

Essential Tools of the Internet: Using Email and the Web for Effective Communication

A public sector consultant shares ideas, guidance, and best-practice examples on how community-based nonprofits are using these tools to integrate technology into their communications plans.

Public management practitioners, along with professionals of many community-based organizations, are seeking practical strategies for integrating technology into their communications plans. Their goal is to reach a greater audience, with an eye on the most cost-effective tools to accomplish this. In our workshop “Essential Tools of the Internet: Using Email and the Web for Effective Communication” we provide ideas, guidance, and best practice examples of how community-based organizations are using these tools effectively. This article is a synopsis of that program.

Gather the Information You Need to Plan

The key to successfully implementing an Internet-based communication strategy is to learn all you can—and keep learning—about your online customer. Many nonprofits are very good at identifying traditional demographic characteristics such as age, location, income level, etc. Commercial organizations have certainly recognized the value of identifying psychographic or behavioral traits of their market segments. Brand loyalty, hobbies, and cultural backgrounds offer predictive patterns of behavior that can help you anticipate their online needs and wants. Finally, technographic information—your constituents’ access to, familiarity with and attitude toward technology—is an area to devote much of your data gathering efforts. The chart below offers a guideline as you consider what current information you have versus what information you need to gather about your current and potential customers.

Know Your Online Audience

There are a variety of ways to collect this information, both “live” and electronically. One way to get information is simply to ask your audience. A survey is the most familiar and pervasive method of asking your audience about themselves and their perspectives.

GEOGRAPHIC	DEMOGRAPHIC	PSYCHOGRAPHIC	TECHNOGRAPHIC
Zip Code	Gender	Activities	Access
City	Age	Hobbies	Platform
County	Education	Opinions	Usage Patterns
State	Income	Values	Training
Region	Ethnicity	Biases	Awareness
Country	Language	Preferences	Tech. Culture
Continent	Lifestyle	Brand loyalty	Constraints

One caution with surveys is that occasionally respondents may tell you what they think you want to hear, or slant their feedback towards the favorable. In general, a survey is an excellent tool for gathering objective data. It should be complimented by other research tactics to verify and balance your findings.

There has been a significant increase in the number of online versus mailed surveys in the past year or so. Organizations can save significantly by offering a survey online instead of absorbing the printing and postage costs of a mailed survey. Online surveys should only be considered, however, if an acceptable majority of your potential respondents have access to email and the Web. Otherwise, your responses will be skewed only to those with access. A combination of online and paper-based surveys can be used to accommodate a diverse audience.

Polling your site visitors, using one to three question pop-ups on your web site, is a good way to “take a pulse” on a particular issue or topic. Many free or low-cost downloads of polling codes are available on the Web, and can be easily implemented. Respondents tend to participate more readily if you are able to offer immediate feedback—viewing a pop-up window that reports how others have answered. Your organization should consider offering polls throughout your site, in context with articles, news releases, or conference promotions on the topic about which you are querying.


More subjective and in-depth information can be gathered by asking questions in an interview or focus group format. The interviews can be conducted one-on-one or with a small group. A script is recommended so that all interviewees are asked the same questions. A focus group is useful if you would like to test thematic ideas or to show examples to get subjective responses. These tactics can be conducted early in the market research program to set context or goals for an initiative, or after a survey is conducted to test assumptions gleaned from that data.

A combination of objective and subjective data gathering, using the tools described above, will result in information that gives you a comprehensive picture of your customers' characteristics, and will allow you to develop an Internet communication strategy for your organization.

Use Email & the Web to Meet Your Goals

Types of Goals

<p>BRAND / AFFINITY</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Increase awareness of your brand/name• Position your organization over competition• Build relationship with customers/members• Opinion leadership• Promote organizational innovation• Improve perceptions through customer service• Build community online	<p>TRANSACTION</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Recruit donors/volunteers• Reach a new market sector• Increase sales of a product or service• Increase frequency of sales from current customers• Increase donations – fundraising• Promote event registrations• Generate revenue through ad sales
<p>CUSTOMER RELATIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Conduct market research• Gather customer intelligence• Segment services/products by markets• Personalize interactions with customers• Improve service to weaker segments• Solicit customer input on products or services• Respond more effectively to inquiries/complaints	<p>OPERATIONS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decrease promotional costs• Decrease travel expenses• Reduce the number of steps in a process• Reduce the number of customer service reps• Increase use of online resources• Reduce input errors by automating forms• Allow customers to perform routine tasks



In “Essentials Tools of the Internet”: we talk about how web goals often fall into one of four major types: Brand/Image, Transaction, Customer Relations and Operations.

The first step in your email

communication planning is to determine what your goals are. Be clear on what you are trying to achieve before you consider which tools and how to use those tools to realize your goals.

Branding

Once you have a majority of emails available, you can begin to use email communications to extend your brand. Simply incorporating your logo—in HTML format—as a header on bulletin emails is one way to do this. Another tip is to add a tagline to the email signature lines of all staff members. Most email software programs allow you to create these signatures. These taglines are used most effectively to promote campaigns; for example, “Mary Smith, Housing Assistance Agency, Fairfax, VA. Donate to the fundraising auction by clicking here—Submissions due by August 12.” Most email programs will convert a web address to a live link so you can use this email tagline to drive traffic to your website.

Your web site, too, can incorporate images to explain or enhance your brand. Many community-based organizations choose to use photos of their volunteers or service recipients throughout their sites. This allows site visitors to get a true “feel” for what the organization does, and to see the effect of their contribution of time or money. The language and tone you use with your content also helps to define your brand. Make sure you have a consistent design across your site as well. The “feel” of your site is very much a part of your brand.

Transactions

“Branded” emails can also be used to promote new products, services or events. The announcement could feature the benefits of the new offering, or explain the topic that a noted speaker will address at an upcoming workshop. The links in the email can lead the reader directly to the order page or registration page of your site, allowing you to transact business at a fraction of the cost of a printed product catalog or brochure.

Amazon.com is considered the premiere example of a transactional web site. Of course, most nonprofits and government agencies don't have the resources to mirror Amazon.com, but they can imitate some of their successful practices. If you are soliciting donations or purchases through your site, pay particular attention to making the navigation of the process as easy as possible. Users should not have to “click” more than six times to accomplish their purchase or donation. Make the instructions easily readable, and inform your site visitors where they are in the process (e.g., You have completed Step 2 of 5). Provide an immediate confirmation of the transaction via email, and make sure to offer instruction for how the customer can contact you with any questions.

Customer relations

You can enhance the perception of your agency's or organization's customer service if you incorporate thank you emails or welcome emails into your recognition of donations or new participants. Including links from the email to different areas of your web site will drive traffic to your site. This approach also allows you to direct the recipient to additional information using the link.

There are a number of online tools you can incorporate on your web site to support your customer relations activities. Feedback forms throughout the site allow visitors to report on their experiences, or to pose questions or suggestions. You may also consider user profile forms as a way to gather in depth information about your visitors and the information they are seeking from you. Finally, if you offer listserves or discussion boards through your site, you should constantly monitor them to determine what issues or problems are being debated. This is fertile ground for getting news ideas for your newsletter, conferences, events and your own web content.

Operations

Nonprofits are finding they can reduce their operational costs by delivering newsletters via email instead of mailing printed versions. As mentioned in the branding discussion, you can brand the newsletter with a graphical banner. Then use this email format to give a synopsis of the news stories. Links at the end of each synopsis then take the reader to the complete article on your web site. This format is also used effectively for issue briefs or calls to action around legislation or regulatory activities. Be sure to keep the newsletter brief. Popular guidance suggests that a newsletter of article abstracts with links is more likely to be read than one that offers full-text.

Your web site can also cut down on operational costs by offering Frequently Asked Question or FAQ areas throughout the site. Catalog the questions you get from telephone calls, and then document the answers in a simple question/answer

format on different pages of your site. This can reduce the numbers of calls you receive. You can also distribute information that is normally mailed using PDF (Portable Document Format). PDF is a format that allows you to capture all the elements of a printed document as an electronic image files and store it on your web site. Adobe Acrobat Reader is a free download program that you can link to (at www.adobe.com), and instruct your site users to download to access these files. Not only will you save postage costs, but your visitors can access your information 24 hours a day.

Enhanced Communication

Email and the Web can support and even enhance your communication strategy. To succeed in achieving your goals, however, your organization must commit to: diligently collect email addresses and faithfully maintain those lists. From your existing constituents, donors or contributors, you should collect email addresses at every opportunity: include an email line on all mailings and forms, and instruct all staff to ask for emails when attending meetings or when speaking to callers on the telephone. If you are looking to add to or expand your list beyond current customers, email addresses can be purchased from a variety of online sources. Type "email list" into any search engine to find these vendors. Lists are categorized by geography, demographics and interest areas. Depending on the source, email addresses cost anywhere from 10 to 35 cents each.

Your ability to use these powerful communications is limited to your access to a desirable email list. Your phone is only useful if you have the right number to call, and mail is only useful if you have a valid mailing address. So too with using email. You must make email list management a high priority. Then, begin to work into your strategy ways that you can enhance and personalize your email messages, and continually learn about the needs and preferences of your market. Having access to your online market and understanding their needs will help you select the most appropriate web-based tools to support your communications strategy.

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