides
- A template that allowed librarians to simply populate pre-created boxes and pages
- 22 boxes of prewritten content that librarians could copy or link to in their guides
- One-on-one appointments in librarian offices as needed

One-on-one appointments were especially important as they allowed us to assist authors at their own computers. Additionally, scheduling time for LibGuides meant that content creation would reliably occur.

As the library embraced the switch to LibGuides, we asked librarian authors to follow these best practices:

- Populate titles, descriptions, and tags for each guide with detailed and unique terms to provide search engines, LibGuide widgets and other content-summarizing tools with relevant information
- Add URLs to guides using the Links & Lists box-type, ensuring link statistics would be gathered and the links would be checked automatically by LibGuides' Link-Checker tool
- List books using links to the catalog rather than call numbers, so book locations would refresh automatically
- Link to the library website's subject-indexed database lists, rather than linking to individual databases
- Consider including automatically-updated content such as RSS feeds and podcasts
- Link to centrally-updated library content created by the LibGuides working group, rather than recreating it

When librarian training and guide creation had been accomplished, we began to evaluate the available usage statistics in an effort to understand the current usage patterns. LibGuide usage statistics from the 2008-2009 academic year suggested that the amount of in-person instruction librarians did influenced the number of web visits to their guides. Additionally, some popular topic guides had relatively high hit rates. A couple of online announcements had made certain guide visits spike, giving promise to the possibility of online marketing as an effective way to bring users to guides that were not typically used or advertised during instructional interactions. We developed a marketing plan to test the limits of this promising phenomenon.

Literature Review

The literature on research guides before the introduction of LibGuides questioned guide effectiveness overall, and sought to understand whether poor usage at some institutions was due to a lack of awareness about these resources. Literature from 2000 to 2006 reported a poor rate of return on the amount of time and energy spent creating and maintaining web-based research guides. LibGuides (<http://www.springshare.com/LibGuides>) entered the scene in 2007 as an answer to content management problems and as the Web 2.0 solution that would make research guides useful again. A number of academic libraries have simultaneously evaluated and implemented the service (Horne, Adams and Cook, 2009). But would LibGuides be able to overcome the pitfalls of its predecessor guides and be more visible and relevant to users? Our study hoped to determine whether marketing the Library 2.0 research guide using Web 2.0 strategies might be the answer.

While Web 2.0 technology platforms and social spaces are new, the theory behind them is not: social media marketing is firmly grounded in both WOM (Word-of-Mouth) marketing and RM (Relationship Marketing). The classic definition of RM comes from Gronroos (1990), who

states that RM's mission "is to identify and establish, maintain, and enhance relationships with... stakeholders... so that the objectives of all parties involved are met" and trusting relationships are formed (p. 138). Naturally, this concept is not news to academic librarians, who have long worn the liaison hat, investing time and energy each semester cultivating connections with students, faculty and administrators. WOM marketing goes hand-in-hand with RM; indeed, WOM depends entirely upon relationships in order to function or hold meaning for those involved. Allsop, Basset & Hoskins (2007) describe the WOM process this way: an institution builds relationships with key stakeholders; the stakeholders then participate in social networks and influence one another, possibly to the benefit of the institution.

What significance does all of this have for library marketing? According to Kenneway (2007), Mathews (2007) and Solis (2008), libraries must first acknowledge that they are participating in something that reaches beyond technology into social science, and approach social media tools opportunistically: as an inroad to gaining a deeper understanding of constituents. According to these authors, libraries using social media marketing would do well to adopt these practices:

- Listen before interacting, so they can participate authentically
- Acknowledge that conversations about libraries are already taking place
- Acknowledge that there is no controlled messaging (Casey, 2008; Solis, 2008)
- Participate as individuals, not institutions (Axelsson, 2008)
- Embrace and use all available tools and strategies (Braun, 2009)

The fact that people are influenced by peers with whom they have trusting relationships (but do not necessarily consider authorities) has significant implications for library service and outreach, particularly in how we bring our liaison and outreach work to the realm of social media. As Solis (2008) notes, "relationships are the new currency in social Media". This is good news for librarians who are already adept at building relationships.

Methods

From the library's list of over 90 published and public LibGuides, 66 were included in the study because they had been published in LibGuides prior to February 2009. Three guides were removed from the study set because they were not listed on the library's list of research guides; they were guides for courses taught in only one of the two semesters; or they were taken down during the marketing period. The 63 guides were randomized and the first half of the randomized list were marked as a control group (32 guides), with the second half (31 guides) designated for online marketing strategies. Each member of the marketing team took informal responsibility for promoting seven or eight guides in the marketed group, and for evaluating the statistics of a similar number from the control group.

SFSU librarians answered surveys about their personal use of LibGuides and online-marketing techniques before and after the marketing period. Guides were marketed using the following techniques: featured links on the library's home page; search engine optimization tags and labels; ads and links via Twitter; selected comments on Facebook; a LibGuides post on the library's blog; and direct marketing email messages. Usage data was collected by the LibGuides

content management service for the full period of the study, and from Google Analytics for the fall of 2009. The site usage statistics were compared over the study's time period and also between the marketed and control groups.

Results

We have been able to make some preliminary conclusions from the combined usage statistics available through the LibGuides web site, Google Analytics, and the statistics kept through our Library's own web site. The marketed set of guides had an average use increase of 63% from the February/March/April period to the September/October/November period, while the control set of guides had an average use increase of 27% during this time. Close inspection of statistics revealed a direct causal relationship between in-person instruction and the number of visits to subject research guides. The more a librarian teaches, the more their guide will be used regardless of whether they instruct students to visit the site during a library workshop.

Librarian Survey

Fourteen of 17 librarians filled out the survey. The questions (see Appendix) were intended to record the instructional usage of research guides on a regular basis, and in particular during Spring 2009. It also asked librarians about their knowledge, personal and professional use, and integration of particular Web 2.0 technologies, including MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Digg, LibraryThing, Delicious, and StumbleUpon. A follow-up survey was conducted at the end of Fall 2009 to record any further changes in usage.

Ten librarians reported mentioning the existence of library guides in general during every library instructional session. Twelve reported mentioning the existence of library guides in general either often or always when doing research assistance. Three used MySpace personally, while eleven did not use it. Eight respondents reported using Facebook personally, professionally (or both) and six did not use it at all. Of those surveyed, all knew about Twitter, nine did not use it, while four used it professionally. No librarians surveyed used Digg or StumbleUpon.

Homepage Feature

There are approximately 49 links on the Library's home page at any one time (see Figure 1), and the placement of the featured guides was toward the lower right hand corner of the page. These featured links included some web site redirect code in order to count the number of times users clicked on these home page links. From Aug. 4 to Dec. 11, 2009, the most hits to a guide link on the home page was 57 times total, while the average was 28 hits per guide over the course of 130 days. We also used Google Analytics to look at the number of visits to marketed guides for the days they were featured on the Library's home page and there was no pattern of increased viewing. We concluded that this method had almost no impact on the guides' usage.

Twitter

The number of visits to individual guides was tracked using Google Analytics both for the day a guide was tweeted plus the following two days. Based solely on these numbers, we have determined that our initial attempts with Twitter were unsuccessful in the short

term. However, our attempts in this regard were incomplete, since not all of the guides were tweeted during the marketing period. As of December 2009, there were 28 followers to this account, a small number that could grow were connections to be fostered. Using the term "#SFSU" in the tweets seems to have been successful initially in finding followers, but not in pulling significant numbers away from Twitter to SFSU University's LibGuides.

Facebook

Before the marketing period began, none of our colleagues reported sharing LibGuide links through Facebook. Attempts at using Facebook were successful in cases where the librarian made postings as an individual to users who were related to the SFSU department being marketed. For example, one author was able to market her own guide by sending a message to a faculty member who chose to communicate via Facebook instead of through email. However, due to the purely social aspect of this networking site, the process would have taken on a level of disingenuousness when the resources were not authored by a member of our team, or our members did not have a personal interest in the material. Furthermore, many of the Facebook "friends" were other librarians, which can have misleading impact on usage measurement and is a common complication for marketing through online social networks (Matthews, 2007).

Blog Posting

California State University employee furloughs began August of 2009, causing the SFSU campus (among others) to be closed the week of Thanksgiving 2009 – a time when students typically work on research papers due at the end of the semester in December. Using this extraordinary circumstance as an opportunity, we created a related entry for the Library's blog (blog headlines appear on the library's home page). There were 22 hits to the blog posting during the ten-day Thanksgiving break period of 2009. Due to the small number of hits across so many existing guides, the effect of the posting remains unclear. However, an increase in LibGuide visits during this time showed that this method of marketing was fairly successful.

Faculty Emails

Our most successful attempts at marketing LibGuides came from the opportunistic emails team members sent to department faculty and student Listservs just before the aforementioned Thanksgiving break week. When members of our team sent emails for departments that they were not connected with formally, they received some enthusiastic email replies from teaching faculty – at least one from each department. Looking at month by month statistics for guide home page views, the marketed guides were more popular than the control group guides in November 2009 when email messages were sent out (see Figure 2). However, one or two subject liaison librarians were not comfortable with a colleague contacting their departments independently, even if the intention was to proactively market their guides.

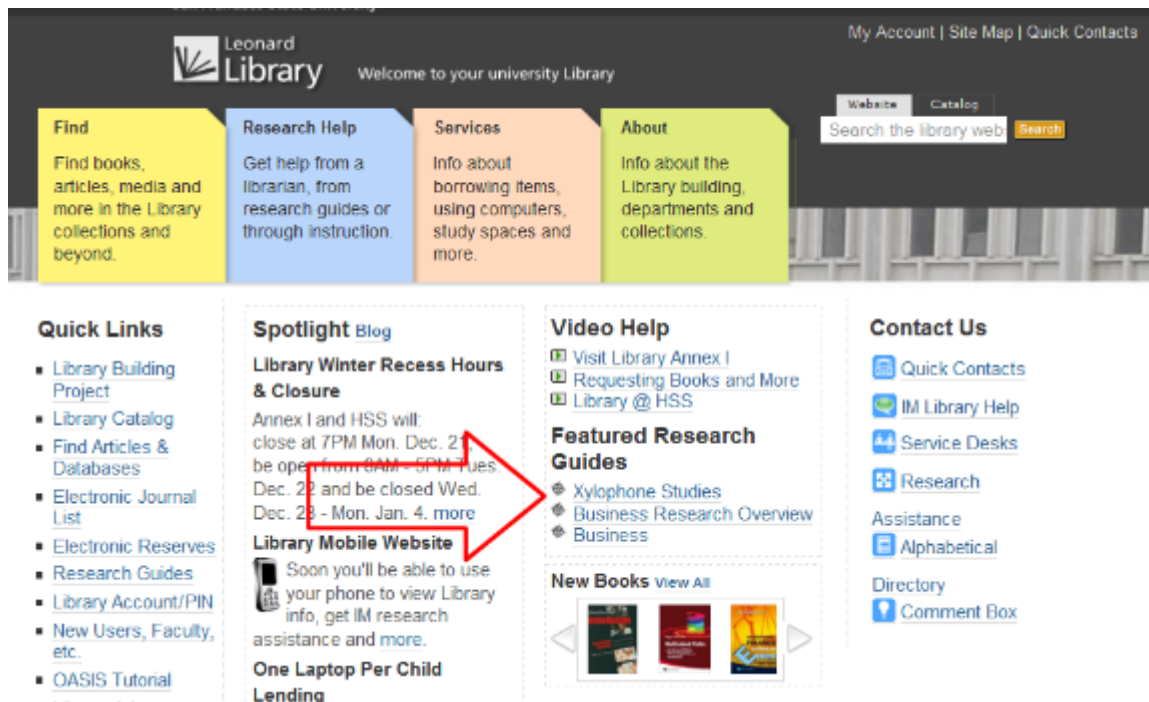
Conclusion

While training librarian authors and managing the transition from HTML guides to the LibGuides platform was a significant project in itself, this aspect turned out to be far more straightforward than marketing the guides. As we examined our results and learned about the nuances of social media marketing, we realized it wasn't the *guides* we should be marketing, but the *librarians* themselves.

Indeed, our results showed that the use of library research guides and the effectiveness of most online-marketing techniques are causally related to the relationships between the guide author and their users, particularly those relationships fostered through in-person library instruction. Because our methods were employed solely for the purpose of marketing the *product* (LibGuides), the relationships critical to success were poorly fostered, and our surrogate efforts fell flat. Promotion of research guides by individual librarians as an extension of their online-professional-personality is the more appropriate marketing technique. This confirms the statements and principles of WOM and RM, but may be problematic for institutions where librarians are not encouraged to promote themselves as library personalities, or who do not have formal relationships established through the subject liaison model. At SFSU's library, future attempts at online social marketing will likely focus on marketing select librarians rather than the research guides.

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Figure 1: Library homepage screenshot showing the location of the featured research guides list

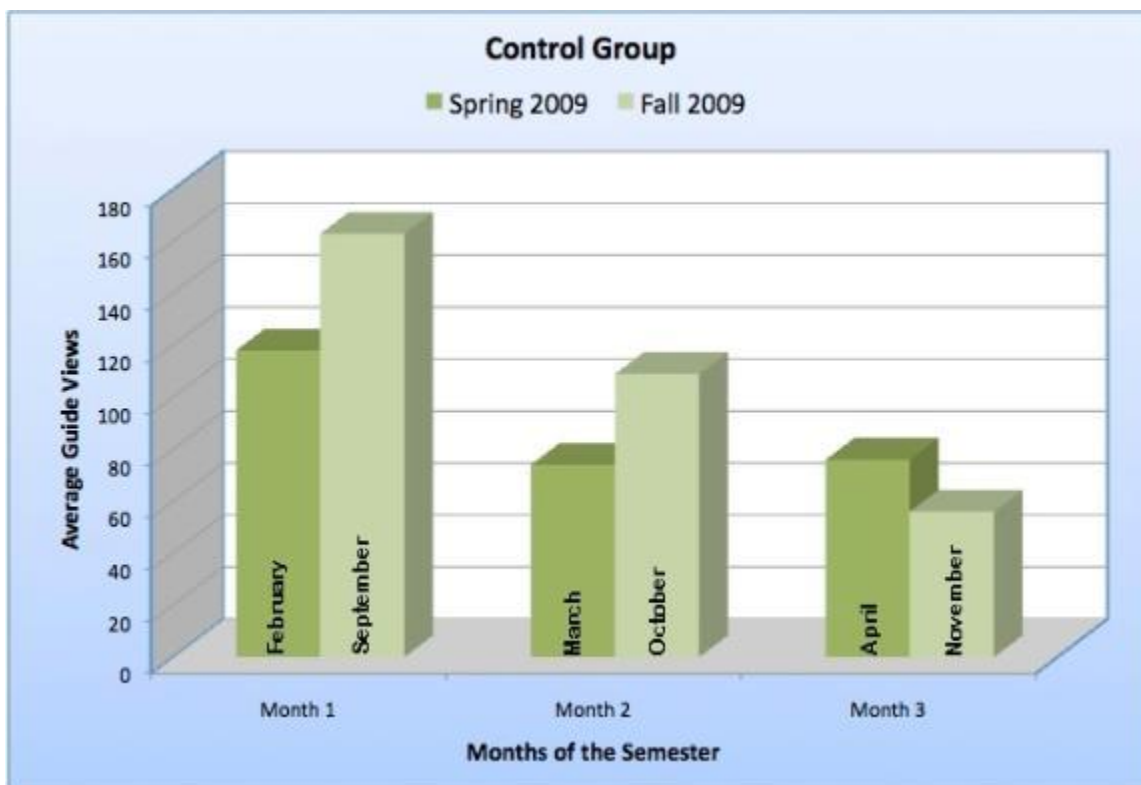


Figure 2: Monthly comparison of LibGuide views for marketed guides and control group

Appendix: Librarian Survey (sample questions)

For any workshops you taught in the spring 2009 semester, please check which actions you took for the LibGuides listed below. Please say Y for yes and N for no, and NA for not applicable.

	[Name of Guide]
Listed the guide on a handout you distributed to the class	_____
Wrote the guide url on a whiteboard or chalkboard	_____
Displayed the guide on monitor/projector during a classroom visit (students did not have computers)	_____
Displayed or showed the guide on monitor/projector during a hands-on workshop	_____
Clicked on links listed in your guide during a classroom demonstration	_____
Directed the students to visit the guide as part of their classroom exercises or activities	_____
How many times did you send the guide link to your faculty during the spring 2009 semester? (Please give #)	_____
Do you think faculty and students visit the guide when you send the link for it?	_____
Do you think this LibGuide is used enough for the time the Library faculty spent making and maintaining it during the spring of 2009?	_____

General Questions (Likert scale)

- Did you mention the existence of library guides in general during any library instruction in the spring of 2009?
- Did you mention the existence of **particular LibGuides** not authored by you **during your library workshops** in the spring of 2009?
- If yes, which guides do you remember mentioning in seminars during the spring of 2009? (Please list them below)
- Do you mention the existence of library guides in general when you do research assistance?
- If yes, which guides do you use and recommend most frequently? (Please list them below)