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A Few Good Email Newsletter Tools

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*Idealware intends to provide rigorous reviews of many different kinds of nonprofit software. However, it will take some time to create all these detailed reviews. Our **A Few Good Tools** series provides some thoughts in the meantime by recommending software that is used and liked by the Idealware community. They may not be the very best of their kind, but they have worked well for us. Perhaps they will also work for you.*

So you're looking for a way to send out email in bulk. You've thought through your strategy (useful, well written information to a list of people who are eager to get it, right?) and identified your needs. Maybe you want to send fancy eNewsletters, or maybe just text action alerts. Perhaps you're hoping for a tool that can send emails to tens of thousands of people, or perhaps just a few hundred. Maybe you need something that can integrate with your offline database, customize the content for large donors, send emails to tailored segments of your list, or allow custom eNewsletter templates.

Regardless of your precise needs, you no doubt are hoping for a tool that is reliable, affordable, and easy to use. We asked seven nonprofit technology professionals what tools have worked well for them. We then combined their thoughts with some of the collective wisdom of various listserves and forums to come up with a set of solid tools that might work for you.

Tools You Already Have

It's likely that you can send email newsletters with the software you already own. While these options won't provide sophisticated reports or effectively deliver hundreds of emails, the options might be a practical choice for a very small list.

- **Outlook (or other email browsers):** Outlook and other standard email browsers will certainly work to send a couple dozen emails, even ones with complex formatting and images. However, this method has some substantial disadvantages. First, putting lots of email addresses into the BCC field (the standard procedure for emailing to a large anonymous group) may cause your email to be flagged as spam. Second, you'll have to manually manage your list. There's a lot of effort involved in adding new subscribers, deleting those who request to be removed, and monitoring emails that are returned. Remember that you are legally responsible for removing those people who request it. If you send more than a few dozen emails at a time, or send to a list on a periodic basis, you should look beyond these standard email browsers.
- **Mailman (or other email list tools offered by your web host):** If you are hosting your website with a commercial shared hosting service, there is a good chance that your hosting package already includes Mailman for free. Check your website control panel. This email list tool will allow you to post a plain text or graphic message to a large distribution list by sending the message to a specific email address. It's not the easiest tool to use and doesn't include easy access to many common features, such as reports of how many opened an email or clicked on a link, or exporting your list of subscribers. If you're sending more than a hundred or so emails at a time, again, look beyond these options.

A few caveats about both of these tools. These software packages send email from your own domain and email server. When using any tool like this, you need to be concerned that your

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emails will be trapped by Spam filters and never make it to your subscribers. Organizations that send millions of emails (like the hosted email companies listed below) work carefully with ISPs (such as AOL and Yahoo) to ensure their email is delivered. You can't easily do this as an individual organization.

If you send out a lot of emails, some people are likely to complain that your emails are spam, regardless of how careful you are. If this happens, all your emails could be labeled as spam, or your domain could even be blacklisted. If you are blacklisted, major ISPs will refuse to deliver any email from you, including your organization's day-to-day email. If you are only sending out a thousand or two thousand emails a month, you probably don't need to be concerned, but at larger volumes, it is well worth looking into other options.

And one final issue: if your email is hosted through a shared server, that web host may put a cap on the number of emails you can send per hour or per day. This could be as low as 50 or 100 per hour, and it could simply stop sending emails after this time. If you're going to be sending out to groups of 50 or more, check with your web host to make sure they'll go through.

Do these methods sound problematic? They are. If you're serious about sending emails in bulk to more than a few dozen people, there are better options below.

Free List Management Tools

There are three online tools that allow you send emails to a list for free: **Google Groups** (<http://groups.google.com/>), **Yahoo Groups** (<http://groups.yahoo.com/>), and **Topica's free service** (<http://lists.topica.com/>). These three tools are very similar to each other: they allow you to create a list with an unlimited number of people and send plain text emails to that list. While most typically used for discussion lists – to allow a group of people to email each other – there's no reason you can't use them to send text-only emails to a group.

People can subscribe or unsubscribe by sending an email to a particular address. All three show substantial advertisements at the top of the email messages you send, and none allow you to track how many opened an email or clicked on a link. The emails are sent off the services' server, so the service will handle some of the issues around deliverability and blacklisting.

Hosted Mass Emailing Tools

One of the most common ways to send email newsletters is to use one of the hosted services that are set up to handle precisely this function.

Hosted email tools typically allow you to manage your list, create emails, and view reports through a web-based interface. Most will allow you to send formatted emails; some provide tools to let you easily format them. You can generally integrate them into your website so that you can take subscriptions online, and the tools will automatically manage unsubscribe requests and delete email addresses that are no longer valid. Reports allow you to see how many opened a particular eNewsletter and how many clicked on a link.

These tools minimize the possibility of being blacklisted as a spammer. In addition, many of the vendors proactively manage relationships with ISPs to prevent spam filter problems.

- **Electric Embers NPOGroups** (www.electricembers.net): NPOGroups has perhaps more in common with tools like Yahoo Groups than the other services in this section – it provides a similar service without the advertising and a bit more control over the list. It doesn't easily support HTML formatting. It is priced on a sliding scale, starting at \$10/month for 2500 subscribers, and \$5 per extra 5000.
- **GraphicMail** (www.graphicmail.com): GraphicMail offers 5000 emails (in total) free to nonprofits (notable branding for GraphicMail is included in your emails in this free version; the branding can be removed for additional cost). Additional emails are about half a cent per email. The tool has solid editing and reporting tools, including a HTML editor that allows you to create your own templates.
- **Network for Good powered by Groundspring Email Now** (www.groundspring.org): A good basic service, with solid deliverability and reports. If you want to send formatted newsletters, you must create them in a different tool and paste the HTML in. At \$29.95/

month for 10,000 emails and \$1 or less for every 1000 thereafter, Groundspring is affordably priced for mid-sized lists, and becomes a great deal for bigger ones. Groundspring is a nonprofit itself and is committed to the nonprofit sector.

- **ConstantContact** (www.constantcontact.com): A commonly used tool in both the business and nonprofit worlds, ConstantContact provides solid templates, segmenting, and reporting features. The pricing scheme is friendly to small lists: \$15/month for under 500 subscribers, \$30/month for under 2500, and so on up to \$150/month for up to 25,000 subscribers. However, several people mentioned trouble with spam filters when using ConstantContact.
- **Emma** (www.myemma.com): Emma is a good solution for those who want to send good looking formatted emails without messing around with HTML. You can install a custom template (designed by you, a consultant, or by Emma themselves) and then easily change the text and images for each newsletter. It has solid reporting tools. It's \$30/month for up to 1000 emails, \$45/month for up to 2500, and so on through a number of levels, reaching \$600/month for 100,000 emails.
- **CampaignMonitor** (www.campaignmonitor.com): Intended for web designers who can build their own HTML emails, CampaignMonitor doesn't provide any template options, but offers good custom fields and reporting functionality as well as solid deliverability. At \$5 per email campaign, plus \$0.01 per email, the service is very affordable for small lists but probably overpriced for large ones.
- **Topica** (www.topica.com): In addition to its well known free service, Topica offers a solid paid option. The tool offers sophisticated website integration, lots of custom fields, and powerful list segmentation tools as well as the standard newsletter template and report functions. It's \$50/month for up to 5000 subscribers (ask about an additional nonprofit discount), but goes up quickly from there: the next level is \$250/month for up to 25,000 subscribers.
- **WhatCounts** (www.whatcounts.com): WhatCounts offers premium email blasting software worth considering if you have a large list and are serious about investing in your email communications: it starts at \$600/month for up to 50,000 emails. Emails are sent from an IP address dedicated to your organization, which eliminates the problems of being blacklisted for other people's emails, and they offers several different APIs to allow you to integrate your email list with other constituent databases.

Hundreds of these bulk emailing tools are used by both nonprofits and businesses. While the ones listed above are some of the most commonly used, many more were mentioned by at least one of our contributors. If you're looking for more options, consider [CoolerEmail](#), [MailChimp](#), [eZine Director](#), [Patron Mail](#), [Vertical Response](#), [Exact Target](#), or [AWeber](#).

For the Technically Inclined

If your staff includes someone with skill in PHP, it's worth considering **PHPList**. PHPList is a free open source email application with solid subscriber management and HTML email creation tools, although it's light on reports. It is generally similar to the basic hosted tools listed above, but needs to be installed onto your web server. It can be installed onto most shared hosts without problem.

If you're already running [Drupal](#) (a common open source content management system), or [CivicSpace](#) (a specific package of Drupal with various Drupal plug-ins), don't overlook the possibility of using these tools to manage your email newsletters. Both include CiviMail, a module that handles basic bulk emailing functionalities.

Remember, however, that all of these tools send emails through your own email server, so the caveats about sending eNewsletters through Outlook or Mailman apply here as well: you will need to consider whether you'll be able to manage your relationships with ISPs in order to keep your emails out of subscribers' spam filters, and to keep yourself from being blacklisted.

For More Integrated Internet Strategies

If you interact with your constituents primarily by email, the tools listed above should work well.

But if you are also tracking their actions, donations, or what they look at on your website, you'll need to think through how you are tracking and integrating all this data. At a minimum, look for email software that allows you to import and export data in useful formats.

You may want to consider software that can manage all of your constituent data and activities, rather than using a separate eNewsletter tool. There are a number of online integrated tools that handle a broad swath of internet features. [Democracy in Action](#) has a particular focus on and strong support for email campaigns; it starts at \$100/month for up to 3000 subscribers. [eTapestry](#), [GivenGain](#), [MemberClicks](#), [LocalVoice](#), [Convio](#), and [Kintera](#) are integrated tools that might also be of interest.

For More Information

[Idealware Online Seminar Recording: Choosing eNewsletter Software](#)

Email newsletters are a great way to stay in touch with and grow your audience, but it can be complex to send and track thousands of emails. In this recording of an online seminar, we walk through what you need to know in order to setup, send, and track eNewsletters effectively, and talk about some of the reliable and affordable tools most commonly used for mass emailing, such as Vertical Response, EmailNow, ConstantContact, NPOGroups, CampaignMonitor, Emma, Topica, and more. The recording is \$20 per person. Or check out our [seminar schedule](#) for a live seminar!

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