

Use a List-server to Distribute Your Newsletter

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By Stephen Bucaro

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By Stephen Bucaro

If you publish an e-newsletter or e-zine, you know that administering your subscriber list is a big chore. To maintain the list, you may be using an email program on your computer or a CGI program on your server. One advantage to maintaining the list yourself is that you know it is not being shared by anyone else.

However, there are four good reasons why you should host your list on a list-server.

1. People can subscribe or unsubscribe from your list automatically with absolutely no work by you.
2. People often subscribe with an email alias or forwarded email account. You send your newsletter to one address, then receive a delivery failure or unsubscribe from an address not on your list. You can't delete it from your list.

3. People subscribe to the list and then forget that they subscribed. They accuse you of spamming. This can't be avoided entirely, but if your list is hosted on a list-server, you can respond by saying "all subscribes and unsubscribes are handled automatically by the list server, you have no control of it."

4. If you plan to sell advertising in your newsletter, most advertisers and advertisement networks will require you to verify your subscriber count. If you maintain the list yourself, the only way you can do that is to share your list with them. You don't want to do that.

If your list is hosted on a list-server, the number of subscribers is there for all to see, provided by an independent third party.

Choosing a List-server

Many list-servers disappeared in the ".com" bust. The best one, listbot, was bought by Microsoft. It is now called bCentral and costs \$30.00 per month. Being a list owner, it is your responsibility to keep your list private. With the well publicized ethical problems at Microsoft, I would not put my subscriber list in their hands.

Most of the lists ended up on Yahoo. They are in the domain <http://groups.yahoo.com>. I find yahoo groups very complicated to configure. I also worry about Yahoo's privacy policy. Yahoo Group Help states, "If you use Groups, it is very likely that other users will be able to see your email address."

<http://www.topica.com> has the easiest to setup list-server. However, it is primarily a group mailing list application that must be configured correctly to perform the newsletter list function. Topica's privacy policy states, "The email addresses of participants are partially obscured so they are not obtainable by unauthorized visitors."

Configuring the List-server

To make a list server function as a newsletter list requires that you modify its default configuration. The

following configurations should be set.

1. List Type: Read-only Announcement list. Only the owner of the list can post messages to the list.
2. Subscription: Does not require owner approval for people to join the list.
3. Archive: Readable by subscribers only. If non-subscribers can read the newsletter, why should anyone subscribe?

Using the List Server

Now all you have to do is post your newsletter to the list and it will be delivered to all the subscribers. You will still be required to deal with delivery failures. If the

reason for the delivery failure is because the email box no-longer exists, then you should delete that address from your list immediately.

A delivery failure can also occur because the email box is too full, or because the mail server is down. You should establish a policy for dealing with delivery failures. You have three choices.

1. Ignore them and let the number of messages returned because of delivery failure grow to enormous size. Advertisers will not use newsletters if they find out they are paying for a large number of non-deliverable addresses.
2. Delete them immediately. If you do that, you may be removing many subscribers who only have the temporary problems mentioned above.
3. Keep a delivery failure address on your list until it fails three times. After three consecutive delivery failures, it is unlikely that the situation will clear up, so you may as well delete the member.

If you want to publish a quality e-newsletter or e-zine, you need to spend more time working on content and less time administering the subscriber list. For this reason, you should use a list-server application. But make sure

that you are comfortable with the operation of the list-server before you commit your valuable subscriber list.

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Check Your Server!

By Dale Sexton

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Do you use your own virtual server to send out your magazine? I do. Be warned, I have discovered bad things that can happen when you don't check your server before you send to your list.

Last week, I was getting ready to send out to my subscribers. Earlier in the day, the owner of the server warned me that it would be down for upgrades. I worked on the newsletter waiting for the server to come back up. When it did I started testing my newsletter, sending it out to myself (or so I thought).

The software I use lets me add or change the list before I send out my email. As far as I knew, I added only myself to that list. I tested several times working on different aspects of the newsletter, trying to make sure links worked, color was right, images worked, and plain text looked good.

I even amused myself sending the 'test' mails from R.M.(rim) Ryder with the address of .

The newsletter was being sent to my email address, so as far as I was concerned, everything was working perfectly. I put the finishing touches on the newsletter and sent it to myself again when I got an email that made me pale.

"UNSUBSCRIBE!!!!

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You have sent me 6 emails in the last 10 minutes! I have Unsubscribed!
Stop sending NOW!"

I couldn't understand what was happening. In the next half hour I received 50 unsubscribers. I checked the list to see what was going on. In my mind the only name on the list I was sending to was mine.

When I pulled up my ftp program, last weeks list was on it. I went to my software to change the list but it wouldn't change. The only thing that would cause it not to change was if the chmod settings had changed. They did. I had sent my 'test' to my list as it was last week.

The upgrade on the server had reset all the settings to everything in my cgi-bin. After it was all said and done, I lost over 200

subscribers. My host is aware of the problem and have done a number of good things for my site, so I see no need to move. The real goal of this article is to make web owners aware of checking their site frequently.

Though the program I use is unusual in that the mailing list can change in the cgi-bin, I had other programs that users brought to my attention were not working. What this means is that as a website owner, you have to check your site all the time. Don't trust that it works.

Dale Sexton owns & operates 'PageCrafters.net', & publishes 'Small Business Tools magazine'. Both focus on tools & tips for small business. <mailto:pagecrafters@pagecrafters.net> Sign up for 'SBT magazine' at: <http://pagecrafters.net/newsletter.html>

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