

How to Create and Manage E-Newsletters

This is a special edition of the periodic e-newsletter *Congress Online* by the Congressional Management Foundation, sponsored by Capitol Advantage (<http://www.capitoladvantage.com>), provider of online solutions and publications that facilitate civic awareness and participation.



Congress Online highlights new and relevant Internet trends, technologies, and practices on and off Capitol Hill. It is a part of our broader technology research, which studies Congress' use of the Internet, identifies and award best practices, and provides technology guidance to congressional offices.

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Creating an Effective E-Newsletter

Keep It Short and Scannable.

An e-newsletter is not just the same content you would put in a printed newsletter, then cut-and-pasted to an e-mail message. The Internet is a different communications environment and requires a different writing style. People do not read long documents online, they scan to find something relevant or interesting to them. Keep e-newsletters to three screens or less, and format them to be scannable. E-newsletters are like sound bites of the Internet allowing people to be “information snackers.” Provide multiple headers, bullets, short paragraphs and sentences, and links to further information. If you want to draw attention to longer documents, provide either brief summaries or the first few lines of the document with a link to the full document on your Web site.

Keep Content Substance/News Oriented – Not Self-Promotional.

Constituents want substance, not press releases, speeches and promotional material. If the e-newsletter looks like a campaign commercial, they'll hit delete, and probably not read future e-mails, even if they're not self-promotional. Focus on the news that affects your constituents. What previous or upcoming legislative action most affects them? Which past or future activities will they be most interested in knowing about? What services do they most need to know about? What is the Member doing in the state/district where they might be able to interact? If your office has the resources available, you might also consider offering topic or issue-based e-newsletters to target specific audiences (environment, defense, health, agriculture, etc.). And if you want to get your press information to reporters, consider providing a separate e-newsletter tailored to the media.

Link to Your Web Site.

Your e-newsletter is an excellent opportunity to bring people to your Web site. Not only can your Web site provide more detailed information about the stories in your e-newsletter, it can also draw people's attention to other items of interest. For example, people who are interested enough in a feature about recent education legislation might click to a complete copy of the Member's statement. The information on your Web site can provide links to related information, such as recent press releases and speeches on education or the education page in your issues section. If you give people an opportunity to learn more about the things that interest them, they will also learn more about the things that interest you. Thus, the e-newsletter, combined with the Web site, can be a powerful tool for building and strengthening relationships with constituents.

Grab Readers Attention with Great Subject Lines and Good Looking Content.

Attention spans are short when it comes to e-mail. If subscribers don't open your e-newsletter as soon as they see it in their inbox, chances are they'll forget about it. Craft your subject line carefully, since it's the first – and often the only – thing they'll see. Put the most interesting and relevant information at the top, where it can be seen in a preview window. If you have the ability, consider sending e-newsletters in HTML format, which can be formatted like a Web page, with colors and graphics that get people's attention. (Just be sure they're not so big that they clog peoples' inboxes! It's best to keep e-mail messages under 100 KB). And do NOT send attachments, especially bulky files like video and audio. Link back to that kind of material on your Web site.

Keep Content Timely and Relevant.

In order to capture readers' interest, e-newsletters must provide fresh information about topics on peoples' minds. If it's in the local news and Congress has something to do with it, it should be reflected in the e-newsletter. Consider providing information that's not available in the media, such as background on relevant legislation, the Member's views on the matter, or links to relevant resources on the Internet.

Send the E-Newsletter Only When You Have Something to Say.

There are no hard, fast rules about how often to send an e-newsletter, but the trick is to send it often enough that people don't forget they're subscribed to your list, but not so often that they get tired of hearing from you. Most congressional e-newsletters are sent weekly, monthly or when a major event occurs. For example, if there's been a big floor vote and your boss is quoted on the front page of the local paper, you could send out a quick e-newsletter with maybe a two-paragraph summary and a link back to a more complete statement. Do not send newsletter just because you've introduced a bill – that may be a major event to you, but not to your constituents. Include that kind of information in your regular e-newsletter.

Give Readers an Opportunity to Do Something.

Direct marketers and grassroots organizations have mastered the art of “the ask” in their e-mails, and they've received a great response. Various studies indicate that between 20-50% of recipients respond in some way to commercial e-mail, way beyond the traditional 2% of direct mail. People provide their e-mail addresses to organizations they want to hear from, and when the organizations ask them to do something, they often do. Marketers ask them to buy products or fill out surveys. Grassroots organizations ask them to volunteer or contact their legislators. Members of Congress can ask them to attend town hall meetings in their areas, provide feedback on current issues, or forward the e-mail to friend. Constituents who subscribe to a Member's e-newsletter want to be informed and involved, so consider giving them opportunities to act, but be sure “the ask” is within House and Senate rules. For example, the House has rules against Members soliciting petitions. And, be sure your office can manage the results in a way that makes readers feel as though it was worth their time to act.

Make It Easy to Subscribe and Unsubscribe.

This is a long-standing and widely acknowledged point of e-mail etiquette. Every e-newsletter should include information about how to be added to or removed from the distribution list. The process should be painless – a click of a button or some other simple task – and, once a person has been added to or removed from the list, their status should remain the same until they request a change. Some communications specialists are under the mistaken belief that, “well they might read it, so I'll send it anyway” – so they make it difficult to unsubscribe to e-newsletters. All this does is annoy the recipient and remind them that you are unresponsive to their request – not the message you want to send to your constituents.

Provide an E-Newsletter Archive on Your Web Site.

Archives not only enable constituents to refer back to something they read before, they also provide prospective subscribers with information to convince them they want to be on your list. If they can see

what kind of information they will receive from you, they can make a more informed decision about giving you their e-mail address.

Provide A Privacy Statement And Stick To It.

In our focus groups with constituents, we learned that some constituents are reluctant to provide Members of Congress with their e-mail addresses because they're concerned the addresses will be used for campaign purposes. Few people outside the Beltway are aware of the strict separation between official and campaign business. For this reason – and many, many others – your office should establish a clear and comprehensive privacy policy about how you will and will not use personal information provided by constituents and post an easy-to-understand privacy statement on your Web site. Then, stick to it. For example, if your privacy policy says that you will only use an e-mail address to send the e-newsletter, do not use it for other targeted mass e-mails. If the policy changes, notify subscribers and give them the opportunity to opt-out, if they choose. In politics, perceptions matter, and when it comes to the thorny issue of privacy, it's better to be clear and cautious than vague and opportunistic.

Building Your E-Newsletter Distribution List

E-mail addresses, with accompanying information about the constituent's interests, is becoming the information gold of political communications. Some Members of Congress recognize this trend, are mining that gold now, and have amassed e-mail lists of more than 20,000 in the House and 75,000 in the Senate. Some companies are now even selling e-mail lists to Members of Congress.

The collection of this information must be done in ways that respect the privacy of the constituent and do not create undue labor burdens on staff. Below are some tips for building an e-newsletter distribution list.

Only Ask For an E-Mail Address.

The more information you require prospective subscribers to provide, the less likely they will be to join your e-newsletter distribution list. For the purposes of sending targeted mail, it is important for your constituent database to include names, addresses, interests, and more. However, for the purpose of an e-newsletter, all you really need is an e-mail address – and that's usually all people will be willing to provide. If you want permission to communicate with as many people as possible, don't use your e-newsletter distribution list to build your database. Limit the amount of information you require of e-newsletter subscribers and build your database through other means.

Place a “Subscribe” Box On Your Home Page.

Make it easy for people who visit your Web site to join your list by placing a “subscribe” box (basically a form with only one field) in a prominent location on your home page. Even better, place it in the same place on every page. That way, visitors to the Web site can subscribe from anywhere on your site.

Ask Callers for E-mail Addresses and Offer E-Newsletter.

It is easier and less expensive to respond to constituent callers via e-mail than postal mail. Offices should ask constituents who phone the office how they would like to receive a response. (It's also a chance to tell constituents, “You'll receive a response quicker via e-mail and it will save the office a little money.”) At that time, you can also ask if they want to be added to the e-newsletter list. Make sure all front office staff

have a clear privacy policy handy to dispel any concerns constituents might have, and assure them that unsubscribing to the e-newsletter is easy.

Refer to the E-Newsletter In Speeches and Responses to Constituents.

What better way to let people know about the e-newsletter than when you have a captive audience? Consider including a line at the bottom of every letter or e-mail to constituents, and at the end of every speech, that says something to the effect of, "If you would like to hear from me on a regular basis, subscribe to my e-newsletter at [Web address]." Don't forget to make information about the e-newsletter, examples or archives of past e-newsletters, and your privacy statement easily accessible from the Web address you provide.

Use Print Newsletters and Events to Invite Constituents to Subscribe.

Consider making the e-newsletter part of any print newsletter, mass mailing, or event. You can advertise both your Web site and the e-newsletter through any of these means, but you can also use them as opportunities to collect e-mail addresses. Any time you send a print newsletter or mass mailing, consider including a mail-in form (with the Web address, of course) to enable people to subscribe to your list. At events, consider placing a clip board in a prominent location with a request for e-mail addresses -- or, better yet, have staff distribute it through the crowd. This places a burden on staff (or interns) to enter the e-mail addresses into your list by hand, but the work is ultimately outweighed by the ability to communicate with more constituents any time you have something to say.

Encourage Subscribers to Send the E-Newsletter to Friends.

In every edition of your e-newsletter, consider including language that encourages people to forward it to others they think might be interested. If they like what they see, many of them will, and then those people become prospective subscribers. It may sound simple, but it's very effective. After all, it's a technique that marketers have been using successfully for ages. In the Internet age, this is called "viral marketing." Ironically, many Members of Congress don't effectively use e-mail because they're afraid their messages will be altered and sent around the Internet. To our knowledge, this has never occurred. However, we do know that Members' unaltered messages have been forwarded around to constituents and even some media, praising the Member's work.

Encourage Teachers, Librarians, and Community Leaders to Make the E-Newsletter Available.

Community leaders may be inclined to make your e-newsletter available to others out of their sense of civic duty. In your communications with these people, consider asking them to provide the e-newsletter on and/or offline so that people who are not aware of it, or who do not have Internet access, may benefit from the information. This will help build your distribution list and enable you to reach people who might not otherwise have access to it.

Weigh the Pros and Cons of Buying a List.

Recently, companies have begun marketing constituent e-mail lists to congressional offices. Most of these lists are created through a process called "appending," where information from e-mail databases are matched with records that have constituent names and postal addresses, such as voter files or phone books, to create lists of verified constituent e-mail addresses. This technique has been used for several

years for commercial marketing purposes, but it is a new technique on Capitol Hill. Because we have not heard of any office's experiences with these e-mail lists, the Congressional Management Foundation's Congress Online Project can offer no advice, except to say that offices considering them should carefully and strategically weigh the potential benefits and drawbacks. And, if there are offices currently using this technique, we would be very interested in hearing their experiences.

Managing Your E-Newsletter

Don't Bite Off More Than You Can Chew.

E-newsletters present wonderful opportunities for communicating with constituents, but they also present a new challenge for an already overworked staff. Before you begin to collect e-mail addresses, have a management plan in place for the e-newsletter. How often will you send it out? What are the goals of the e-newsletter? How will content be developed? Who will be responsible for it? What will the review process be? How will the office manage possible collateral consequences of the e-newsletter (such as incoming e-mail, a growing distribution list, or a more involved constituency)? It's better to know what you're getting into before you begin than after you get constituents hooked on it.

Manage Subscriber Expectations.

Once you establish your e-newsletter policies and strategies, create language for the e-newsletter and the Web site that explains the key points subscribers need to know. For example, if you have established a policy not to respond to e-mail sent as a reply to an e-newsletter, be sure that's conveyed in the e-newsletter (and consider directing them to your Web form or e-mail address as an alternative). The more information you can provide to subscribers, the easier it will be to manage their expectations for communicating with your office.

Use It Or Lose It.

When constituents sign up to receive an e-newsletter, they expect to receive something soon, not at some unidentified future date. Collecting e-mail addresses before you are ready to begin sending an e-newsletter runs two risks. First, many of the e-mail addresses will be outdated, which will mean staff will have to cull the bad addresses from the list. Second, subscribers will have forgotten they gave you their e-mail address and, when they finally receive an e-newsletter from you, will view it as spam from their Member of Congress. As a result, it's better for everyone involved if you do not begin collecting e-mail addresses until you are ready to use them.

Involve the Entire Staff.

A timely and relevant e-newsletter requires that everyone in the office be involved in identifying topics and content. The legislative staff will know which of the past and upcoming bills will be of most interest to constituents. The district/state staff will know what constituents are talking about and what the most important cases and projects are. The press staff will know what's been in the local news. And the mail staff will know what constituents are writing and calling about. Consider making the e-newsletter a topic of your staff meeting or finding other ways of ensuring the e-newsletter has the benefit of everyone's best thinking.

Use Available Tools For Managing and Tracking E-Newsletters.

There are tools available in the House and Senate to make it easier to collect and manage subscriber lists and to create and send e-newsletters. The House and Senate also provide tools to collect and analyze traffic to your Web site, which can help your office understand which stories piqued your subscribers' interest and which did not. These tools can help you more effectively manage, shape, and target your e-newsletter. Vendors are also now offering tools to enable you to track statistics about your e-newsletter, such as how many people open it, how many forward it, and how many click on links within it. These tools are regularly used in direct marketing, but they are new to Capitol Hill. Offices considering purchasing such tools should carefully weigh the benefits and drawbacks before implementing them, since they will be among the first on Capitol Hill to try them.