

PRODUCT REVIEW / ANALYSE DE PRODUITS

Google Hangouts

Product: Google Hangouts, developed by Google and an integrated tool in the Google+ social networking platform

URL: <http://www.google.com/+learnmore/hangouts>

Audience: Anyone interested in free video chat/web conferencing

Purpose: Virtually collaborate with colleagues and patrons

Compatibility: Windows PC or Mac; Mobile apps available for Apple and Android products

Price: Free

Description

After the death of Google Buzz in 2011 [1], Google launched yet another attempt at delving into the social networks market with Google+. One of the new features included in this social network is a video chat and web conference tool, called Google Hangouts. Hangouts allows up to 10 users to video conference simultaneously with collaboration and conferencing tools that go beyond simple video chat. While Skype, Facebook, Apple, and many others offer a free video chat tool, it is the video conferencing features Google integrated into Hangout that set this product apart from the rest.

Anyone with a Google account is able to participate in a Hangouts session without having to create an additional account. If you are one of the 425 million people with a Gmail account [2], you do have a Google account and will have little difficulty participating in a Hangouts session. But even if you do not have a Google account, they are free and take only moments to create.

Compatibility

Hangouts functions within any browser on both PC and Mac. It is also available for mobile use on smartphones and tablets in the Google+ Android and Apple apps. There is an easily installed plug-in the user is required to download the first time Hangouts is used on a given machine.

Features

It is the ability to do more than simple video chat that separates Hangouts from other freely available video chat tools. Up to 10 simultaneous users can video chat in one session. (Skype offers the same capability for up to 10 users, but for a fee as part of its premium service). The main video screen displays the participant who is

speaking and will switch when the next participant begins speaking (or starts speaking louder than anyone else).

Hangouts has a number of collaborative tools for use within the video chat interface. All users are able to display a YouTube video on the main presentation screen, share a presenter's screen or desktop, and even edit a shared Google Drive document (formerly Google Docs). This ability to share desktops makes Hangouts a viable presentation tool rivaling free or low-cost web conferencing software and a better video presentation tool than exists in Learning Management Systems (i.e., BlackBoard, Moodle, etc.).

Shortly after the launch of Hangouts, Google enabled the Hangouts on Air feature. At the click of a checkbox, Hangouts on Air will broadcast your session to your connected YouTube channel where others can view the live presentation. Hangouts on Air also automatically creates a recording of the presentation and uploads it to your YouTube channel. For a great example of how this tool can be leveraged to stream and record a professional development presentation, see the recently aired American Libraries Live episode on libraries and technology. It is the first in a series of episodes on library topics using Hangouts on Air [3].

Hangouts on Air can also be utilized by librarians for creating quick instructional videos of a librarian sharing their screen as they demonstrate how to do sample database searches. Simply set up a Hangouts session by yourself and check the box titled "Enable Hangouts on Air". Once you have completed your session, you will have a YouTube video to post on your library website and (or) send to patrons.

Limitations

The one major drawback of Hangouts is that the tool is locked in to Google+. Google+ might be a great social network, but regardless of the quality of the design, usability, and features, it has nary a chance of unseating Facebook, and its reported 1 billion active users [4], as the preeminent social network. Hangouts is easy to set up and use if the user is familiar with Google+, but it can be a challenge introducing a first-time Hangouts participant to the Google+ platform.

Hangouts has made strides in this area by integrating the Hangouts option within Gmail for those who do not use Google+ or prefer not to have to go to Google+ just to join a Hangouts session.

Conclusion

Connecting virtually with patrons and colleagues in real time is becoming more important and integral to the work

of information professionals. Google Hangouts is an incredibly useful tool for collaboration with librarian colleagues, professional development webinars, distance library instruction, recording lectures and panel discussions, and for the occasional one-on-one patron interaction. Even though the integration with Google+ or the requirement to have a Google account is a drawback, the usability of this tool and its many features (not to mention its affordability) make it well worth this minor inconvenience.

References

1. Google Buzz Bites the Dust. PCWorld [Internet]. 2011 [cited 20 Nov 2012]. Available from: http://www.pcworld.com/article/241965/google_buzz_bites_the_dust.html
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3. Archive of Episode 1: Library 2017, Tech at Warp Speed [Internet]. [cited 20 Nov 2012]. Available from: <http://americanlibrarieslive.org/blog/archive-episode-1>
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