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Auto-Responders: An E-Mail List Productivity Tool

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Abstract: Shrinking budgets and growing demands require Extension to become as efficient and effective as possible. An auto-responder is an online service built to automate much of the effort required to maintain and use an e-mail list. Auto-responders have many features and benefits that could help Extension reduce staff time and become more efficient.

Traditional methods of communication include face-to-face classes, meetings, letters, and telephone calls. E-mail is a relative newcomer to the mix and now often dominates as a preferred method of communication. E-mail distribution lists were the next logical step.

Many Extension agents may now have hundreds or in some cases thousands on their e-mail lists. Maintaining these lists in a traditional e-mail client like Outlook or Eudora can be labor intensive. New subscribers must be added or removed or e-mail addresses must be changed for the list to stay current.

In addition, the capabilities of this type of solution are limited. The list may or may not be able to store much demographic data. Customizing the demographic data is rarely possible. Segmenting the list to send information to a select group is usually out of the question. In addition, there are budget concerns and hiring freezes that limit the amount of staff help available.

What Is an Auto-Responder?

In those situations, an online service called an "auto-responder" can be called to the rescue. An auto-responder service can automate some of the typical maintenance tasks. The tasks of subscribing, unsubscribing, and changing personal information is turned over to the subscribers themselves. E-mails can be pre-written and delivery scheduled up to a year in advance.

One of the most powerful features is the ability to create a customized subscription form. This feature allows agents to ask for specific demographic data and then segment the e-mail list to send email to one portion of the list. How will that affect a working agent? A horticulture agent who serves a residential audience, a commercial audience, and Master Gardeners, for example, could collect common data into one database and segment the list when needed. Another option would be to simply set up an e-mail list for each group, asking for customized demographic data from each.

Benefits to Extension

The first benefit to Extension is the labor savings. Subscribers can now be responsible for subscribing, unsubscribing, and updating their e-mail address and account information. That eliminates a good part of the maintenance of an e-mail list, saving precious staff time.

The second benefit to us is that we can better segment our e-mail lists and send more relevant information to only those who want it, rather than sending everything to the whole list by default.

A third benefit is that these services create "opt-in" lists. That means the subscriber first asks to be on the list. The service automatically sends a confirmation e-mail. Subscribers then must click on a link in the e-mail to confirm their wish to be on the e-mail list. This process protects subscribers from spam, and it provides an audit trail showing that not only did the subscribers sign up, but that they also confirmed that request.

Another important benefit is the scheduling feature. Even if they'll be out of the office, agents or staff can pre-write and schedule e-mail distribution well ahead of time, thus avoiding gaps in communication, such as late newsletters.

Benefits to Our Clientele

The main benefit to our clientele is that they have control of their subscription and account information.

Because this system can segment the mailing list base on customized criteria, a secondary benefit to the customer is that this system can reduce the amount of e-mail a client receives from Extension while at the same time increasing the relevancy of that information.

At the time of this writing (January 2008), I've only worked with one auto-responder service, Aweber <<http://www.aweber.com>>. The advantages and disadvantages listed below may or may not pertain to other vendors.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Auto-Responders

Most auto-responder services allow unlimited number of e-mail lists on any number of Web sites. This can allow one account to service even a large Extension office.

One primary disadvantage is that some technical knowledge is required, mostly Web skills. There is a small learning curve that goes with learning a new system, but if you run into trouble, Aweber's customer service is very helpful.

The two primary online auto-responder services are:

- <http://www.aweber.com>
- <http://www.getresponse.com/>

What Does It Cost?

This particular vendor charges \$20 per month if paid month to month or \$180 per year if paid annually. I think it's worth it.

This article is online at <http://www.joe.org/joe/2008december/tt5.shtml>.

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