

LEADING the WAY Tech Connects

With family schedules loaded up

more than ever before, PTA leaders are faced with a serious challenge: How do you keep in touch with time-starved parents? In many cases, technology can provide the means to stay connected with these parents and keep them involved in the work of the organization. If used wisely, digital technology can provide quick and affordable ways to promote your events and programs, distribute needed resources, and recruit new members and volunteers.

Whether you're building a website, sending out an electronic newsletter, or posting an online survey, the first question to ask is whether the software or device you're using is the right tool for the job. Also, it's crucial for you to know which technologies your members have access to and which types of technology they are more inclined to use. For example, if few of your members have high-speed Internet access, you'll want to use fewer animated features on your website.

It's more than just clicking "send"

E-mail remains one of the most effective, inexpensive ways to stay in touch with your members. With e-mail, you can overcome communication barriers such as time pressures and distance. Your members can read and, if necessary, respond to your e-mails when they have the time to do so. E-mail can also be used to quickly mobilize volunteers on a particular issue.

Below are a few ways you can use e-mail to keep members informed and involved.

- * Use electronic newsletters to highlight PTA events, upcoming meetings, and new material posted on your PTA's website. Keep the newsletter items brief and lively.
- * Use e-mail to send out meeting notices and agendas (sometimes, you can shorten a meeting by discussing topics via e-mail beforehand).
- * Make electronic versions of frequently used documents so they can be quickly distributed via e-mail.

When sending out bulk e-mail, consider using an online application such as Yahoo! Groups (<http://groups.yahoo.com>) or Google Groups (<http://groups.google.com>). Both services are free and easy to use, and neither requires special software.



More savvy Web users could opt to use an e-mail list management system such as Lyris (www.lyris.com). Lyris provides more flexibility but requires a bit more technical knowledge. Also, Lyris is not free.

Keep them coming back to your website

It's not just a pleasant-looking website that will keep people coming back. The material offered on your website must be useful and easy to find. If parents have to spend time hunting for a particular resource, they'll get frustrated and probably not return. Here are some tips for creating a PTA website that members will use regularly:

- * Keep text brief.
- * Break your information into bullet points and list the most important items at the top. Be aware of the "fold" of your Web pages—some users may not scroll down to find important information.
- * List your events, programs, and fundraisers, and offer a brief description of each. Consider how members will use this information and what format they would find easiest to navigate.
- * Highlight specific volunteer opportunities; provide information about each, including the hours involved, location, and goals.
- * Keep PTA contact information up to date.
- * Describe the purposes of your PTA, and anything else people should know about your PTA.

Departments

For parents who want to be involved in your PTA but often are unable to participate in activities, your PTA's website may serve as their main connection with the organization. Help these parents continue to feel connected to your PTA by regularly freshening up the website content:

- * Highlight and post new resources, articles, and newsletters as they become available. Remove outdated material.
- * Recognize volunteers with messages of appreciation and photos of them helping out.

Other ways to connect

Blogs—A “blog” (short for “Web log”) is a series of items posted on the Internet—often with a more personal touch. Blogs are usually maintained by an individual or a small group of people. PTAs can use blogs to provide updates on ongoing projects, to describe new developments within the PTA, and to post motivational messages from volunteers. Blogs can also be a good option for maintaining a cheap and simple local unit website. There is a free blog service called Blogger (www.blogger.com).

Bulletin boards—Internet-based bulletin boards provide a venue for members to have online discussions. These are places to ask questions, share ideas, and give feedback. Usually, a bulletin board has a specific stated purpose and there is an individual who serves

as moderator. Visit www.pta.org/bulletinboards to see PTAs national bulletin boards.

Podcasts—Podcasts are audio files available over the Internet. PTAs may use podcasts to broadcast interviews with PTA leaders or key members of the school community. A podcast could also feature a recorded speech or the voices of your membership.

Social networking sites—Many parents have heard of MySpace (www.myspace.com) and Friendster (www.friendster.com) because of safety issues pertaining to children. These services are not just for kids, though. Social networking sites can provide a quick and easy way for members to communicate with each other. Among the functions available are online event invitations, blogs, photo hosting, and bulk e-mail sending. These services tend to be free and very user-friendly.

As the digital age continues to unfold, PTA leaders must keep up with the changes and decide whether their PTAs can benefit from putting new technologies to use. Your job is to evaluate the usefulness of these new avenues and decide on the best ways to keep your time-pressed members connected to the organization. **OC**

Ted Villaire is the managing editor of Our Children magazine. Derek Phillips, managing editor of www.pta.org, contributed to this article.