
PERSONALIZING LIBRARY OUTREACH WITH GOOGLE SCHOLAR ALERTS

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Abstract

This article describes an outreach initiative that uses Google Scholar Alerts to create a personal point of connection between the library liaison and departmental scholars that the liaison works with. The process of creating the program is discussed as well as a small assessment that was conducted about the efficacy of the program.

Keywords

Outreach, Google Scholar, positive reinforcement, academic libraries, liaison

Introduction

An ongoing concern for liaison librarians at academic libraries everywhere is how to connect to their constituents to which they have been assigned, as outreach is a critical part of the job. Often, liaison librarians will send out blind emails about library services and resources on a set schedule in the hopes that their constituencies will read those emails and take some kind of action based on its content; for example scheduling an instruction session, putting materials on course reserve, asking for research assistance, etc. While emailing information to constituents blindly will potentially get some occasional responses, individualized and timely outreach content is often far more successful. This is generally known as “just in time” outreach, which has been successful as an intervention in healthcare for decades. For example, home healthcare nurses were sent a timely email to remind them about pain interventions for cancer patients with the results of the study having a positive effect on cancer patients experiencing pain (McDonald, Pezzin, Feldman, Murtaugh, and Peng, 2005, p. 474). “Just in time” outreach in libraries is usually used around well known events like Black History Month or midterms and finals in academic institutions.

In terms of liaison outreach to professors, “just in time” outreach might revolve around start-of-semester requests for instruction but this just “just in time” outreach is generally not

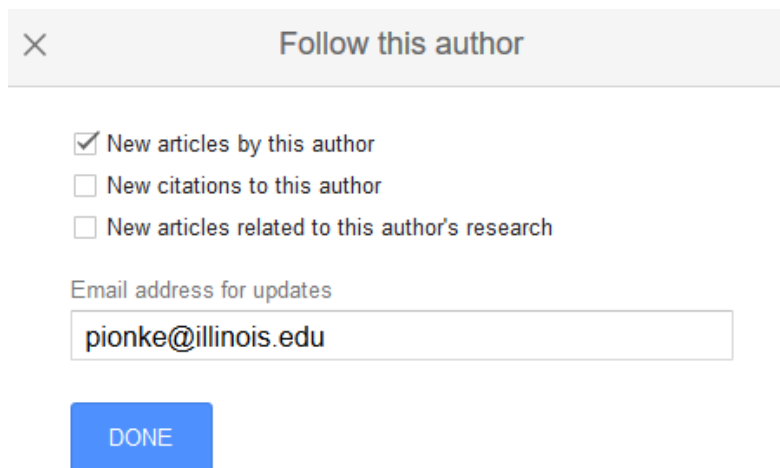


personalized. That said, throughout academe there is often a dearth of recognition of the accomplishments of the professoriate, especially of junior or assistant professors. Sending out personalized emails that congratulate the recipient on their recent publication(s) using a “just in time” outreach approach creates an individual moment of connection that may boost, not only morale, but also the relationship between the scholar and the librarian. As many scholars have established Google Scholar profiles in order to track their citations, using Google Scholar Alerts to know when professors have a publication come out creates an opportunity to both congratulate the professor on their recent publication and to communicate with them about library resources. This article describes a successful email outreach program based on Google Scholar Alerts that I established to support the Applied Health Sciences department at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2018. The goal of the program is to create a moment of connection that both communicates library services to the scholar and creates a positive emotional connection between library liaison and professor.

Process

To establish the program, I followed these steps. Depending on the size of your institution, the departments you support, and the range of services and support you offer, you may need to adapt them.

1. Setup a Google Scholar account (<http://scholar.google.com>) if you don't already have one. Once you have a Google Scholar account, you can set up alerts for anyone else who has a Google Scholar account.
2. Farm department websites for the names and college/university emails of scholars. Not all scholars will have a Google Scholar account, which could lead to a separate outreach campaign introducing faculty to Google Scholar and describing how to set up an account.
3. When you set up an alert, there are several options. At the minimum, an alert for when something is published by that person is ideal. If you really want to do a deep dive, you can also have Google Scholar email you when someone else cites the researcher's work as well as having Google Scholar recommend articles to you around that person's work. See Figure 1.



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Follow this author

New articles by this author

New citations to this author

New articles related to this author's research

Email address for updates

pionke@illinois.edu

DONE

Figure 1. Google Scholar selection options.

4. Creating a spreadsheet to track who has been emailed as well as when and what email was sent to them, is a definite must. A one or two word description of the email contents is typically sufficient in the tracking sheet. See Figure 2.

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Name	ORCID	IDEALS	Data Bank	Illinois Experts
2	A	9/20/2020	1/24/2021	4/29/2021	7/20/2021
3	A	12/17/2021	4/25/2022		
4	B	2/20/2020	6/3/2020	9/20/2020	11/20/2020
5	B	4/7/2020	11/20/2020	1/10/2021	5/11/2021
6	B	10/6/2018	11/29/2018	2/4/2019	2/28/2020
7	B	3/26/2020	6/3/2020	8/31/2020	10/5/2020
8	C	1/7/2019	4/22/2020	4/29/2021	8/17/2021

Figure 2. Example of a tracking spreadsheet.

5. Create a series of boilerplate emails about all the different resources and services that your library has to offer. If there are specialized librarians at your institution, working with them to write an email that highlights their specialty, like a librarian who focuses on patent searching or a librarian who does copyright, will help inform scholars about broader library services.. Emails should follow a standard format including a salutation with the scholar's name, congratulations on their publication, a short email about a specific topic, and a standardized closing. The boilerplate emails can be in any order you wish though there may be occasions some emails should be sent out before others. In Figure 2 above, the ORCID email is first because ORCID iD, a “persistent digital identifier” that helps connect authors to their scholarly works, is a backbone of other services that the library offers. For example, here is the first email about ORCID iD that is sent out:

Hello [Name],

Congratulations on your recent publication!

I wanted to reach out to you and ask if you currently have an ORCID iD. ORCID iDs are a unique number for each person that you can then link your various names to like legal name, nicknames, maiden names, and married names. ORCID iDs, when linked to your publications and then to your accounts in places like Google Scholar, ResearchGate, Academia.edu, Mendeley, and Scopus will automatically send publication updates to those accounts with no effort from you thereby keeping your academic identity up to date with your publications across the places that people might be looking for you and your research.

Get your ORCID iD (or connect an existing iD to your campus identity) at <https://orcid.library.illinois.edu>

If you have questions about ORCID iD or need assistance setting up your account and cross linking it to other accounts, please reach out to me. I am happy to help.

Again, congratulations and if there is anything I can do to assist with your research or teaching, please let me know.

Best,

JJ

6. Google Scholar Alerts will come to your inbox at any time. If there are a lot of Google Scholar Alerts set up, it may be more useful to batch when emails are sent. For instance, sending emails every Monday or the 1st and 15th of every month. The other option is to send emails as they come in, which may work better if there aren't that many scholars to keep track of.

Whatever options you choose, or however you adapt these steps, maintaining a routine is important. If you try it out and then choose to end the program for any reason, it may be helpful to communicate with your faculty that the program is ending.

Assessment

The Google Scholar Alert Response Emails program had been running for at least a year when I decided that a small assessment would be helpful in determining if I should continue the program. During the fall and spring semesters of the 2021/2022 academic year, I added a short, three question, survey assessment to Google Scholar Response Emails. The email recipient received the survey solicitation up to three times in the Google Scholar Response Emails. A separate solicitation was also sent out to Google Scholar Response Email recipients on January 25, 2022 in order to improve the response rate of the survey. Emails were sent to 28 potential respondents with 11 responding to the survey request for a response rate of 39%. The survey sought to understand whether or not the Google Scholar Response Emails were useful, whether or not the information was new to the recipient, and if there were areas where the researcher was struggling in terms of their research and teaching and might need more information or services from the library.

Question 1 asked "Was the information in this email useful to you?" 54% responded yes, 27% no, 9% maybe, and 9% no opinion. Question 2 asked, "Was the information about the University Library new to you?" 100% of respondents indicated no. Lastly, question 3 was an open response question and queried, "What pain points are you currently experiencing in your teaching and/or research?" There were 7 responses to this question, 3 of which indicated no pain points, 1 didn't understand the question, and 3 mentioned issues outside of the library's scope (COVID and time).

While the survey was intentionally short in order to get data and not impinge on the time and energy of the potential respondents, I see the fact that there was a response rate of 39% as really positive. Such a high response rate indicates that the recipients not only read the email but were engaged by it. More interesting was the fact that all respondents indicated that there was nothing new in the Google Scholar Response Emails that they have been getting but about half of the respondents still found the email useful. The usefulness of the email may have been because the recipients were being reminded of library services that they may have forgotten. All in all, this assessment generally indicates that this outreach initiative is successful in that respondents find the information contained in the Google Scholar Response Emails to be useful, even if that information isn't necessarily new to them. This finding tracks with my anecdotal experience in which blind emails that I sent before garnered almost no recipient responses at all and the Google Scholar Response Emails actually generated email responses to the author more often than the blind emails. Exact numbers of responses to both blind emails and Google Scholar Response Emails were not formally tracked.

Lessons Learned

Anecdotally, scholars really appreciate being congratulated on their work. When I receive a reply from a Google Scholar Response Email, the response typically starts with an expression of gratitude and follows up with a request of some kind: purchasing materials, instruction in a course, or consultation on research or search methodology. While faculty may already be aware of the services that are being highlighted, as a method of outreach the Google Scholar Response Emails are still effective because I am in contact with individual scholars more frequently than when I only sent periodic blind emails. Generally speaking, out of every large batch of emails that are sent out, at least one or two recipients will send an acknowledgement back, often with a library-related question or request. The Google Alert Response Emails accomplish the purpose of not only potentially educating the recipient about library services and resources, but also creates a moment of connection and potential dialogue between scholar and library liaison. The anecdotal response rate of the Google Scholar Response Emails far outnumbers the anecdotal response rate of blind emails being sent out monthly.

Over the course of this project, library colleagues whose services are mentioned in the Google Scholar Response Emails have expressed excitement about having their expertise and specialties highlighted. This is a potential source of collaboration within the library and outside of it. For example, one particular library staff member requested to be carbon copied on “his” email so that he could make sure that the scholar had a profile set up in the database he manages. This collaboration led to interesting opportunities for him within the departments targeted by the Google Scholar Response Emails.

Currently, I send Google Scholar Response Emails out by hand individually, which can take anywhere from a few minutes to an hour or more depending on how many emails need to be sent and how long it has been since the last batch of emails were sent. A potential project for the future is to acquire grant funding to hire a python programmer to create an if-then-else script that would automate the process between Microsoft’s Outlook, Excel, and Word, thereby cutting down the time currently required to run the project.

As an outreach tool, the Google Scholar Response Emails are unique, in that there is currently no library and information science literature that describes an initiative that uses Google Scholar in this way. Anecdotally, it has been constructive in terms of relationship building to use this kind of personalized outreach. While it is unknown how much morale is improved by receiving the Google Scholar Response Emails, it’s hard to imagine that an email congratulating a scholar on a publication that may have taken a year or more to produce would not have a positive effect. This then creates a positive feeling between the scholar and the liaison librarian because the librarian is celebrating the scholar’s accomplishment in addition to promoting library services.

Works Cited

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