

Listservs: Creating Your Own E-mail Mailing List

So you want to discuss your profession, a hobby, a political issue, or your favorite band with like-minded people on the Net, but you can't find an appropriate place for the discussion? You could try to create a newsgroup or set up a Web site with a message board. Each has its benefits and could serve your purposes very well, but before you rush into anything, there's another option you should think about: Start a mailing list.

Mailing lists are useful for many purposes. A business can send announcements of new products to customers who have signed up to receive updates. It's also possible to publish an electronic newsletter via a mailing list. For example, Debbie Ridpath Ohi's biweekly electronic newsletter, *Inklings*, offers advice and market information to more than 14,000 writers. In this article, we'll focus on the issues you'll need to consider before starting a mailing list, and you'll see how easily you can apply many of these principles to other types of lists.

Why E-mail?

No mode of communication comes without its drawbacks. But mailing lists look like a pretty good option when you compare them to newsgroups: Not all Internet service providers (ISPs) carry every existing newsgroup, so your newsgroup probably won't be available to everyone who is interested. Due to the vagaries of USENET propagation, any given server may receive messages in the wrong order or even miss a large number of messages altogether. This can make discussions difficult to follow.

E-mail doesn't have these problems. It's accessible to anyone who has a valid E-mail address. And unlike USENET, a single program distributes all the messages in a mailing list, which means everyone will receive every message in the proper order. The private nature of a mailing list also makes it somewhat less susceptible to things like spamming and trolling (posting argumentative messages just to disrupt a discussion).

Steve Portigal, owner of the five-year-old *Undercover* mailing list, points out that the medium itself influences the nature of the discussion. "E-mail is much more effective— people have a different emotional reaction about sending out a message than putting one in a commonly accessible area—the act of reading discussion group E-mail along with your other E-mail creates a certain user model that tends to be more conducive to good community—trust, humor, openness, some reduction in flaming."

How mailing lists work

Any subscriber who wants to post a message, whether it's a new message or a reply, simply sends his or her posting to the mailing list's address. The MLM (mailing list management) software then re-mails the posting to the other subscribers.

Most MLM software allows users to receive messages in one of two ways: one at a time or in digest format. In the one-at-a-time, or immediate, format, the MLM sends each message to the other subscribers immediately. In the digest format, the list

owner configures the MLM to collect messages for a specified length of time (such as daily or weekly) or until the accumulated volume reaches a specified size (such as 40 KB). At that point, the MLM bundles the collected messages into a single file and sends it out.

Each format has its own advantages. In general, users who want to participate in the discussion will probably prefer the immediate format. This allows discussions to progress faster.

On the other hand, many subscribers will just want to "lurk" (read the messages without posting anything). Lurkers often find that digests are easier to deal with than a constant stream of individual messages.

Questions, questions

Before setting up your mailing list, you'll need to make a few decisions. Your choices will depend on the nature of your subject matter, your purpose for creating the list, and personal preference.

One of the biggest considerations is whether you want to moderate the list. In an unmoderated list, every message will go through automatically. In a moderated list, the owner screens each message and approves it "as is," edits it and then posts it, or kills it.

It's usually best not to moderate a discussion list unless you have a compelling reason for doing so. There's the obvious drawback of the time and work involved. If the list is busy enough, moderation could turn into a full-time job. Further, a moderator will inevitably run into problems with subscribers who don't feel they've been treated fairly. No matter how fair and objective you try to be, someone will find a reason to complain.

You'll also have to decide whether you want the list to be public or private. In a public mailing list, anyone can join by simply sending a request by E-mail. As soon as the MLM software processes the membership request, the new person is automatically accepted. As a result, the list is open to anyone who knows the address.

But you might want to limit membership. For example, suppose you're running a mailing list for the International Widget Makers Union, and you want to restrict it to union members. Making the list private will allow you to verify that each subscription request came from a union member before you approve it. This gives you more control, but it also involves more work.

Depending on your configuration, non-subscribers may be able to post to the list. This can increase your chances of receiving spam and other undesirable types of messages. Your MLM software will have options to safeguard against this, and although nothing can guarantee absolute security, restricting your list to subscribers usually go a long way toward keeping outsiders from disrupting things.

Software choices

Depending on your circumstances, you may have to use whatever software is available. Most ISPs have some sort of MLM software installed, usually available to users for a small fee. So your first step should be to contact your ISP and find out if it can set you up.

If your ISP doesn't pan out, or if you just want more information, take a look at Spark NET's list service. Its MLM software is the well-known Majordomo package. Majordomo offers all the options described above, and SparkNET throws a Web-based interface into the deal to make configuration and administration easy. Just point your browser to <http://www.majordomo.com>.

Other resources

If you want to shop around, check out Listbox, a mailing list service offered by IC Group, which also runs the PObox mail forwarding service. Listbox runs Majordomo software and offers a similar array of options. You can find Listbox at <http://www.listbox.com/>

Majordomo isn't the only game in town. L-Soft's LISTSERV is another widely used MLM package, and you can check it out at <http://www.lsoft.com>.

If you have a shell account on your ISP (an account that gives you direct access to the ISP's operating system) and feel very confident in your computer abilities, you may want to think about finding an MLM program, installing it, and running it yourself. For information about MLM software in general, take a look at Norm Aleks' Mailing List Management Software FAQ. Aleks provides details about the technical aspects of running an MLM program. He also has capsule reviews of a number of MLM software packages and provides links to sites with further information. It's a very good starting point if you want to install your own MLM, or even if you just want to learn more about MLM software packages. Aleks' home page is located at <http://LIBRARY.UMMED.EDU/~naleks/>

Your Own Mailing List: What's It Like?

In November 1992, Steve Portigal, a graduate student at the University of Guelph in Toronto and a diehard Rolling Stones fan, discovered there were no Stones resources on the Net—no newsgroups, no Web sites, no mailing lists. In 1992, this wasn't such a shocking discovery, but still there was no question that Portigal would have to remedy the situation.

He briefly considered trying to create a newsgroup called `rec.music.stones`. But after doing some research to find out how to create a newsgroup, he became discouraged. The process seemed too complex and arcane to be a viable option. (More recently, someone else created a newsgroup called `alt.rock-n-roll.stones`.)

However, the university had set up a mailing list for a recently concluded conference. The solution was obvious: Co-opt the existing, now unused list for Stones discussions.

It was unlikely that the university would have agreed to set up a new list for such a purpose, but it did agree to rename the `cscw92volunteers` mailing list to *Undercover*.

Undercover is the title of one of the Rolling Stones' lesser-known albums, and since the word could imply any number of things, the subtlety of the reference appealed to Portigal. It also obscured the subject matter from university officials, who might not have approved, which added another facet to the name—it reflects the circumstances under which the list was born.

Portigal began promoting *Undercover* by posting to newsgroups and other mailing lists. He also, in his own words, "stupidly spammed" a number of lists devoted to music. Long before spam became a widely publicized issue, Portigal learned it was a bad idea. A more acceptable tactic was posting an invitation for USENET readers to ask about *Undercover* in his signature file.

Portigal listed *Undercover* in mailing list directories, but he found that this led to problems. Portigal has moved the list twice since its inception. "That data (the old directories) is still out there, unmaintained and unupdateable—I've tried to have so much of it corrected, but there are Web pages out there with files from 1994 that no one owns. Very frustrating," he says.

At first, *Undercover* was available only as an immediate list, and activity was sporadic. Portigal worked hard to stimulate discussions, posting brief stories and asking questions. Each attempt would spark some activity, but it would die down after a few days. So Portigal would have to come up with something else to prod things along.

After it became "politically expedient" to move the *Undercover* list, Portigal relocated to another system at the university. Here, he was able to offer *Undercover* in a digest format, and both membership and discussion activity increased.

Portigal then moved from Toronto to San Francisco, which meant he was now trying to run the list from a machine that was hundreds of miles away and not always attended. Not surprisingly, this opened the door to problems. For example, sometimes the system would crash at a time when no one was there to reboot it. Fortunately, donations from subscribers enabled Portigal to sign a five-year contract with Listbox to host *Undercover*.

When creating a new mailing list, many providers will ask what you want and set things up for you. But Portigal wanted to preserve some of the existing features of the list, such as fancy headers on the messages and a list of topics at the top of each digest.. Keeping these features meant that Portigal had to tweak the Listbox configuration. This type of work requires an understanding of how the system works and a great deal of care. A small typo Portigal made in a configuration file caused Listbox to generate a digest (a special compilation of recent messages that's sent out to readers) for each message. Some users reacted angrily, with a few even talking about lawsuits. Fortunately, cooler heads prevailed, and things smoothed out.

Numbers vary, but current *Undercover* membership hovers around 800. Daily administration takes an average of 20 minutes and includes approving new subscribers. Portigal approves almost all subscription requests, but sometimes people submit fake addresses as a prank. These addresses are easy to identify because the welcome message bounces back. He's also noticed a recent trend in marketers attempting to subscribe, apparently so they can post advertisements on the list.

Portigal has to remove addresses when E-mail bounces, an almost daily occurrence. Other tasks include dealing with misdirected postings and unsubscribe requests. Often, people send these types of messages to Portigal himself rather than to the listserv.

If you become a list owner, you'll need to have a degree of technical savvy. In addition to dealing with the technical aspects of day-to-day administration, you should be able to understand some of the problems that are likely to arise. Even if a solution is outside your control, a coherent explanation can often calm an upset subscriber.

Owning a list also takes a certain amount of "people skill." "There are always people problems," Portigal points out. "The technology just doesn't facilitate the usual confrontation-avoidance mechanisms that we use in face-to-face communication—inflection, gestures, eyes."

Portigal notes that even with the potential for misunderstandings, things usually work out. "Amazingly, so many of those situations resolve themselves, people apologize, they learn how it works, they grin and move on, and become really good parts of the list."

This leads to what is probably the most striking aspect of *Undercover*. Given enough time, most newsgroups and mailing lists will eventually develop their own culture, but the culture on *Undercover* is particularly well defined. Among the discussions about favorite songs, biographical trivia about the Rolling Stones, and speculation about the upcoming album and tour, plenty of off-topic banter goes on. Some members have taken on distinctive roles, running jokes have developed, and the atmosphere is as close to a group of longtime friends gathering for a Saturday afternoon barbecue as you'll find anywhere on the Net.

It's a culture that Portigal put a lot of work into nurturing in the early years, and he says that now, it's taken on a life of its own. He's proud of the list, even with the maintenance it requires and the occasional problems. "It's not like work anymore; it's not even like effort anymore."

The bottom line is that a mailing list is a big commitment, and your subscribers will expect a lot from you. But as you've seen here, if you can follow through on the commitment, a mailing list can be very enjoyable and rewarding.

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