» tech tips for every librarian

by donna f. ekart

ifttt: If This, Then What?

As the communications person at my library, I spend a lot of time going back and forth between various online services. Most of my day is spent talking and listening, reading and responding, and writing and sending. I wouldn't change it one bit. As I've said before, I can't believe that someone pays me to do things I enjoy so much. However, that doesn't mean that there aren't times when I wish the processes weren't all so brutally manual. I long for a *Minority Report*-ish screen, where everything I need is in front of me and able to be manipulated. I'm not going to get that, library budgets being what they are, but I think I've latched on to something that gets me closer.

It goes by the quirky name of ifttt, pronounced like "lift" without the "l," and it stands for "If This Then That." It's a web-based service that allows you to hook up your various online identities, services, and places for storing and recording information in a variety of useful and interesting ways.

The genius of ifttt is that it takes full advantage of the functionality built in to many popular online services and presents it in a simple manner. Typically, you'd need at least a little programming knowledge to dig into the APIs for Twitter, Flickr, Google Calendar, or Dropbox and then to write scripts to pass information back and forth. But with ifttt, all the API and programming business is behind the scenes. Instead of lines of code, you're presented with pretty icons and hilariously giant text. It's a service and an interface my grandma could love, if only my grandma were on Twitter.

As with everything you learn, getting the terms straight is half the battle. On ifttt, you've got five things to keep straight: Tasks, Triggers, Actions, Channels, and Recipes.

Tasks are simple to understand— they're what you want to get done. A real-world example would be that you want to have milk in your refrigerator at all times. Now translate that kind of idea to all your social media services: the places you store data online and the places you produce and consume information. You might want your Flickr photos in Dropbox, or you might want tweets sent to your email. If you're kind of famous, when someone mentions you on a library blog you'd like to be notified.

Triggers are the events that prompt the task. In our real-world example, that would be noticing that you're low on milk. ifttt does the noticing for you; you just have to define what it notices. If a photo is tagged with your library's name in Facebook, if someone is selling something on craigslist, and if your favorite video is on YouTube—ifttt can notice all these things.

Actions are the things you want the Trigger to, well, trigger. In the real world, that's someone going to the store to buy milk. In ifttt, that's adding a bookmark to Pinboard, saving a website to Read Later, sending you a text message.

ifttt Channels include all the online services you know and love.

Channels are all the services that are available for ifttt Triggers and Actions. In the real world, that's all the different grocery stores and kinds of milk available to you. There are more than 40 Channels on ifttt as I write this. I've mentioned several here, but I haven't found much that I use regularly on the web that isn't listed. Really, just Pinterest is missing, and that's probably for the best. I don't really need a way to get *more* Pinterest in my life.

Recipes are ifttt Task-Trigger-Action groupings that are already set up for you. If the appeal and utility of ifttt is not immediately obvious, browse the Recipes. For me, it was a complete light bulb moment. I had no idea I wanted to do these things, but seeing them spelled out made their usefulness obvious. Of course I'd like to be notified of new free ebooks for the Kindle; yes I would like to send links from the tweets I mark as favorites to Instapaper.

When Facebook profile picture changes, update Twitter profile picture.
by derickjackson   created November 21, 2011   used 6474 times

Just like reading a great cookbook, browsing ifttt recipes created by other users can lead you to just what you need or inspire you to adapt and create your own.

Once you have the basics down, you're ready to go. First, create an account. You might want to pause and think about whether you're creating it for you (to do your work) or for your library (to do the library's work that involves you). Or, maybe you want two accounts, one for you and one for the library. Since you don't have to be logged in to ifttt for your tasks to run, it's easier than it is on most services to have a dual identity.

With your account in hand, head to the Channels page and activate those you'd like to use. Again, think about whether you're using your personal account or the library's official account. I ended up with a mix. On the Channels page, the logos are black and white until activated, so it's easy to see at a glance what you've switched on.

A quick word about activation before we move on. ifttt uses pseudo-authentication to activate channels. You're not giving ifttt your actual login and password to all these services—that would be a terrible idea. Instead, when you activate a channel, ifttt redirects you to the service, where you give ifttt limited permissions to interact on your behalf. If it helps, think of it like the valet key some cars have. It starts the car so someone can park it for you, but it does not let them into the glove compartment where you keep the registration and insurance papers. ifttt never knows your password, and if you decide to stop using it, you can revoke permission at any time. You've probably granted a variety of services and applications access to your Facebook and Twitter accounts already, and whether that's a good thing or a bad thing is probably a topic for a whole different column. For now, just know that you don't have to be concerned about ifttt suddenly going rogue and locking you out of all your accounts and stealing your identity.

Fears allayed, you can move on and activate channels to your heart's content. I found about 15 services to activate right away. In a small side benefit, I also learned about a couple of

Seriously, this text could not be any bigger or more clear.

services I'd never encountered and may start to use in the future.

With channels active, it's time to set up some tasks or adopt some recipes. I started with a simple task of my own— post a newly uploaded Flickr photo with a specific tag ("fb") to Facebook. Why do I want to do this? My library has a Flickr account in which we post photos from collections, events, etc. For most instances, we'll post a dozen or more photos. So, for example, a lecture and reception sponsored by our Friends group might result in 25 photos of the lecturer, the audience, and general crowd shots at the reception of various campus luminaries. I don't want all those on Facebook, especially individually, because that would be annoying to anyone who is a fan of our page. But I would like to let our Facebook fans know about the event, and, incidentally, the existence of our Flickr account. So as photos are uploaded, the person uploading them decides on the one photo that best captures the event and tags it "fb." That photo is noticed by my ifttt trigger and uploaded with its attendant caption and data to the library Facebook page to complete the action.

There are a million benefits for me here as the person responsible for my library's communication channels. The best benefit is that I don't have to do anything to get relevant content from one service to another. No one has to remember to tell me about the new photos. I don't have to check for new photos. I don't have to write a caption for a photo of an event I may not have attended. Additionally, I don't have to give everyone access to Facebook, teach them to use Facebook's interface,

or force them to create a Facebook account if it's not relevant to their job otherwise. That's great for a variety of "too many cooks" reasons.

To make my task, I simply clicked on the Create a Task link. That brings up the awesomely huge-texted Create a Task page. You click on "this" to set your Trigger channel and then pick from the list of available ways to interact with that channel. Then click "that" to set your Action channel, and choose the action you'd like to have happen. For my task, I clicked "this" to choose Flickr and then the "new public photo tagged" interaction and specified my tag "fb." Then I clicked "that" to choose Facebook Pages and "upload new photo." Once saved, the task runs automatically, every 15 minutes. I can use the ifttt interface to check on how many times the task has been run and how many times it's been triggered. I can delete, suspend, or run any task immediately as well.

I've used ifttt for a variety of things, including dropping all the library tweets on Google Calendar, a seemingly small thing that has changed my life in 3 weeks' time. Now I have data, actual awesome historical data, about exactly what we tweeted and when, without having to rely on the kludgy twitter interface. I can also see at a glance whether we're meeting our goals for pacing and spacing of tweets. It's not *Minority Report*, but I'm getting there. ∎

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