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Starting and Managing an Online Discussion Group

By Laura Bray
Communication News, July 2002

One of the main reasons that people join associations is for the networking. You can take advantage of your members' expertise by starting online discussion groups, collections of e-mail addresses of people interested in certain topics.

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Online discussion groups

- facilitate networking among members,
- enable experts in your membership to share specialized knowledge,
- quickly disseminate news and other important information to a wide audience, and
- foster a sense of community around your association.

Free services can help you start an online discussion group quickly and easily. Sites such as [Yahoo! Groups](#) provide free, easy-to-use interfaces to set up your groups. Such services fund themselves with brief advertisements at the bottom of each message sent to the group.

For more robust functionality, you can purchase software packages such as [Lyris](#) or retain an outside hosting service such as [Sparklist](#).

Drawbacks

Directories

Section Council

Section Description

- A member must have an e-mail address to participate.
- You'll need to dedicate some resources to ongoing list maintenance and monitoring.
- Just as you are liable for the content of your printed publications, so too might your association be legally liable for messages posted to the discussion group. Consult legal counsel to get more information on risks.

Getting started

Before creating an online discussion group, it's important to answer the following questions:

- **What will be the overall theme?** Will you have one discussion group for your entire association to discuss general topics, or do you want to restrict discussions to a particular area?
- **Will you use a free Web-based service or purchase software?** A free service is a good way to "get your feet wet" without spending a lot of money, but purchased software provides more functionality.
- **Who can join the list?** You can set up your list as "public" (anyone with an e-mail address can join), "approval-required" (you, as the moderator, must approve all subscription requests), or "private" (you, as the moderator, must enter new subscriptions). Private lists are more work for the moderator, but they ensure that only legitimate individuals can subscribe to the list. Many list management packages allow you to define addresses that should be banned or that always require approval.
- **Who will monitor the list?** Once you've set up the list and enrolled your first batch of subscribers, you have to keep an eye on activity regularly to ensure discussions stay on track and subscribers are following the rules.

Ongoing management and monitoring

- **Listserver rules.** Standards of etiquette and rules on what types of messages aren't allowed establish proper listserver usage. Send the rules suggested by your legal counsel to everyone who

subscribes to your listserver.

- **Listserver monitoring.** During listserver set-up, you will need to choose between an “open” list and a “moderated” list.

In an open list, e-mail sent to the list is automatically forwarded to all members of the list. In this case, the list manager should review every e-mail posted to the listserver. Don't be too alarmed; a skilled list manager can accomplish this (even on a very busy list) by quickly scanning each message. The list manager ensures that discussions stay on track and subscribers are following the rules. If a subscriber breaks a rule, the list manager should issue a warning (sent privately to the offending subscriber) or suspend the subscriber. Periodic reminders sent to the listserver will help ensure that all subscribers remember the rules and the consequences of breaking them.

On a moderated list, the list manager must approve all messages before they are sent out to the group. Moderation is a lot of work for the list owner, but it ensures that only legitimate messages are posted. Most software packages allow multiple moderators, so you can split up the load. You might also want other members of the association staff to monitor messages, so they can answer association-related questions.

- **Set subscriber expectations.** Whether open or moderated, listservers have limitations. Set realistic expectations up front with your subscribers. Subscribers frequently complain of getting junk mail after posting messages. Remind subscribers that a listserver is a public forum. If they don't want junk mail, they should not post messages to the list.

You also need to set expectations on viruses. Most listservers are simply content conduits and do not provide any sort of virus-checking capability. During outbreaks, subscribers could inadvertently post attachments to the list that include viruses (if your list allows attachments). Remind subscribers to update virus protection on their computers, and include a disclaimer in your welcome message that your association assumes no liability for viruses.

- **Watch copyrights.** Take great care with copyright issues. Most subscribers don't consider copyright law when composing their messages. In the interest of sharing information, they may paste material from some other Web site or document and post it to the list. Make copyright rules clear in the welcome message, and frequently remind subscribers of what's allowed.

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