

Using E-mail for Special Projects

By BNET Editorial

published on BNET.com 10/31/2007

Businesses run on e-mail. Beyond its core function—sending and receiving messages—e-mail can be used to improve productivity and understanding throughout a company.

In addition to facilitating day-to-day, person-to-person communication, e-mail also provides an ideal way to broadcast information to large groups of people instantaneously and cheaply. Also, it can manage specific communication challenges, such as sending unique messages to subgroups of a single contact list (i.e.: a sales team as a sub-group of the marketing department.)

One primary tool embedded in most e-mail programs allows you to automate certain types of communications. For example, you can schedule ordinary information requests, routine customer inquiries, and follow-up messages for distribution.

What You Need to Know

What should an e-newsletter include?

An e-newsletter is a great tool for regularly communicating with various audiences. It can include articles geared to each recipient's specific needs. Customers can be sent tips on product utilization, new developments, and ways to connect with other users. This kind of a newsletter is virtually free to send and can be sent at any convenient time—either regularly scheduled or occasionally, when circumstances warrant.

Include whatever your audience needs to know. Don't do it just to feel that you are utilizing the tool. If it is just an advertisement, people will soon be directing it to their spam folder.

Make it as long as needed but not too complicated. If you are also conveying detailed information and lengthy documents, send them either as attachments or as links to a Web site from which that additional information can be downloaded and read at their leisure. For regular features start off with a bulleted summary or write the first line as a hyperlink. That way, if the reader wants to know more he or she can click on the link to reveal the rest of the story.

How can I keep from making the newsletter become junk mail?

A valuable newsletter always keeps the reader in mind. It also allows readers to subscribe and unsubscribe easily. When they subscribe they are letting you know the material is helpful. When they unsubscribe it is no longer meeting their needs. The onus is on you to make it interesting. From time to time, ask readers what they would like included. You might also have a section for reader feedback

and even create a discussion area on your Web site where readers can talk with one another. Avoid the seven deadly sins of marketing management when you create your newsletter. Especially heed numbers five and six: don't get complacent, and keep content relevant.

What to Do

Send Useful Messages Regularly

If you communicate regularly with large groups of people or even to everyone on staff about items of interest that they all need to know, begin seeing that as an opportunity to explore upgrading the e-mail messages to an e-newsletter. That means making it more attractive, raising the editorial standard, and including graphics. Design it for usability or it will be trashed on arrival.

If you do not already send announcements about the following items, you may want to consider doing so:

- business performance updates
- policy changes
- structural changes
- new personnel
- new opportunities within the company
- sales successes or other achievements
- product and technical information
- meetings and outcomes
- professional interest items

If there is enough news and there is a need to communicate to everyone on a regular basis about matters such as those listed above, an e-newsletter is the way to go. Before you send everything to everyone, however, remember to use "send all" responsibly. Don't send messages just to send messages; only pass on information that is useful or has genuine news value. Check to see if your company already has an e-newsletter. Perhaps your messages can be included.

Save Groups in your E-mail Contacts List

The beauty of e-mail, is that it allows you to create as many separate groups as you want from a single contact list. It is a great way to distinguish among your varied audiences and allows you to customize your messages to specific needs. You can create a separate contact list for customers, colleagues, retailers, journalists, investors, anyone who has a direct interest in your work. Because e-mail is a low-cost way of sending and receiving information, you can even send personalized

information to small sub-groups of each group. For example, you could sub-divide customers into additional categories such as:

- small, medium, or large businesses
- current customers or former customers
- competitors customers
- frequent or infrequent customers

Targeted information is usually more valuable to the reader since it is more likely to address his or her specific needs more frequently than if your e-newsletter must address multiple audiences.

But even though you subdivide your interest groups, you should still ask them what additional information they need and what other kinds of materials they would like to see in your e-newsletter.

Enable Self-Service via the Web

Having a Web site for service-related issues is a first line of help for customers that need information that is readily available and commonly needed. Clearly indicate a customer service link on your Web site where people can go for FAQs, technical reports, downloads, discussion groups, etc. Then if they aren't satisfied that way, include an email feature for further customer follow-up. Either embed the e-mail feature into your Web site, or as with other requests, establish a dedicated e-mail address such as service@yourcompany.com for them to send their inquiry.

In this way, the web and a semi-automated e-mail based response system saves your company time and money. It is also customer friendly. In many cases, they get immediate satisfaction.

Simplify the Inquiry Process

Most requests for information are simple and easy to handle. Setting up an e-mail automated response simplifies the process and will save your company time and money.

Start by creating dedicated e-mail addresses such as information@yourcompany.com or sales@yourcompany.com. When a request comes in, have an automated response based on a prepared message and any attachments, if necessary. When you receive a request, such as "please send me a brochure" or "ask a sales representative to contact me," send an automated response. If you can't answer the question immediately or the response will take time to reach the individual because it needs to be sent through regular mail, at least say in your automated response that an answer is being prepared or is on its way. Additional follow-up can be handled directly by the relevant company person via e-mail, but the automation of the response to the initial inquiry is still one of the easiest and cost effective ways to increase productivity.

Manage Projects with E-mail

If you are involved in any kind of project, immediately set up a group in your e-mail contacts list. All projects generate high needs for specialized and frequent communications. An e-mail group provides every member of a project team access to the same information, no matter where they are; and, they can keep intra-group communications in one file.

If you run a project undoubtedly you will be communicating:

- intra-project messages
- updates
- budget reports
- scheduling changes
- requests for information
- minutes of meetings
- timelines, goals and progress indicators
- problems remaining
- additional sources of information

If you add videoconferencing or teleconferencing, your communications strategy can become even more thorough, leaving little room for misunderstanding. These additional tools are ideal for groups that are widely separated. A recording of any such conference can be distributed immediately afterwards to all participants as a convenient e-mail attachment.

Set Up Dedicated Systems for Your Sales Force

Because sales representatives spend a great deal of time with customers, they need easy access to a great deal of up-to-date information. E-mail is an ideal tool for distributing important sales information and maintaining communications right to the salesperson's handheld device such as a Blackberry. This will be very important if you have frequent changes in:

- new orders
- price
- customer records
- product information
- billing questions
- customer issues
- delivery details

Many of these issues can be automated through a sales management information process that reaches the sales force exactly when they need the information.

What to Avoid

You Send Unimportant Information

Be sure to test each message you send for relevance, usefulness, timeliness and user-centeredness.

You Depend Too Much On Automated Systems

Automated responses are a good way to handle requests for service or information. But they must be followed up by effective customer service. If not, they will actually hurt your reputation. An immediate automated response that tells a customer you've received their request does more harm than good if the customer then has to wait weeks for the information or never hears from you again.

You're Impersonal

Automation doesn't have to mean impersonal. Talk to the IT department about how to address your messages to each person on your list. Also, eliminate bureaucratic language and be more conversational as if you are speaking to each person. Even a newsletter can accomplish this by using everyday language and telling real stories about real people at work and about real customers.

Where to Learn More

Book:

Blumberg, Matt and Mayor, Michael, Sign Me Up!: A marketer's guide to creating email newsletters that build relationships and boost sales. iUniverse, 2005.