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### **Social Media Versus the Listserver: You Don't Have to Choose**

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"Power in America today is control of the means of communication." —*Theodore White, American political journalist, historian, and novelist during the 1960s*

What is the best electronic vehicle for communicating with members? Is it still email and listservers? Or is it LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media forums? Or are blogs the way to go?

Some association staff would tell you that listservers are outdated and social media forums like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter and discussion blogs are the most viable ways to communicate these days.

Social media is indeed fashionable and, on the surface, may seem to have replaced listservers. However, nothing is further from the truth. Listservers, social media forums, and blogs each serve a distinct purpose and are geared toward diverse audiences, all of whom receive information differently. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. (See chart below.)

### **A Closer Look at Listservers, Forums, and Blogs**

The **listserver**, whose name originated from the software named Listserv, was the initial technology-based communication tool for associations. Its primary function has been to serve as an email variation on the traditional mailing list or newsletter.

Although it still serves this function, the listserver has found a secondary role as a means for members-only, closed discussions and the sharing of proprietary information. For example, if some of your members are purchasing new software for their company, they may want to use a closed members-only listserver to get feedback on different products. Such a situation could foster a "safe" environment for member-to-member communication, without the risk of offending vendors and solicitors.

This type of discussion is better suited for a listserver environment (versus an open social media platform), where confidentiality, transparency of opinions and experiences, and an open exchange of information exists.

**Forums**, such as the discussion forums provided by LinkedIn groups and Facebook pages, offer the option of an open or a closed environment. Forums serve as a virtual meeting place for individuals with similar interests,

backgrounds, or association memberships. These forums, when used effectively, offer an environment for a great exchange of ideas, best practices, industry trends, and topical discussions.

Emerging from these forums is Twitter. As more and more of these groups open their discussions to a broader base of participants, their discussions become more and more subjective and exposed to general view. These forums become more transparent as advertisers and vendors circumvent partnership agreements, join group discussions, and poach the association's membership for selling opportunities. Discussions often turn into sales pitches that muddle objectivity.

In this environment, it is important for your association to appoint a group manager to monitor discussions and make sure they remain on topic and useful.

**A blog** is yet another creature that roams the electronic communication terrain. The term has taken on a much more complex definition as it has evolved over the years. Depending on your association's objective, a blog can serve different purposes. Initially intended to provide an ongoing web log of discussion or activity, the blog serves as a one-way form of communication. The blog's administrator controls the topic, and—although he or she may allow comments—it is rarely without permission and prior overview (set by predetermined ground rules).

## Picking the Right Tools

Since each of these tools has a distinct purpose, one possibility is to integrate your listserver with your social media forums and blogs. You can channel some of the archived discussion topics (non-proprietary information only, of course) into your forums to initiate discussion.

But before you jump into electronic communication, start with a well-thought-out communication plan with objectives and goals that support your association's overall strategic plan. If you've already jumped in head first, step back and examine whether your use of electronic media is in line with your association's strategic plan.

For example, perhaps one of your strategic plan's objectives is to grow membership. Therefore, just as you once used (or maybe still use) a print brochure as a tool to market to prospective members, you may want to use LinkedIn or Facebook to target specific audience demographics.

Establishing your association's communication plan is not unlike planning your family's vacation. You discuss the trip's goals (relaxation, education, adventure) and choose your location accordingly. You decide what your ultimate destination will be and commence the planning process. In our technological age, you are less likely to buy a map, but you will probably MapQuest the directions to determine your route. You are also likely to use your GPS for backup to ensure you're heading in the right direction. Should time, weather, or interests alter during the trip, you make adjustments and find new ways to make the most of your family vacation. You want to engage each family member in the trip and meet everyone's needs. You plan thoughtfully to ensure a great experience.

Truth be told, many association staffs spend more time planning their family vacations than their annual communication plan.

So, which of these electronic tools is best for your association? Begin with your plan. Then see the chart below for an overview of how the tools compare.

### The Pros and Cons of Listservers, Forums, and Blogs

Purpose	Advantages	Disadvantages
<b>Listservers</b> Member-only discussions Subscriber-only discussions	Controlled audience Greater confidentiality Ability to track receipt of email	Require updated email database Limit information to members or subscribers
<b>Forums</b> Exchange of ideas among members, nonmembers, and any other interested participants "Coffee shop" gathering, offering a drop-in approach to discussions	Greater variety of opinions from a wider audience Encourage member engagement Greater insight into areas of interest and trends	Wider audience means that sources' credibility is hard to guarantee Loss of confidentiality Advertisers and salespeople can encroach
<b>Blogs</b> One-way communication to members or nonmembers Readers can comment, follow, and interact with the blogger Readers can follow and share via RSS feeds, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, etc.	Ongoing visibility to members and followers Steady flow of information to members and volunteers Encourage engagement and sense of community Support association's mission	Require a high level of commitment to generate content regularly Require more staffing



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