

Best practice for sending email newsletters

 Basic

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Email is a great way to communicate with our stakeholders but too many charities are sending emails from their PC software or Webmail such as outlook and hotmail. These emails lack design, personalisation and are liable to get blocked as spam as well as potentially breaching the Data Protection Act. This article explains the tools we need to send good emails to our supporters and details the things we should look for in an ASP Email Broadcast system.

Introduction

Many charities are realising the benefit of emails, whether it be a newsletter to their supporters or a campaign. Email is cheap (1p/email), quick to create and instantaneous to deliver. In many ways it is the direct marketing dream: personalised, cheap and trackable.

But sending bulk emails requires a different set of skills and a different tool than our standard day to day emails, even if the number sent is small, there are do's and don'ts about 'broadcasting' emails.

Many charities are using standard office based emails such as Outlook and Lotus, or Internet based emails such as Hotmail and Gmail, to send their organisational emails. These tools were not designed for sending bulk mailings and the result is poor email delivery, poor presentation, being blocked as spam and potentially breach of the Data Protection Act (DPA).

Best practice

Best practice for sending bulk emails requires a set of capabilities:

- **Design:** You need to represent your organisation professionally, with your logo and brand. You want the layout of the email to work for you in getting your message across. Layout of copy and inclusion of images helps people read copy on a screen so is crucial to emails.
- **Templates:** We are creatures of habit. Having a template for your email adds to its familiarity and increases our response to it. Just like a web page it is best practice to make the layout of each email the same, and this is most easily done via an HTML template.

- **Personalization:** Addressing the message to Dear *Firstname* has the same effect on emails as it does in print, it engages the user and makes them feel that you are writing to them not just a faceless 'supporter'.
- **HTML:** The advantages of HTML email are obvious as you can include all the pretty content and images. All the PC and web based email tools send either plain text or rich text (with some formatting) and therefore limit your design and content.
- **Links v attachments:** Many ISP's and office firewalls block attachments from unknown sources. So sending a link to a web page or web based document is far more likely to get it read. But adding long links to emails is both unsightly, breaking up copy, and risky, because if the link breaks across a line it won't work. Sending links behind the HTML, as we do on the web, allows you to make the copy a link and ensures the link will work.
- **Delivery:** Sending bulk emails always runs the risk that they will be seen as spam by the recipient's ISP (Internet Service Provider). When you send an email from your PC it goes out across the Internet with the IP (Internet Protocol) address of your office, similar to having an electronic postcode. Emails need to come from a recognised email broadcaster or the ISP may blacklist you as a spammer and block all emails from your IP address.
- **Accessibility:** Approximately 20% of users get plain text emails, so it is important to send emails they can read. We want to send HTML emails, so we should be sending both depending on what the user can (or wants) to receive. This is known as a 2 part send. It is also good practice to offer a link to a web version of the email.
- **Subscriptions:** Capturing people's emails is becoming increasingly important. As people move online and postage costs rise we all want to use email because it is what supporters are choosing and to save money. So we need a tool which can easily capture emails and store them in an address book. But to keep admin down we don't want to be manually adding them to our contacts, we need an address book which captures them from our website automatically.
- **Supporter choice:** We want to allow users to self manage their name, address and preferences. Allowing them to make changes to their email record via an automated address book saves time, effort and data entry errors.
- **Data protection:** The law says that we must offer an unsubscribe option on every email we send out to supporters. None of the PC and web based email tools offer this function. It can be done manually, but the risks of not updating your data records are high, in which case you can easily send an email to someone who has 'opted out', breach the DPA and annoy a supporter. You should always conceal recipients email addresses when doing bulk emails, which email broadcast systems do.
- **Bounces:** The most common reasons emails fail to get through is that the email address is no longer in use, which is known as a 'hard bounce'. Many emails also fail to reach the recipient because their email is unavailable or their inbox is full, which is known as a 'soft bounce'. We need a system that can manage and record these bounces, giving us the option to exclude these names from future sends.

- **Forward to a friend:** In most cases we want the message to go as far as possible and with email it is easy to add a forward to a friend option so that the recipient can send it on. PC and web based emails do not have this option.
- **Reporting:** While you can send out emails and assume they are getting through it is much better to be able to see how many were delivered, how many were opened and what links were clicked on. As well as showing how many users really read your mail it can demonstrate what they are interested in and what they respond to, increasing your understanding of how to communicate with them.

Taking all of these best practice guides and applying them to Outlook and Hotmail type tools, it is obvious that they do not offer the capabilities we need. They are not fit for the purpose of sending bulk emails and were not designed to do so.

What we need is an email tool which was designed for sending bulk emails and which has all of these options. There are 2 alternatives available:

Bulk email software:

Packages which can be downloaded onto your PC or server which were designed for bulk email broadcast. They have all the tools for template design, address book management, subscriptions and some reporting. They do not help with spam. In order to make sure that emails get through they need to come from a registered email broadcaster, an organisation which has spent time and money registering with the ISP's.

Unless you are prepared to spend that time and money you are just as likely to be blocked as a spammer from these tools as you are using Outlook. The other downside to this option is the impact it can have on your PC, server and Internet access. If you send an email to even a small number of recipients you are bound to slow down the PC, block up the server while it processes the send, and use up all of the bandwidth, slowing down everybody's access to the Internet. This is not guaranteed to make you popular in the office or with the IT manager.

ASP email provider.

An ASP (Application Service Provider) tool is provided by a specialist company. It sits on their server and emails go out from their system, therefore avoiding your IP address and your sever. These tools provide all the components you need: templates, editors, address books, unsubscribe, sign up forms and reports. They also, critically, spend their time and money making sure they are registered and compliant with the ISP's. If they were perceived to be sending spam and got blocked they would lose money, always the best incentive for staying on the side of the angels.

Recap

To recap, if we compare the three options for sending bulk email side by side, the benefits are of using specifically designed tools are clear:

Comparison of bulk email options			
	Outlook/Hotmail	In-House Software	ASP
Templates/design	No	Yes	Yes
Personalisation	No	Yes	Yes
HTML emails	No	Yes	Yes
2 part send	No	Yes	Yes
Subscriptions	No	Yes	Yes
Bounces	No	Yes	Yes
Unsubscribes	No	Yes	Yes
Forward to a friend	No	Yes	Yes
Reporting	No	Yes	Yes
SPAM	No	No	Yes
Fit for purpose	No	Yes	Yes

There are many of these ASP providers, some of whom have charity deals and are experienced with charity clients. Some will offer a full service, designing, building and sending your email – at a cost. The tools are accessible from the Internet with a username and password. They should be easy to use and simple to understand. Look for a combination of the tools you need for sending your emails on a system you find easy to use, at the best price. Expect to pay a set up fee and a monthly charge or cost per email.

And finally ...

So, without mincing words, sending bulk emails from PC based tools or Webmail such as Outlook and hotmail is worst practice. Charities should invest the small set up fee and monthly charge in an ASP Email broadcast email tool which was designed for the purpose of sending bulk emails, provides all the components for good design, accessibility, personalisation, subscription management and reporting, but most important of all reduces admin, has an unsubscribe and won't get you blacklisted as a spammer.