• How-To •
Promoting the Library by E-Mail Alert Service
by Sharon Giles and Jon Crossno

The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas Library serves a primary client population of over 17,000 faculty, staff, students, and residents of UT Southwestern, Parkland Memorial Hospital, Children's Medical Center, and Zale Lipshy University Hospital. The library currently provides access to over 1,400 full-text electronic journals, over 3,000 electronic books, and over 170 bibliographic and full-text databases in addition to its more traditional collections of 250,000 volumes in all formats and 1,800 current journal subscriptions.

When the library began increasing its electronic collections in 1997, our marketing team investigated ways to promote the new products in a timely and efficient manner. Our print newsletter, *UT Southwestern Information Times*, was functioning as a venue for publicizing library products and services, but because it was published bimonthly and shared equally by the library and three other campus departments, it was not an efficient forum for our late-breaking news. So we sought additional methods to highlight and promote library-specific information. One proposed avenue was to develop a periodic e-mail alert service, or an e-mail newsletter.

We thought e-mail was a potentially viable medium for several reasons:

- Ease of distribution
- Relatively inexpensive cost
- Extremely customizable format
- Delivers relevant information directly to users
- Superb vehicle for "just-in-time" marketing

An e-mail alert service also allows libraries to engage their users' attention and counter the competition from the growing array of information providers on the Internet. It is an effective way to strengthen "brand" loyalty and to encourage user feedback.

Planning and Implementation
To bring this idea to fruition, the marketing team initiated a process of background research and planning. We considered not only content, format, distribution, and production issues for an alert service, but also methods to promote it and evaluate it.

We surveyed the Web pages of major medical libraries and Texas academic libraries for ideas. Most had Web newsletters either in HTML or PDF, which were online versions of their printed newsletters and were issued with the same frequency as the printed version. Some content ideas that we gathered from these newsletters pertained to new products and services, library classes, and news about library facilities.

But we realized that these Web newsletters represent a passive means of promotion, like brochures waiting to be picked up. Very few libraries had advanced to the next step of proactively distributing this information to their users by offering e-mail subscriptions. However, these libraries were still basically just reusing the text of a printed newsletter and not visualizing the e-mail alert service as a publication with its own unique abilities and possibilities.

We researched e-mail distribution methods, such as mass broadcast, e-mail address books, client databases (including circulation systems), contact management databases, and automatic distribution software. We also discussed format considerations, such as presentation (ASCII, HTML, etc.), frequency, and length.

Internally, we looked at the library's strategic plan and mission and identified some areas that would be enhanced by the alert service. These areas were developing a virtual library, promoting staff as experts in biomedical information, and creating easily accessible mechanisms to invite user input.

We also wanted to include the concept of "permission marketing" in the development process, which means that users must agree to subscribe to our service and that we don't send out unsolicited alerts. It also means that subscriptions to our alert service may be a marker for a group of users who are more interested in library services than others—i.e., our best customers. This is a different strategy from the one we used for our printed newsletter, which is mailed to all faculty and staff. As a result, the two complement each other.

In the next stage of the planning process, the marketing team sponsored a library-wide brainstorming session to develop the idea in more detail. From this meeting, the team was able to make some decisions on distribution, content, and format. Then they drew up an action plan and initiated a testing process.

After considering the types of e-mail distribution, we selected listserv software as the most reliable. Mass broadcasts violate the concept of permission marketing, and e-mail address books require a great deal of time and effort to maintain. Also, neither the circulation software nor the contact management database we use allows for the production of group e-mails at this time.

So to set up the listserv account, we contacted the campus' information resources group for assistance. We decided that the list would be moderated and would not allow automatic bounceback of messages (which means e-mail that is sent to the list address is received only by the list moderator and no one else).

In terms of the content of the alert service, we used some that was already prepared. To highlight the virtual library concept and staff expertise, we also included existing Web features, such as the Internet Site of the Week and headlines from the Biomedical News page. We realized that some items, though, would have to be created from scratch. These would be event announcements, new product or service announcements, and tips on using existing products or services. Some of these are later reused in our print newsletter in an expanded version as part of our time-conserving strategy.

Regarding the various format options, we set the alert service's frequency to weekly and limited the number of items to five or six, including two regular features. (We chose Jesse Berst's ZDNet AnchorDesk as a model for its brevity and use of links.) Rather than overwhelming the recipient with a huge amount of information, our intent was to focus on short, specific news items, which could be read quickly and would hopefully "hook" the reader into investigating more deeply through the hyperlinks we included.

We also recognized that e-mail programs vary widely in the way formatted text is viewed. Because of this inconsistency, we decided to publish the alert service in two formats: basic e-mail (ASCII text with embedded URLs) and HTML (which allows nicer design). The two versions would be virtually identical and would cross-promote each other.

Once we had made all these decisions, we then prepared an implementation outline, which included the steps of setting up the library's list address, preparing beta versions of the e-mail version, and releasing the final version to the campus. We wrote three test issues and sent them only to library staff. We learned to use the listserv software, which stripped out all text formatting such as boldface and bullets. We also held a contest to select the name for the alert service, and we chose Info-Library: UT Southwestern Library News.

Promotion and Evaluation

We launched the inaugural e-mail issue of Info-Library in conjunction with the Library Showcase promotional campaign we held during National Medical Librarian's Week in October 1998. The initial subscriber base was derived from sign-up sheets from the Showcase event, library staff, and names garnered from the Internet Users Survey we had sent out the previous summer. The Web version **(http://www.swmed.edu/library/about/infolibrary.htm)** was first published in January 1999.

To promote the alert service, we tried e-mail, word of mouth, printed flyers, bookmarks, postcards, and newsletter articles. The most effective method proved to be a systematic e-mail campaign, which increased the number of subscribers by 50 percent in 1 month! We also derived a steady flow of subscribers from the HTML subscription form and from a checkbox on the library registration form. Unfortunately, the print methods have not been as productive for us.

When it was time to evaluate the alert service, we needed to determine exactly how we would measure success. We decided that the most important factor was the number of subscribers. (Other measures are tracking impact and soliciting feedback.) We had initially set a goal of 200 subscribers, which we easily surpassed, and by the end of the first year of publication over 1,000 individuals had subscribed to the alert service—far more than we ever imagined. So far, we also have had a low dropout rate (approximately 4 percent).

Tracking the newsletter's impact will be a future project of the marketing team.

To obtain more structured feedback, we prepared a simple questionnaire in both e-mail and HTML formats in September 1999. We received 54 responses out of a base of 860 subscribers (a response rate of 6.3 percent). The responses indicated that the following features were valuable to the subscribers:

- New library resources and services announcements (91 percent)
- Tips on using library systems and resources (61 percent)
- Special events announcements (59 percent)
- Library and Internet class announcements (59 percent)
- Tips on Internet sites of medical interest (52 percent)

We also asked the subscribers what frequency they desired—45 percent preferred weekly; the rest preferred either every 2 weeks (35 percent) or monthly (20 percent). The vast majority also indicated that they preferred to read the e-mail version; only 8 percent preferred the Web. We also asked for suggestions for additional features, and a new materials list was the most frequent response.

Using What We've Learned

As a result of the survey, we have switched Info-Library to a frequency of every other week, alternating with lists of new materials. We are continuing to focus on the features that subscribers deemed most valuable on the questionnaire.

Publishing the alert service did prove to be more time-consuming than first expected, but it has been good for honing our writing, editing, and marketing skills. An unanticipated bonus was that it also became a vehicle for staff development and communication in our large library. Several staffers have become involved, either as story contributors, editors, HTML consultants, or registrars of new subscribers.

Overall, we believe that an e-mail alert service is an idea worth trying, even if you are only reissuing your printed newsletter. Reuse that text if you must, but consider taking advantage of the special capabilities of e-mail.

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