Technology in Practice. Your Virtual Brand

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Your Virtual Brand

Online presence for professional success

by Meredith Farkas

I recently started teaching another great group of future librarians at San José State University about Web 2.0 technologies. I'm always in awe of their enthusiasm for the subject matter and for their chosen field. This year, I also feel a little sad, knowing that some of them will likely struggle to find work after graduation in this extremely tight job market. I try my best in the course to equip them with some of the skills they'll need to build a strong and positive personal brand online and keep my fingers crossed that it will help them as much as it has helped me professionally.

To market, to market

In the absence of a significant work history, an online presence can help distinguish a job candidate from the sea of new librarian résumés that come across most search committee members' desks. Imagine looking at the résumés of two librarians with identical skill-sets and experiences where the only difference is that one has an online portfolio and blog. You'd probably take a look at those online supplemental materials and would get a better sense of whether this person would be a good fit for your institution. An online presence can offer search committee members a better sense of who you are, what your level of tech savvy is, and how passionate you are about the profession.

Librarians looking for work need to think of themselves as a brand and consider how they are packaging their skills, experience, and personality, both on paper and online. I used to chafe at the idea of thinking of myself this way, but people who don't know me can—and will—develop a sense of who I am based on what they find in a Google search. They will find my blog, links to my presentations, interviews I've done, my Facebook profile, and awards I've won. And whether it's fair or not, they will judge me based on all that.

When potential employers search for your name online, what will they find? It's important to keep in mind that your online presence has the potential to be as harmful to your career as helpful. An insulting blog post about a job interview you had, negative or hurtful posts to a library discussion list, or a compromising photo on Facebook can all damage your online brand. This doesn't mean that you're not allowed to have an online personal life; employers understand that we all have lives outside of work. But while you don't need to censor yourself online, you certainly should be mindful about what you post based on who might find it.

There's another benefit to building an online presence that goes beyond branding. Using social software tools can also be valuable for professional networking. With social software, you can meet library professionals from all over the world, share ideas, and become part of a community. I know of several people who were recruited for jobs by people they met and became friendly with through blogs, FriendFeed (friendfeed.com), and Twitter (twitter.com). When someone you get to know and admire online is looking for a job and you have an opening at your institution, chances are good that you will try to help him or her out.

In my next two columns, I'll discuss how to use blogs, Twitter, and other social software tools effectively for professional networking. These technologies have tremendous potential for building a name for yourself in the profession and building a supportive network of colleagues and friends. In such a tight job market, every librarian on the job hunt—whether brand-new or veteran—should explore new ways of building presence and networking online.

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