

Church Communication & Technology:

Constant-Contact; are paper newsletters a passing fad?

How many of you still receive a paper newsletter from your church? How much would you suspect that costs your congregation to print and mail? And how many members read it each month? How professional looking is it? Finally, what could your congregation do with the money for ministry that is being spent to put the newsletter together, copy and mail it? During this workshop, I hope to take time to look at these things and to take a look at one e-newsletter source that can help your congregation put that money into mission and help save some trees.

Discussion time.

The presbytery office used to assemble a 12-page newsletter. We had a full-time newsletter editor seeking programs and events from the churches in order to put together a nice, professional looking newsletter that was then printed, with a three color cover and black & white pages inside. The process of making 350 copies took about 2 days of printing, folding, and preparing for bulk mailing, with the trip to the post office and discovering a new change in the bulk mailing procedures just about every trip. Photo quality was always questionable at best. Then we moved to a color copier, which reduced production time by more than half, but increased the actual printing expense slightly. We still came out ahead, but we were still using hundreds of sheets of paper and were getting very little feedback from the audience.

About 2 years ago, we switched completely to an electronic newsletter and to electronic announcements and prayer request notifications. Initially our audience shrank as those who couldn't or wouldn't use email no longer received the news letter. But within 6 months, our electronic mailing list had increased, with numbers of church members adding their email addresses in order to receive timely news and to keep up with prayer requests for people around the presbytery. Currently, our email list is nearly 25% greater than our old mailing list was at it's height. Time that it took to prepare the newsletter is now spent doing other jobs that got put off while a staff member made time for that job. A staff position is no longer necessary. These savings have come to save the members of presbytery churches in finally coming to a point that the per capita didn't have to increase for 2010.

There will always be those in your congregation who won't get a computer, or prefer a printed document. You may find yourself having to always have a few printed copies to send out. A printed Constant Contact email is still presentable enough to fold and mail out to those members, so be sure your office email account is also on the recipient email list. This also helps let you know when the message actually went out.

While there are several companies out there that offer “bulk emailing” service for your electronic newsletter, the presbytery office uses one called Constant Contact. We were perfectly able to send emails out directly from the office, but they look like emails, with no professional looking texts, photos, or links to web content. We were also limited to email lists of fifty or fewer people per group due to problems with our email host service. So, in order to be able to send to hundreds with a single click, we found the email services provided by Constant Contact. This company gives you a 60 day free trial period, helps you set up your email lists, helps monitor addresses that no longer work, allows new people to join and people who do not wish to receive the news to opt out with a click of the mouse button, and gives you nice, professional looking templates for your news articles. You can type or paste articles directly to the draft document, then when done, arrange the list of recipients, and set up to email the news immediately or at a pre-determined time. There are costs, which are dependent on the size of your email list and the number of times you will be sending emails per year. Churches also get a non-profit discount.

Now, we will run through setting up an email through the Constant Contact system.

Go to <http://constantcontact.org/index.jsp> (also where you should go for information if you want to set up your free trial period). When you have an account established, you will need to log in with username and password. This will bring you to the main page for your organization. Click the tab for Emails. The list of sent emails, drafts and templates comes up. Find the template you want to use, and click the icon of the overlapping sheets of paper. Clicking this copies the template, which prevents you from accidentally typing over it and not having a clean template the next time you need it.

After clicking on the template, you are asked to name the new document. I usually try to name something like a prayer request using the name of the person it is for and the date that I’m sending it. This name will only appear on your list of emails, not in the message anywhere, so it can be abbreviated in any way you prefer. Once you have named the document, click the Next button.

Review the Email Message Settings. Generally, once this was established when setting up your account, you won’t need to make changes, but if you want the message to come from the pastor, clerk or educator, this allows you to make that change before going on to prepare the document itself. Make any changes needed, then click the Next button.

Now you can see the document template. Each block that has been set up needs to be edited. In our case, the date in the first block needs to be changed to make it current. The icon showing a piece of paper and a pencil is the Edit icon. Click that and then update the date. After making the change, click the Save button. In our example, the next block is the block

where we will type in our message. Click the Edit icon, and type in or paste the message. You can copy and paste from an email or word processing document if you need to use information sent by somebody else, or if you want to use the spell check features of your word processing software to make sure the message will be correct. Either way, after clicking the Edit button, just highlight the text already in the block and type or paste in the text you want to use. You can change fonts and font sizes with the menu to the left of the block just as you would for most word processing. When you have the message set up, click the Save button. In our example, the last two blocks need no changes, so we will click the Save and Continue button.

You are now ready to pick the email list you want to use. If you only have one list, just click the block for that, or select the list name you wish to use. Our example has 3 lists, the General list being our church members, the next being the list of Presbytery email addresses to share with the rest of the country, and the last being to send just a test message within the office. We will click the Test list for this demonstration. Then click Next.

Now you are ready to set up the email to be sent out. Select when you want to send it. You can send now to send it out immediately, which may take up to 30 minutes, depending on how many other Constant Contact users are online and trying to send messages at the moment, or you can arrange to have the message sent out at a particular time and date if you want the message to go out at some other time. After selecting the Status, click the Finish button. If all went well, you will see the message that your email has been scheduled successfully. You're done and ready to take care of the next project on your busy to-do list!

I have not had the opportunity to try other companies personally, but would have to assume that they would be as easy to use as this one. Take a look at some of the email announcements and prayer requests that our office has sent out in the past, go to Constant Contact and other similar services, take some time to determine your needs and set your account up for the free trial period and give it a try.

Questions and Answer time.