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There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch: Listbot

By Richard Lowe

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This column is about TANSTAAFL, which is a term from a book by Robert A. Heinlein (one of the best Science Fiction authors that ever lived) called "The Moon Is A Harsh Mistress". The term means "There Ain't No Such Thing As A Free Lunch". This concept is the basis of the plot of the book, which is about a Lunar penal colony and it's attempt to free itself from Earth domination.

Listbot

Some years ago I decided it was time to create an email newsletter. I had been doing quite a bit of research on internet promotion, and it was quite obvious that a newsletter is an essential part of any advertising campaign. I didn't know much about elists at the time, so I more or less used the first service that I found. That service was Listbot.

Listbot was cool. It was easy (almost trivial) to create a list (or as many lists as I wanted). In fact, I soon had finished creating my list and went on to attempt to get people to join (and that's the hard part of the job of any listmaster). Listbot seemed to be the perfect service, and the price of a small advertisement at the end of each newsletter seemed very reasonable.

I kept my mailing list on Listbot for about a year until I more or less outgrew their service. Oh, it would handle my list easily (well under 500 subscribers), but I was finding the user interface awkward and difficult to use. So I went off to find a different service, and after some searching and experimenting, settled on Bravenet's mailing list.

Moving the list was a pain but fortunately it was fairly small so I managed to do it in a few hours. For the next few months, I was happy on Bravenet's

service, until I ran into the 500 email address limit. At that time, Bravenet did not provide a solution for larger lists.

Thus, I had to move my list again, and this time I moved it to my own list server. Now I have none of the limits forced upon me by other list services. With any luck, I will never have to move the list again.

I never did delete my Listbot account, and thus received occasional mailings from them. A few weeks ago, I received an email which I found interesting. Here is the first paragraph of that email.

"Dear ListBot User: We are sending this letter to inform you that effective

Aug. 20, 2001, we are discontinuing the central ListBot service. ListBot has become a very popular free service, and we've been pleased to offer this valuable tool to both consumers and business users. As a provider of services for small and medium-sized businesses, our main goal is the continual improvement of services to meet the growing needs of business users. To achieve this goal, we have launched the new List Builder service, an enhanced e-mail marketing tool that will take the place of ListBot."

Is there a foul smell in the air?

What's the problem with this? Well, I've been seeing this more and more lately and it really ticks me off. This is when an excellent service is picked up by a large company and ruined, destroyed or simply closed down. The company cannot make the service fit their business model so they simply discard it without a single care that human beings are the recipients of their services and products.

Almost as bad is when the service is modified to fit the larger company's standards and the previously excellent tool or service is made more-or-less worthless. The best example of this behavior is the destruction of the Webring system by Yahoo! in September of 2000.

http://www.internet-tips.net/Advertising/Webrings_blacktuesday.htm

These companies have totally forgotten (or don't care) that people, real flesh-and-blood human beings with feelings, use and depend upon their services.

Listbot is an old service which has always been free (advertising supported). A few years ago Microsoft purchased the service, presumably to be able to offer this kind of service to their customers. They added Listbot to the offerings on their Bcentral service and promoted it all over the

internet.

Over the years, I have looked long and hard at Bcentral, and to tell the complete truth I found it to be a highly overpriced hodgepodge of hastily patched together offerings which was difficult to use and mostly of limited value. Even so, the free version of Listbot was one of the better list processing services available. Because of this (and because of Listbot's long history) it became very popular for small lists and very small businesses.

Of course, Microsoft is not really shutting down Listbot. No, what they are doing is attempting to get people to pay for the service, at a rate of about \$269 per year. This price allows for the sending of 10,000 emails per month, and you can purchase more if you desire. You have the option of paying for the new service or moving your list elsewhere.

What's wrong with this? A good analogy is the 710 freeway debate going on in

Pasadena, California at this time.

For the last 20 years the powers that be have been trying to build a 2 mile extension to the 710 freeway. The problem is the freeway extension will go through a beautiful, well established neighborhood. It requires the demolition of a substantial number of old houses and the relocation of a number of people. On top of that, freeways tend to divide communities and isolate people from one another.

The people of Pasadena have made it clear over and over again that they do not want this freeway extension. However, the government, in it's infinite wisdom, has, for whatever reason, been trying to get it built in spite of the people's wishes.

The government has forgotten (or doesn't care) that the houses that they want to tear down are inhabited by families, some of whom have been living there for generations. The freeway is "for the greater good" and the little folk, in other words normal people, don't count.

Large companies tend to have the same attitude. It didn't matter to Yahoo that hundreds of thousands of webmasters depended upon their ring system – the only thing that mattered was the bottom line. And it does not matter to Microsoft that tens of thousands of list owners, serving millions of people, depend upon their service. The only thing that Microsoft recognizes is that they are not making the required amount of money from their service.

The argument that "free services no longer work" does not hold water.

Listbot was free before the incredible expansion in internet advertising, and it's certain that, with able and intelligent management, the service could have remained free and profitable after the collapse of internet advertising.

Is it wrong for a big company to want to make money for it's shareholders? Of course not. Shareholders are people with emotions and feelings as well. What is wrong is the destruction of a service which is used by so many people, which was profitable and could be made profitable again, simply to further corporate goals without a single thought or care for the people effected by the change.

Just as when Yahoo destroyed webring, tens of thousands of listmasters now have to scramble to find alternative list hosting services. Some will make the difficult choice to use a paid service, some will find free services and others (probably the majority) will simply abandon their lists forever. This is the saddest part of this story – lists which have been lovingly maintained for years will simply be destroyed. These lists will be burned in the name of corporate profits.

It's sad and pitiful at the same time. Take note when you see these thoughtless and careless events occur – you are witnessing the results of

incompetence at best and malicious evil at worst.

Richard Lowe Jr. is the webmaster of Internet Tips And Secrets at <http://www.internet-tips.net> – Visit our website any time to read over 1,000 complete FREE articles about how to improve your internet profits, enjoyment and knowledge.

The 'ListBot Dilemma' and List Hosting Alternatives

By Angela Wu

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I'm disgusted.

On June 22, 2001, one of the most popular list hosts announced that it was replacing it's excellent service with a 'new and improved' version. We have to save all our subscriber lists and archives by August 20, or they'll be lost forever – unless, of course, we upgrade to their new service.

You might already know that I'm talking about ListBot. Yes, the extremely popular ListBot is to be replaced with something called 'ListBuilder'.

Now I don't begrudge them for eliminating the 'free ListBot'; they're a business, after all, and they have to try to remain profitable. What bothers me is that they don't seem to care one whit about what this means to their customers – free AND paying customers.

Let me add that they had a lot of loyal customers – people who loved their service and were willing, even happy, to pay for it. I was one of them ... until recently.

This change has a big effect on those of us who used ListBot to manage our newsletters. Our ListBot subscription links will now be defunct. In other words, years of hard work promoting our subscription links – in articles, eBooks, links, and so on – are completely *wasted*.

THAT is why I'm disgusted. It's hard to believe that ListBot would behave so callously towards their loyal, paying fans.

My trust is broken. I loved ListBot. I *don't*, however, love what they've done. So instead of upgrading to their new ListBuilder service, I went looking for another solution.

SCRIPTS

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One option is to purchase a script to manage your list. Two such examples are:

- == Opt-in Lightning, <http://www.optinlightning.com/>
- == Mail Master Pro, <http://www.cgitoolbox.com/package.html>

With scripts, there's a number of things to consider. For example, does your web host allow you to install and run scripts? Is there an extra charge for doing so? Do you know how to install a script – or know someone who can do it for you?

On the good side, once installed, your list management is completely under your control. No more relying on another company to handle your newsletter! You typically pay a one-time purchase fee for the script (and possibly the installation as well) and it's yours to use forever.

#### FREE LIST HOSTS

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ListBot used to have a free version (ad-supported). If you're determined to only use a free list host, two of the most popular are:

== Yahoo Groups, <http://groups.yahoo.com/>

== Topica, <http://www.topica.com/>

If, however, you choose to use a free service, be aware that although they're free *now*, they may not *remain* free. At any time they could choose to start charging for their services (like so many previously 'free' online services have done) ... or they could withdraw services altogether.

Heck, ListBot was run by Microsoft. If Microsoft couldn't make it work, how much longer do you think these other services will remain free?

FEE-BASED LIST HOSTS

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While searching for a solution to my 'ListBot dilemma', I came across a large number of list hosts. What I was looking for was a host that could provide all the usual newsletter management features, along with reliability and a strong dedication to customer service.

In terms of money, fee-based list hosts usually work on

a subscription basis. You pay a fee periodically (every month, quarter, or year, for example) in exchange for the ability to send a certain number of messages each month. Some list hosts will charge you based on how many messages you send (for example, \$1 for every 1000 messages).

Two list hosts that were highly recommended to me are:

== SparkList, <http://www.sparklist.com/services/hosting/>

== ListChannel, <http://buildyourhomebiz.com/listchannel.html>

I finally chose to go with ListChannel (SparkList has a minimum of \$50/month, which is more than I want to spend). So far I'm happy with ListChannel: it's fast, reliable, and their customer service is consistently prompt and helpful.

If you're a 'ListBot Refugee', ListChannel has set up a special discount for you (good only until August 20, 2001): <http://buildyourhomebiz.com/listbotspecial.html>

Angela is the editor of the Netpreneur's Notebook Ezine, a newsletter for online business 'newbies'. Pick up your free subscription today by visiting <http://buildyourhomebiz.com/newsletter.html>



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