

Using and Managing Scouting Mailing Lists

Sean Scott

Cub Scout Roundtable Commissioner
Cub Scout Training Chairman
Tahquitz District, California Inland Empire Council

The popularity of email makes it possible for any Scouting organization, from units to councils, to keep leaders and parents abreast of activities, news and events like never before. Communication can take place at the click of a button, and at little or no cost. Best of all, set up and administration of mailing lists is a simple task that doesn't require you to learn a programming language or buy expensive hardware or software!

Overview of List Services

Simply put, a list service is bulk-mailing tool. Individuals subscribe to the service, and when a message is sent by email to the server's address, it is relayed within a few minutes to every member of the group. Thus, tens, hundreds or even thousands of individuals can be reached through a single email address.

List servers are most often used to manage discussion groups. Each group is categorized and listed so that visitors can search for and find groups that interest them. By joining a group, members receive the benefits of near instant communication with others they might otherwise never know, sharing information, opinion and advice.

Each group has one or more owners or moderators who manage the list, monitor discussions, and perform simple administration. The technical details, such as maintaining security, archiving messages and processing messages and subscriptions, are handled by the hosting service.

Advantages of using a List Server

- **Permanence:** Your host should make regular, reliable backups of your group. It's unlikely that they will lose your information, whereas information kept on an individual's personal computer may be more susceptible to machine failure.
- **Security:** Most hosts allow the list owner to define a number of security options that can be tailored to protect the privacy of your members email addresses.
- **Ease of Transition:** When the responsibility of maintaining the list changes, the new administrator simply has to be given permission to do so. The change is otherwise seamless because everything necessary to list operation is stored at the host.
- **History:** Past messages are stored and can be reviewed and searched if necessary.
- **Features:** Most list servers provide more than just mail. They can include a file area for storage of documents and programs that interest your group, a place to record relevant Internet bookmarks, the ability to maintain

databases, calendars, create polls, and even support chat sessions among members.

Considerations for Starting Scouting Lists

When selecting a host, you should decide whether your needs are best served by a free- or fee-based service.

Free services are obviously attractive, but come at the expense of advertising banners appended to the top or bottom of each message. Make sure that the host does not advertise any product or service that is inconsistent with Scouting's principles, or that the host will allow you to exclude such advertisements from your group.

If a fee-based service seems to be the best option, make sure that the costs are reasonable. There should be a commitment from the unit, district or council to continue paying the bills and maintaining the service in years to come.

Some hosts offer both options, and allow you to go from a free to paid service and back again. This flexibility can be convenient when advertising isn't preferred, but future funding is questionable.

This is one of the most important decisions to be made when starting a group. Some up front investigation and commitments can prevent the difficulty of having to migrate your list to another service later on.

(Note: My main experience is with Yahoo!Groups. Yahoo! is a fairly stable host, and they offer an impressive array of services. They have also been very responsive to the concerns of Scouting groups when it comes to advertising by not putting adult-oriented or other inappropriate banners in Scouting groups. Yahoo! recently phased-out its adult-oriented hosting services in an effort to be a family oriented content provider. I own or moderate several groups through Yahoo!, and have been generally pleased with their level of service. Other services are listed at the end of this presentation.)

After deciding on a provider, you will need to settle on the type of list that best suits your group needs. Most groups are discussion oriented, and give all participants the freedom to post messages. If there is a concern that the group will be inundated with messages, jokes and virus warnings, it can be set to moderated status. Configured this way, all messages (or only messages from certain individuals) are approved by a moderator before being sent to the group.

For lists with the primary purpose of distributing information, such as newsletters and event bulletins, an announcement group is probably the best option. Announcement groups allow only the moderators and owners to post messages. Messages from anyone else are sent to the moderators, but not the rest of the list.

Privacy Concerns

It seems that as we gain more access to information, we lose some privacy in the bargain. Prospective members of your list will have to weigh their desire for privacy against the value of the information you provide.

In a typical, discussion based list, the sender's original email address will usually appear in the header of the message they send. Anyone with access to the list can compile this information into their own mailing list, to be used for unsolicited bulk mailings, or to attempt to gain information about the individuals on the list. Furthermore, the host may include a member page, showing names and email addresses.

Since a Scouting list may include discussions that reveal meeting times, unit numbers, and the names of youth members, serious thought should be exercised to protect this information. Fortunately, many hosts provide the list owner options to improve the privacy and security of identities.

Membership Approval: One option allows the administrator to approve all new memberships. While adding slightly to the workload of running the list, the owner can keep positive control over who is a member, approving only those that have a legitimate interest in the group.

Public and Private Groups: Groups may also be public or private. Private groups will not allow visitors to browse archived messages or member lists. Public groups are openly accessible to everyone.

Listed and Unlisted Groups: The list owner can opt to create the group as unlisted, meaning that it will not appear in directories or searches. Such a group is inaccessible except by invitation, and its growth limited to only those that the owner knows. Listed groups can be found by keyword searches.

Privacy Options: The owner can decide how members and the public can access individual features of the group. For example, the message archive can be set so that only members may view it, while the member listing can be restricted to only the moderators.

Content of Newsletter and Announcement Lists

If you've created a discussion group, your members will determine the content. But if you're creating a newsletter, you will need to provide the information on a regular basis. You'll also need to format it in such a way that leaders and parents will want to read it.

Each of us undoubtedly has an opinion about what will make a leader read their announcement from start to finish. I am no exception, and share my philosophy on newsletters, following several months spent promoting monthly roundtable meetings and district events through an announcement list.

- Put your most important message first, so that if a reader opens the message and scans a few lines, they will at least get that much.
- Give leaders an incentive to read your message from start to finish. Humor, a contest, prize or a search for a hidden clue can give reason for your audience to look over your entire announcement.
- Always include information on how to contact the list owner and how to unsubscribe.
- Many people do not read their email on a daily basis. Send your announcement early enough that members will still have time to plan, even if they don't get your message for 3-4 days.

- Combine multiple small announcements into a single larger message. Many people don't want their inbox inundated with messages, and will unsubscribe from your list.
- Use a meaningful subject line that identifies your message. Some email clients and services will filter messages from mailing lists as bulk or junk mail, and place them in a special folder. If your subject line doesn't communicate the content of your message, it's likely to be deleted as unwanted or simply go unread.

More information on list services

Free service providers

Topica - <http://www.topica.com/>
Coollist - <http://www.coollist.com/>
ListBot - <http://www.listbot.com/>
Prodigy - <http://goodstuff.prodigy.com/Lists/>
VPMail - <http://list.to/srv/Homepage>
POBox.com - <http://www.listbox.com/>
Mail-List.com - <http://www.mail-list.com/>
Yahoo! – <http://groups.yahoo.com/>

Lists o'lists! Directories of mail server providers

<http://catalog.com/vivian/mailing-list-providers.html>
<http://www.gweep.bc.ca/%7Eedmonds/usenet/ml-providers.html>

More information on list services

http://everythingemail.net/email_discussion.html