

**Building a Brand and Telling a Story in Perpetual Crisis:
Launching a Sustainable Archives Marketing Strategy**

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ABSTRACT

The American Heritage Center at the University of Wyoming began serious efforts to launch a marketing strategy in 2016, just as the University was hard-hit by a significant funding deficit. The marketing committee was tasked with modernizing and leading marketing efforts. Their focus was incentivizing faculty and staff colleagues to participate in the creation of effective marketing content through social media and other channels. Despite low workplace morale, unfilled positions, University instability, and turnover on the committee itself, the American Heritage Center has implemented a new marketing structure while working with limited financial and human resources.

KEYWORDS

marketing, archives, higher education, social media

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INTRODUCTION

The American Heritage Center (AHC) is a large archives located at the University of Wyoming, founded in 1945 and utilized by researchers both nationally and internationally. Despite its stature, the AHC had never established formal marketing efforts before 2016.

A primary strength of the AHC lies in the variety and uniqueness of its archival collections. Over the decades, the AHC has collected more than 75,000 cubic feet of archival material and made that material available to the public. Its collections include the papers of Hollywood stars and black-listed actors, comic book creators, aviators, missionaries, workers on the transcontinental railroad, women journalists, Wyoming history, and University archives.

As was common during the aftermath of the great recession of 2008, both staff and faculty positions were cut relative to their pre-recession levels. This left the AHC in a sort of perpetual crisis, with more job duties being piled on to fewer and fewer people. In spite of the increased workload, one AHC faculty member took it upon herself to utilize social media for marketing and outreach. This started in 2010 with a WordPress blog updating every other week or so, and soon branched out to include Facebook and Twitter.

The early blog posts highlighted collection material, as well as the process of making archival material available to the public for research. One successful example came in 2012, when the AHC participated in the Society of American Archivists' Archives Month "I Found it in the Archives" public awareness campaign. The AHC submitted a photograph and description of pellets of yellow cake uranium found in a Wyoming senator's papers.¹

Later in 2012, the AHC held a Facebook event to name an item from the Forrest Ackerman collection. Ackerman was a collector, editor, and writer of works on science fiction, fantasy and horror and a notable item from his collection is a "tribble" prop from the 1967 Star Trek episode "The Trouble With Tribbles." Voting took place over Facebook and Twitter, and the winners, who proposed the name "Furry Ackerman" received congratulations over social media.

However, over the next few years, social media engagement began to taper off. From 2012 through 2015, fewer and fewer social media posts were created. Other faculty and staff were unwilling to learn social media skills, or simply too busy to spend time on it. When the archivist in charge of social media left for a different job in 2015, the AHC committee responsible for website development took over social media. The AHC also hired a new graphic designer and invited her to serve on the web committee, where she displayed a particular interest in engaging in marketing activities. In 2016, Wyoming began experiencing a financial crisis at the state level, and it became apparent that major changes were coming to the University of Wyoming. Severe state budget cuts and a loss of positions around campus affected the marketing operations of the AHC in a number of ways. The University was forced to cut \$42 million from its operating budget and laid off or bought out more than 350 staff and faculty. This caused concern within the AHC.

¹ Christopherson, Emily. "A "Day" in the Life: Emily Christopherson, Agent of Order." American Heritage Center News. October 25, 2012. Accessed April 6, 2018. ahcwyo.org.

At the same time, the AHC brought on a new director, after the position had been vacant for the better part of a year. The new director tasked the website committee with rejuvenating and modernizing marketing efforts. This meant changing the entire culture of marketing and communication at the AHC. Much of what had been done was internally focused, with marketing for large events, programs, activities, and archival accomplishments only being communicated after the fact.



Figure 1:
Yellow cake uranium from the Joseph C. O'Mahoney papers, used in the 2012 Archives Month blog on ahcwyo.org.

The committee was at a decision point. There was a large opportunity to change how it engaged in marketing, but an equally large, if not overwhelming challenge to do so in the midst of a budget crisis and staffing changes and shortfalls, along with associated low morale that accompanied those. The big question then became: "how do we overcome these barriers to implement something new that is likely to have a positive overall impact for our institution?"

The charge from the new director was to change the culture around marketing and talking about ourselves in meaningful and impactful ways without letting our archival duties be pushed aside. The committee was asked to define the core messages for marketing the AHC, create infrastructure for robust marketing, develop support for a culture of storytelling, and put into place mechanisms and rewards for all AHC employees to participate in marketing efforts. In addition, the committee was asked to define budgetary needs, and clarify what official duties would fall to whom. The director asked the committee to pivot marketing from the "features" model to the "benefits" model (Douglas, 2000).

Soon after the committee received this charge, all three members attended the 2016 Library Marketing and Communications Conference in Dallas, Texas. Attending different sessions in order to

maximize new knowledge gained at the conference, the team returned energized and ready to form a new marketing plan. However, the unexpected departure of the graphic designer forced the team to re-evaluate its timeline. To compensate for the departure, the committee brought on the AHC's photographic technician to the committee, who began to oversee Instagram posts using relatable content and hashtags.

SETTING GOALS AND GETTING INSTITUTIONAL BUY-IN

By early 2017, the committee was overseeing posts on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and WordPress. However, more effort was required to meet the new director's goal of a comprehensive marketing strategy. To start, the committee began a Facebook advertising campaign, paying \$15.00 per month to run a sponsored post featuring a rotating selection of historic images from AHC collections, along with a description of the AHC and the open hours for the reading room and rare books library.

Next, the committee invited AHC staff and faculty to a "marketing town hall," during which the marketing team laid out its objectives, and invited everyone to contribute their own ideas on large whiteboards. From that town hall meeting, the marketing committee landed on three goals: 1) increase the number of users and potential users of the archives, both in person and online. 2) increase awareness of the AHC as a unique home to historical material and as a service institution for students, scholars, and the community, and 3) revitalize the AHC's web presence and bring it into the 21st century, through updated web design and social media.

Although marketing was now a key AHC priority, the budget cuts had caused human and financial resources to be limited. Committee members were expected to accomplish these goals while keeping up with regular job duties. The uncertain atmosphere on campus and at the AHC naturally resulted in high turnover of faculty and staff to greener pastures. The recurring turnover of employees also meant that the distribution of job responsibilities changed frequently. To accommodate this reality, the committee needed to streamline marketing work and minimize the amount of time spent on routine tasks.

In early 2017, the committee created a backend infrastructure, which serves as the marketing toolkit. The toolkit, a folder within the AHC's network drive accessible to all employees, contains templates, checklists, sign-up sheets, and calendars that help the committee market efficiently. There is a calendar that lists annual events relevant to the AHC or University of Wyoming, such as the deadline for researchers to apply for the AHC's travel grant or homecoming week every October. There are flexible templates for event planning, marketing, and press releases that can be adapted to fit different communication channels such as email, social media, and print. Throughout 2017, the press release template has been used to announce exhibits, book talks and author signings, public lectures, and, most recently, the addition of two faculty archivists to the AHC team. For the fall 2017 and spring and summer 2018 semesters, the committee hired a graphic designer from the community to create event posters that were hung around campus and town. The posters have resulted in an increased number of attendees at AHC events and exhibits and more people are asking about future events.

The toolkit also includes a number of items for social media, including a social media policy, a calendar of historic events that occurred in Wyoming, and a sign-up sheet for all AHC employees to write blog posts each semester. The social media policy was written after gathering and reviewing similar policies from other institutions and reviewing Pew Research Center's Social Media Update (Pew Research Center, 2016). The policy outlines overall goals in using social media, proper use of the institution's accounts, and defined audiences for each platform. The calendar of historic events in Wyoming was created many years ago by an intern for another project and was rediscovered by the committee. One committee member had already been creating Facebook and Twitter posts featuring Wyoming history, but the discovery of this resource cut out the need to do much research to find content for the posts. The blog sign-up sheet is circulated during an all-staff meeting at the start of every semester and includes options to write about important historic dates, like the 50th anniversary of a nearby plane crash, holidays, or to write about an idea of the person's choosing. The blog sign-up sheet has been instrumental in inspiring coworkers to write blogs regularly.

The committee continues to tweak the infrastructure as needed based on what works and what does not to meet the defined goals. As needs are identified, templates, checklists, and policies are added to further streamline marketing work.

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF STORYTELLING

A difficult but important part of the committee's September 2016 charge was to develop support for a culture of storytelling. The town hall was an important step in creating this culture because the committee learned how others in the building might want to contribute to marketing through storytelling. Since the town hall, the committee has stayed in communication with co-workers about how their work could be used as stories for marketing. The frequent reminders have helped encourage contributions to the blog and other social media platforms, but this pressure must be constant to keep colleagues contributing as time goes on.

Part of this storytelling culture has been to gather the stories of researchers who engage with AHC resources to encourage support from stakeholders and resource allocators. This has been a big shift for the AHC; the AHC previously only thought of stories in terms of the stories in the archival collections. Now, the reference unit gathers brief researcher stories from interactions with users in the reading room. Stories are written by the reference faculty and staff and do not identify researchers. For example, in August 2017:

Researcher investigating Cerro Corporation records found collection material to be much more detailed and interesting than supposed. Seeing and handling the actual primary source materials caused him to rethink his research approach. Mentioned his entire experience at the AHC was helpful and productive.

These stories get shared regularly with the AHC's resource allocators, but can also be used for print marketing produced by the AHC like brochures or the annual report.

The committee has generated many ideas for ongoing social media campaigns but has struggled to launch these due to time constraints. There is one ongoing campaign, #WyoWednesday, on

Facebook and Twitter. This is a weekly posting featuring various stories from around Wyoming. This campaign has taught the committee an important lesson: people like to hear about their town. The smaller the town that is highlighted, the more viral the post goes, often being seen by more people than actually live in some of the towns that have been featured. This campaign has also been a way to get AHC student employees involved in marketing efforts. Many of the student employees are from Wyoming. The committee member who typically writes #WyoWednesday started asking student employees to find images from their hometown or somewhere important to them in the archives. The students have been excited to be involved in social media work. These posts often receive a high volume of engagement from followers and are shared widely.



Figure 2:
#WyoWednesday Facebook post featuring photographs of Lovell, Wyoming from the Hugo G. Janssen papers chosen by a student employee that grew up in Lovell.

The AHC's blog is a natural platform for fostering a culture of storytelling. The committee has been diligent in posting to the blog regularly, but blog posts can be tedious to research and create. Keeping the blog active and providing regular content requires the participation of AHC employees beyond the committee. The blog sign-up sheet has helped encourage co-workers to assist with content creation. The sign-up sheet also helps the administrator of the blog easily track who has volunteered to write posts throughout the semester. The sheet serves as a one-stop reminder of upcoming deadlines about specific events.

With the backend infrastructure created and having gained buy-in from enough colleagues to get them participating in content-creation, the committee has been able to launch a new storytelling project with Wyoming Public Media (WPM): *Archives on the Air*. The committee started talking with the Cultural Affairs Director at WPM in August 2017 about the possibility of having a one-minute show featuring stories from the archives, mostly from collections but also about the archival work done at the AHC. The committee wrote sample scripts to test the feasibility of researching and writing for a program of this type. The test was successful and Wyoming Public Media offered to make this an ongoing show. The show airs new episodes every weekday, two or three times a day, ten months of the year with reruns of past shows the other two months. Every week, the five shows are combined into a podcast and posted on the WPM website. Links are posted on the AHC's Facebook and Twitter accounts, along with scanned documents and photos relevant to each story. Due to committee members' limited time, a part-time position was created allowing a student or recent graduate to spend time researching and writing scripts. As of this writing, the show has not yet premiered on-air, but will in June 2018. WPM is also a unit of University of Wyoming and facing the same budget and human limits as the AHC. This collaboration is helping both units move forward productively to meet our needs despite the budget and staffing cuts.

LESSONS LEARNED AND MOVING FORWARD

Two years since the formation of the marketing committee, things are not perfect but working fairly well. *Archives on the Air*, the event posters, and #WyoWednesday, have all been successful, but the greatest success of the committee has been the increasing buy-in and participation from co-workers. The AHC's message gets out and this helps recruit new users and advocates for the AHC. Even if they only engage online, they are still engaging with the AHC and getting excited about the archives.

One of the most difficult hurdles has been the turnover of committee members. The committee has had six different members in two years, and three of those members have left the AHC for other opportunities. Every time a committee member leaves, a new one must be found from the remaining employees. That member may be facing other additional job responsibilities at the same time. Once a willing member is found, they must be trained in the marketing work, which takes time away from moving forward on committee goals. Happily, the committee membership has remained stable for almost one year and this has been beneficial. The committee currently consists of a Reference Archivist, who has been involved since 2015 and is currently chair, a Processing and Programming Archivist, and the AHC's Office Associate. The committee may not have any graphic design skills, but we have plenty of enthusiasm.

An ongoing struggle is that members' other job responsibilities means that members are still mostly putting out fires and dealing with whatever is most pressing in the moment. Unfortunately, this is true across all job responsibilities at the AHC as well; the putting-out-fires mentality is simply part of getting through this transitional period as the University of Wyoming and the American Heritage Center move into the future. In all areas of the AHC's work, employees are learning efficiencies every day and learning to let go of tasks that are not feasible with current resources.

There is a light at the end of the tunnel. Colleagues are continuing to see how important it is to market the AHC and are more interested in participating in the creation of content every day. The committee has been working with another unit on campus to hire a marketing coordinator, who will spend 30% of their time focused on AHC marketing efforts. This hire won't mean the committee can cease doing marketing work, but it will be able to shift some tasks to a professional marketer, with actual training, to lead marketing efforts.

The most important takeaway from the past two years of marketing efforts is not to give up hope and be persistent. Marketing and outreach may start as one person with limited time and support from colleagues, but as the results of those marketing efforts become visible, others learn the importance and joys of marketing and want to join in.

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