

Naming That Bear: a Public Relations Campaign and the Influence of Social Networking By Linda Shippert, Science and Maps Librarian, Washington State University Libraries

The emerging tools of the read/write web, also known as Web 2.0, provide unprecedented new opportunities for libraries and librarians. As we begin to look at ways to use these technologies, we must remember to let the technology work for us, rather than the other way around. By reaching students where they are online, instead of waiting for them to come to us, we can increase student awareness and engagement. A recent public relations campaign at the Washington State University Libraries was transformed through student participation and social networking.

In August 2006, a taxidermied Alaskan Brown Bear was donated to the Charles R. Connor Museum at the Pullman campus of the Washington State University. Due to space constraints, the bear was put on display at the neighboring Owen Science and Engineering Library. Placed prominently inside the Library main entrance, it was clear that the bear could be a big draw for the Library. Science Librarian and Instruction Coordinator Betty Galbraith conceived the idea of holding a contest to "Name that Bear," to increase awareness of the bear on campus and to bring more people into the Library. I volunteered to collaborate with Betty on the project, but because of workload distribution I ended up spearheading the initiative.

After establishing the logistics of the contest – no restrictions on who could enter or on the number of entries per person, and the result would be decided by committee rather than by number of entries received – the public relations campaign began. A press release was sent to *The Daily Evergreen* (the student paper), to *WSU Today* (the faculty & staff paper), to a mailing list for library users, to the WSU announcements mailing list, and was posted on the Library's website. There was also an advertisement which appeared in *The Daily Evergreen* once a week during October, and special coffee cup sleeves distributed at the student bookstore. The contest began mid-September, and votes began to trickle in until October 4, when everything changed.

Facebook, www.facebook.com, is a free social networking site originally intended exclusively for college students but now open to the general public. The email address(es) you submit determine which "networks" you belong to, such as the WSU network. Your personal profile can include details such as "relationship status" and "favorite books," work and educational history, and even courses currently being taken. You can join "groups" which are gathering places for people with similar interests. Groups are easy to start, so they come in a dazzling kaleidoscope, from functional groups for campus student organizations, groups for political causes, and groups for social action, to the fun and ridiculous, such as "I Heart Sleeping," or even "No, I Don't Look Like a Librarian." You can also, and perhaps most importantly, establish "friend" relationships with other people, which allow you to see what their status is and what "groups" they join, and vice versa.

In the first week of October, 2006, WSU student Brandon Brackett created the Facebook group "Name the Owen Science Library Bear after Stephen Colbert." *The Colbert Report*

is a political satire program on the cable network Comedy Central, hosted by Stephen Colbert as a right-wing pundit. There have been several nation-wide campaigns to have things named after Colbert, including a Hungarian Bridge, a hockey team mascot, and even a baby eagle at the San Francisco Zoo. The creator of the Facebook group felt that naming the bear after Colbert might garner press for WSU, and possibly even a visit from Colbert himself. The group grew staggeringly fast, with 246 members on October 5 and 738 by October 13. In addition to contacting friends and classmates, members of the group also attempted to contact Comedy Central, *The Colbert Report*, and Stephen Colbert himself. Entries for "Name that Bear" were suddenly coming in as many as forty per day. Most were for some variation of "Stephen Colbear," but just as many were for other names, from Al to Zebrin, submitted by students, staff, faculty, and children as young as 3.

Although "Name the Owen Science Library Bear after Stephen Colbert" was not an officially sponsored library group, it was used by The Libraries as a way to reach interested students and share information. Many librarians and library staff joined Facebook for the first time in order to join the group and see what was happening. Librarians posted to the group pictures of the bear, reminders about voting deadlines, and informational links.

As word of the contest and the Stephen Colbert campaign spread, the Campus press was galvanized. I was interviewed for *The Daily Evergreen*, for WSU Cable 8 News, and photographed for *WSU Today*. Articles about the contest appeared in the Daily Evergreen on October 12 and November 7, in *WSU Today* on October 13, and in *WSU Today Online* on November 6. By the deadline of October 31, there were an amazing 526 entries in the contest. The Facebook group peaked at 860 members, and on December 1, a month after the end of the contest, there were still 622. There are still more than 400 members as of April 2007.

Without the read/write web, "Name that Bear" would have been a fairly ordinary public relations campaign. With social networking, it became a phenomenon. The Facebook group engaged students and brought them into the library in ways that an ordinary public relations campaign could not. The system of networks and groups within Facebook created an instant sense of community and provided connections between people that allowed a viral spread of information. There has been much talk about whether or not University administrators and faculty are really welcome in, that the space is for students and they resent intrusion. An official library Facebook group would probably not have gained the popularity of this student-created group, but Facebook provides other opportunities that can be exploited more subtly.

When confronting new technologies such as social networking, librarians must ask the question "what can it do," instead of "what is it for." As technology develops the use of tools changes from the originally conceived purpose; for example, as specialized services such as twitter and instant messaging have appeared, the use of email has changed. Although there are those who prophecy the death of email, what we are seeing, instead, is a repurposing of email, with certain functions spun off to other applications. If we look

at Facebook with an eye to what it can do, rather than just what it's for, there are ways in which we can make use of this technology without intruding unduly on what the students feel is their territory. Official library Facebook groups have great potential, but we should also look at what is already there and find ways to insert a library presence.

Facebook provides existing communities of students which we can tap into to reach them "where they live." The students are already creating groups about libraries, and by joining them there instead of setting up official groups, we have a chance to reach them on their own terms. By joining groups such as "Lost in the Stacks," or "People Afraid of the Library," we can not only discover what library issues the students are concerned about, but also join in the conversation to present them with additional information. If we create our own groups, we must give the students a reason to come to us. Instead, we should use this opportunity to go to them.

The emerging technologies of the read/write web can change the way libraries interact with their patrons. Librarian awareness of social networks and other emerging tools is critical so that we can find new ways to tap in to existing communities of students, to reach them on their own terms, to engage them and share information. By taking part in an existing group on Facebook the WSU Libraries campaign to "Name that Bear" took on a life of its own and became more successful than it could have been through only official channels.

At the end of the contest, a committee consisting of library staff and faculty and the donor of the bear selected the name "Sundance," as a nod to WSU mascot "Butch" and the movie *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid*. The creator of the "Name the Owen Science Library Bear after Stephen Colbert" Facebook group was awarded a consolation prize to recognize his contributions. Although members of the group were disappointed that their name was not selected, the group's creator posted a message that there were no hard feelings and fun was had by all. It was clear that, regardless of the contest's outcome, the students felt a sense of ownership and inclusion in the process, and, we hope, in the Libraries.