Segmentation of Email Systems Benefits You and Your Clientele

Abstract

Using commercial email services to segment email lists allows Extension to customize information according to clientele interests. Our email system has 42 segments, allowing us to be very specific in choosing who receives the information we send out. It also allows clientele to manage their information according to their needs. There are some challenges, such as not being able to send attachments, but overall these systems can makes delivery of information more efficient and effective, and less expensive than printed media.

Andrew McGuire
Extension regional specialist
Ephrata, Washington
andrew.mcguire@wsu.edu

Gwen Hoheisel
Extension regional specialist
Prosser, Washington
ghoheisel@wsu.edu

Washington State University Extension

Email is a foundational technology of today's information world. Although not acclaimed like the more recent social networking, it is the most basic electronic connection to most people—even Facebook requires an email. Extension uses this tool widely, mainly for contacting individuals or groups through email lists. With automated mailing list management (Palmer, 2008), the use of these lists allows us to contact many individuals quickly and cheaply. However, there are new ways to improve this tool.

Email List Segmentation

Using a commercial email service, our multi-disciplinary team of Extension specialists built an email system that allows subscribers to receive only the information that they want. This is done by enabling clientele to choose from 42 interest segments (Table 1) while subscribing. They also give information on their occupation and geographic location. With this information, our team can send out information based on these segments. We can send one email to multiple segments, for instance apple production and cherry production, but a client signed up for both of these segments would only receive one email. Subscribers can change their selected segments or unsubscribe at any time by clicking a link at the bottom of each email.

Table 1.
Example of Segments Used in an Agriculture-Focused Email System

Occupation/Industry sector (choose all that apply)	Farmer/rancher/producer/grower
	Crop consultant
	Ag-chemical
	Equipment
	Government agency employee
	Research
	Spanish speaker
Interest Segments	
Vegetables	Potato
	Onion
	Sweet corn
	Green peas
	Carrot
	Other vegetables (asparagus, cucurbits, tomato, pepper and others)
	Vegetables seed crops
Cereals and other row crops	Wheat/small grains
	Corn (grain and silage)
	Dry edible beans
	Alternative crops
Tree fruit production	Apple
	Cherry
	Pear
	Stone fruit
	Nursery
	Automation/mechanization of fruit production
Grape production	Juice grapes

	Wine grapes
	Table grapes
	Winery
Other small fruit	Blueberry
	Raspberry
Forages and perennial crops	Alfalfa
	Timothy
	Other grasses, legumes, mixes
	Mint
Livestock production	Cattle
	Swine
	Sheep
	Goats
	Pasture management
Ag systems	High residue farming
	Soil quality/health
	Certified organic production
	Direct marketing
	Small farms
Water and Irrigation	Center pivot irrigation
	Drip irrigation
	Surface irrigation
	Water availability, water rights

Benefits of the System

There are many advantages of such a system, for both the clientele and for Extension (Table 2).

Table 2.

Benefits of a Segmented Email System

For Clientele	For Extension
• Proven, known, and widely used technology (Guenthner & Swan, 2011) • Device neutral • Instant access anywhere (good for alert notifications) • Customized and specific information focused on their unique blend of interests/needs • Timely notification of alerts and events as opposed to quarterly newsletters	• Active "push" of information rather than passive websites • Instant delivery • Can use to target specific segments of our clientele • Expandable • Web access allows it to be used anywhere, anytime, by multiple users • Automated list management • Lower cost than paper publishing • Allows Extension to reach clientele previously unknown since the user self-identifies interests • By using a template for emails, all communications look professional and similar no matter the segment

The creation of this system eliminated email lists maintained by individual Extension educators, which led to clientele receiving emails from multiple WSU Extension sources. It also eliminated a printed newsletter that did not focus on the specific interests of clientele because it combined articles on too many diverse topics such as tree-fruit, agronomic crop, vegetable, and livestock production. Now, we have a unified, content-specific system, instead of a shotgun approach to delivering information.

We use the system to deliver pest alerts specified by the target crop, event announcements, timely reminders, informational articles, and links to outside information. After a little over a year, we have over 940 subscribers.

Challenges and Cautions

We needed to build a small team willing to learn a new system and define rules that work for all segments. To maintain quality control over messages sent from the university, we created a template

for all emails and agreed to limit emails to maximum two per week per segment. Gatekeepers, as we called them, were identified as people willing to send information for specific segments even if the information originated from other sources. For example, any university faculty may send information to the grape industry through the two gatekeepers for grapes and wine. This provides quality control of the system and ensures that not all faculty have to learn the email system, just the gatekeepers. A large initial effort is needed to ensure that clientele subscribe to the system. Our team of gatekeepers has promoted this service at all commodity and educational meetings.

We have encountered some limitations in using these types of systems. Some services offer only a limited number of segments, so know how many you will need and compare prices. We pay extra (see Cost and Services, below) for additional segments. When sending to multiple segments, most systems only allow you to do "OR" combinations, as in Cattle or Sheep. If you want to be more specific, such as sending only to crop consultants who are also in the alfalfa segment (an "AND" combination, crop consultants AND alfalfa), you will have to find a service that offers this feature and probably pay significantly more. Most services do not allow email attachments, but links to articles or websites are acceptable. Graphics are limited to a specific size, but this has not been a problem as we try to keep our emails small. For a small extra fee, we eliminated all reference to the system provider and have our Extension logo on every email.

Emails sent to numerous clientele through these types of services can be misidentified as spam. Choose a reputable service with strong spam policies. This will prevent most of your emails from being rejected by your clientele's Internet service providers. We have had to work with a few ISPs to unblock our emails, since they do not come from the university system.

Finally, any email system will have to deal with full inboxes. To attempt to deal with this, we have sent our subscribers information on best practices for managing email and other information they receive. This is a work in progress, for both our clientele and us.

Cost and Services

We pay $414 per year for our service level, which allows us a maximum of 2,500 subscribers, 5.0 MB image library, and 15,000 emails per month. Examples of companies offering these services are iContact, Constant Contact, Bronto (used by eXtension), AWeber, and MailChimp. All of them are designed for email marketing, but some of them can be adapted for Extension use. Use their free subscription plans to test each one. Our team has elected to charge each gatekeeper a nominal fee to pay for these services.

References

Guenthner, J. F. & Swan, B. G. (2011). Extension learners' use of electronic technology. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 49(1) Article 1FEA2. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2011february/a2.php

Palmer, D. (2008). Auto-responders: An e-mail list productivity tool. *Journal of Extension* [On-line], 46(6) Article 6TOT5. Available at: http://www.joe.org/joe/2008december/tt5.php