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## **Planning for an eNewsletter At Your District or School**

There is a growing trend in K12 education to provide information to parents and community members through email or the school/district website. In fact, from a recent survey conducted in collaboration with the Colorado School Public Relations Association, Relatrix found two-thirds of school districts either had an eNewsletter service or were planning to implement such a service by next school year (2007/08).

One of the most common mistakes when planning for an eNewsletter service is thinking too small. The tendency is to look at an eNewsletter as simply a replacement for a print newsletter. What we did on paper, now we'll do online. However, delivering information online needs a different framework for planning. Not only are electronic documents a different format for delivery, but users expect to access and interact with information in an online document differently than the print version.

In an online world users can personally define their information preferences, and your message needs to target their particular interests. Therefore, one print newsletter might be better delivered as multiple online newsletters. Rather than a district-wide newsletter, department or school level newsletters might be more effective in matching the information preferences of your parent and community audience. With the ability to insert hyperlinks to other sections of your document, or other documents or pages on the web, it can be more efficient to send headlines and summaries, rather than entire stories in an eNewsletter.

The bottom line, when considering the move to an eNewsletter service is to rethink your audience and their interests, segment your community so you can deliver the specific information they would like to receive. In a world where fewer people have time to read a newsletter from front to back, the Internet can be a valuable tool to personalize and target the information you deliver.

### **What are the advantages of an eNewsletter?**

#### Cost Savings

The most often mentioned advantage to moving to an eNewsletter is cost savings. The printing costs for quality, color newsletters can run upwards of \$1.00 per page, and thousands of dollars per edition of a print newsletter, even for a small district. While there are people who will only read a document in



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paper form, more and more prefer to either read news on their computer or print documents on their local printer.

### Speed of Delivery

An obvious advantage of electronic delivery is the speed with which you can reach your audience. While this is not always a priority when the content of your newsletter is not time critical, it will quickly become apparent to both you and your community that if you can deliver non-critical information to thousands of subscribers in minutes or hours, rather than days; then you will also want to deliver such time sensitive information as security alerts, school closure notices and other details in a similar manner.

### Disintermediation

Speed of delivery goes hand-in-hand with the advantage of disintermediation. Disintermediation means removing the middle-man from the information supply-chain. In this case, the middle-man is the news media that puts their own spin on events. To get your side of a story out to a broad audience of parents and community members can make a big impact on formulating their opinion about an issue at your district.

### Tracking & Reporting

Another often cited advantage of eNewsletters is the ability to track and report on who received and opened an eNewsletter email. The Internet allows for a 'deeper' level of understanding about your eNewsletter subscribers. This data can be used to identify trends in sign-ups and opt-outs of your eNewsletter(s), which will give you incite into your audience interests. Aside from tracking subscribers and readers, you will need to track those email addresses that 'bounce' back your eNewsletter. This is crucial to maintaining the accuracy and currency of your subscriber list.

### Segmenting & Personalizing

A complimentary advantage to tracking is audience segmentation. This means defining an audience in terms of their relationship to your district or school and their personal information preferences. You can use those relationships and preferences to deliver the information that is most relevant to that audience segment. A key aspect of segmentation is the ability for a parent or community member to define and change their information preferences over time, so you consistently deliver a personalized and relevant message to them.



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## **How do I start planning for an eNewsletter?**

The most important, but often overlooked aspect of an eNewsletter service is building and maintaining a subscriber list. Whether you begin with email addresses harvested from your student information system or you already have an existing user list, there are two important points to keep in mind when considering your list–

1. Maintainability – This means keeping the contact details and preferences of your community accurate and up-to-date. The only way to do this is allow your users to change their details online, and be able to opt-out, when they no longer want to receive your eNewsletter.

2. Promotion through other channels – Too often we assume that if a user is interested in our eNewsletter they will come to our website and sign-up. Unfortunately, this only works if they would have some other reason to visit our website to begin with. Therefore, it's vital when building your eNewsletter subscriber list to promote the availability and relevance of your newsletter through 'off-line' channels as well as through your website.

## **What do I do about creating content?**

This question is often at the core of any eNewsletter evaluation. Unfortunately, it tends to be driven from the perspective of the desktop publishing tools that were used to create print newsletters. The Internet has the ability to author 'rich' content with different fonts, colors, graphics and page layouts, but this content is not as flexible or complex in nature as content created by high-end desktop publishing systems.

This can lead to the decision to deliver an eNewsletter as a fixed format file, such as a PDF, generated by your desktop publishing system. While this approach is tempting, because it allows creation of a single newsletter 'document', it is a poor substitute for developing an HTML newsletter that takes advantage of Internet features like email tracking and linking.

Another factor often overlooked when planning content of an eNewsletter is the limited time and attention span of your audience. In the print news media, if you want people to read a headline or news story, then place it on the front-page and above the fold. The implication for your eNewsletter is that you are more likely to get reader attention with headlines and a brief summary of a story at the top of your newsletter. You can then insert links to other locations in your



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document, back to your website, or perhaps to the desktop version of the newsletter upload on your server.

A real time-saving feature in developing eNewsletters is the ability to save, reuse and share layouts and content that you have created previously. This will let you create a standard look and feel to your eNewsletter by applying the same template to each new edition you create. You can also share your templates with other staff members, who may be creating their own eNewsletter.

A key benefit of creating native HTML eNewsletters is the linking features of the Internet. These features can enhance the value of an eNewsletter, if the reader can access other content not shown on the screen. With the use of hyperlinks, you can also allow readers to take other actions, like signing up for other information services from the district, taking online surveys, asking questions via email and much more.

The three general approaches to creating content for an eNewsletter are –

1. Straight Desktop Publishing – With this approach you generally are distributing a link to the original Newsletter, or attaching it to the email sent to your audience. The benefit of this approach is that your staff can create very attractive, multi-page documents in a desktop publishing system with which they are familiar. The disadvantage is that you are not effectively utilizing the powerful linking and tracking capabilities of the Internet.

2. Straight HTML Publishing – You can use either an HTML text-editor or a WYSIWYG editor to develop your content in 'native' web format. This document is formatted and optimized for delivery and viewing via email or on the web. The advantage of this approach is that you can use linking and tracking features to greater effect, while the disadvantage is that your staff must learn a different way to develop and layout your newsletter and some of your 'rich' graphical content may not work well in HTML form, due to practical size limitations.

3. Hybrid Publishing – Here you would develop your eNewsletter in your Desktop Publishing system and output the document as a PDF, or other web-friendly format. Then, rather than trying to reproduce this document in HTML, you would instead use a headline and summary format for your email version, and provide links for each article back to your PDF document or to a particular page or named destination in your PDF.



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## **How do I know if anyone is getting and reading my eNewsletter?**

The benefits of tracking and reporting on the Internet can be broken into three basic areas of consideration.

1. Receipt of Message – You need to know who was in the list of users when you published your eNewsletter. Remember this is changing all the time, as some parents and community members subscribe, while others opt-out of your eNewsletter service.
2. Opened/Read – The truth is that you cannot know if people actually 'read' your entire eNewsletter, or even part of it. What you can know is that they opened the email and saw the first page of your eNewsletter and you should be able to identify who these 'potential' readers are.
3. Bounced messages – Due to the huge increase in spam and email viruses on the Internet, businesses and ISPs are stricter about what email they allow on their email servers. Beyond initial spam filtering process, many people also apply personal spam filters to their email Inbox. Consequently, if your eNewsletter isn't getting through to your intended audience you should know that and have the ability to take some remedial action.

## **What do I do with my eNewsletters after I publish them?**

Your eNewsletters have value beyond the day or week that you publish them. Therefore, it can be useful to archive your eNewsletters on your website so that visitors can peruse them throughout the school year. It can also help to provide links to these archived newsletters in future eNewsletters so that your readers can refer back to them.

Moving from publishing a print newsletter to an eNewsletter has many benefits. The biggest challenge when considering this move, however, is to not be limited by a 'replacement' mindset, when the Internet provides numerous other advantages over print. If you expect that your district's use of the Internet as a channel of communications will grow over time, then you should take the extra time and consideration to assure that the choice of service provider can meet your future, as well as immediate needs.

Relatrix is an Application Service Provider delivering Online Contact Center solutions to the K12 Education market, along with technical and consulting services. For more information about Relatrix and our products and services, please visit our website at [www.relatrix.com](http://www.relatrix.com) or call 303-679-6499.