

Democracy on the Net

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As a new school board representative beginning in January, 1996, I struggled with how I could stay in touch with my constituents. During the election campaign I had visited several hundred constituents by going door-to-door, but I couldn't continue that. I had some money left over in my campaign fund, but it wouldn't go far if I had to pay for printing and mailing of newsletters. And we had no franking privileges in my county. So...what to do?

I live in a university community, and many citizens have e-mail--in fact the university phone directory gives e-mail addresses for nearly all of its faculty. I took the bold step of compiling a mailing list from the directory by copying all the addresses of those people I knew (that lived in the school district, whether or not they lived in my specific electoral district) plus the addresses of all those whose street addresses were in my electoral district (whether or not I knew them). This was a list of about 300 electronic addresses. About half of these people live within my electoral district, but all of them are affected by decisions that I help to make.

Uses:

I didn't immediately conceive what I was doing on the model of a newsletter, but it has turned out to have that feel. In my messages I have tried to:

- 1) Let people know what important issues the school board is deliberating about.
- 2) Let people know how I have been thinking about those issues, including giving rationales for my votes, or for how I anticipate voting.
- 3) Solicit input from people about difficult or controversial issues.
- 4) Urge people to take action by contacting their representatives from other governing bodies about taxes and other issues that affect education or community well-being.

One issue that was especially controversial when I began (and still has not been fully resolved) was what to do about an old and over-enrolled middle school in town: Should we expand and renovate it? build a new one on the same property and tear it down? or build a new one elsewhere? There were strong feelings and supporters of each of the options. After soliciting people's input, and getting over a hundred responses, I selected responses by the most articulate defenders of each option, and circulated them to the list, so that people could see how others thought. I believe this helped to diffuse some of the controversy through better understanding. When I made my vote on this, I circulated a detailed rationale and received a lot of positive feedback, even from those who still would have voted differently.

Another issue that has generated attention in my community is whether students are sufficiently challenged academically. This has arisen in the context of issues about inclusive classrooms, middle school philosophy, and test results. The issues are large and amorphous, and it has been hard to see how to get a handle on them. I wrote and circulated an extensive "discussion paper" in which I tried to frame the issues in discussible ways and offer my views in a tentative way on some of them. Again, this was found to be useful by people on both sides of the issues.

Less than a year after beginning the newsletter, some local researchers were interested in studying its impact and reception. The results were very favorable. Over the 27 months I have been doing this I have sent out 41 mailings, ranging widely in length. As you can imagine I have covered many issues, and people tell me they feel

much more in touch with how things work in local government generally. Citizens know a lot about me, and because of the ease with which people can reply to my comments, I know a lot about the citizens as well.

Growth:

Though the list started with about 300 addresses, in 27 months it has grown to 463. I added addresses of central office staff and principals. Many people have written to have friends added to the list. I know that copies are posted in many of the schools for teachers to read, and that some people forward my letters to others. So I don't know how many people it reaches altogether.

Lessons:

The most important decision in the success of my newsletter was to take the active step of putting people on my mailing list without asking their permission. In my first few mailings I said up front that anyone who wished to be taken off the list need only tell me so. Only about half a dozen asked to be taken off the list! Since I have had the list I have offered to add others to the list--I ask at meetings, and I put requests in the couple of newspapers ads I have paid for--but this gets a VERY low response rate. Although I do not appreciate unsolicited phone ads, or e-mail spam, this does not seem to have evoked that kind of negative response in people. They seem to appreciate being on a list that they probably would not have taken the initiative to put themselves on! Also, despite several requests, I have not shared my list with others. If I deem a concern to be worthy I'll tell my recipients about it and leave it to them to make the contact.

My first mailing was done from my university e-mail address. This raised a concern from a couple of people that I was misusing university resources. I'm not sure whether that would have been a problem or not. I have used and will only use the newsletters for informational and educational purposes. For example, if I decide to run for office again I would not use them for campaign purposes. In any case I switched to using a local address and have heard no further complaints.

Another early piece of feedback I got on my mailings was that all the addresses were being printed out at the head of the letter. Since there were over 300 this was bothersome, and wasteful for those who were printing theirs out. I was advised to put the nicknames for my mailing lists under blind carbon copy (Bcc:) and this no longer happened. (I use Eudora. I don't know if other systems have comparable solutions.) Also, though I only discovered this by accident, Eudora seems to have a limit to how long of a list can be given a nickname--something less than 300. So I now have three lists.

It is important to note that this is not a list-serve or discussion group. All communications go through me. I'm sure a discussion group would drive away many of my willing recipients. But I have occasionally told constituents with a certain interest about others who share that interest so they could work together.

I have tried to make it clear right from the start that my mailings were not official reports from the school board. It has been important to reemphasize that now that I am chair. They are reports about how I see things, as one member of the board. In this way they also offer a different perspective from newspaper coverage. They are more extensive than the local coverage can be, and they are more personal than any news coverage would be.

I have tried to be sensitive to the fact that not all people have e-mail addresses--in fact it is obvious that wealthier and more educated people are much more likely to have

e-mail addresses. And this bias is especially true for my mailing list, since it was built largely from a university directory. So I always need to be aware that the feedback I am getting is only the feedback of some people, not a cross-section. Nevertheless, it is more feedback than most politicians get, and I have a more informed citizenry than most politicians have. That has value even if it is not perfectly distributed. About half of my addresses are of people in my own electoral district, and if I assume that each of these messages is shared with a spouse or neighbor, then about 400 or 500 of my own constituents are reached. That is well over 10% of the registered voters in my district, which is a pretty good proportion.

Though I do not have a web page of my own, a friend has created an archive of my newsletters on his web page <<http://members.aol.com/gisone/schools.htm>>, and you can see newsletters there. If you have questions or comments about the newsletter, please contact me at <jklagge@vt.edu>. You might remember the front-cover article “Wired Village” about my community, Blacksburg, Virginia, in the September, 1997 issue of this journal. My newsletter was briefly mentioned in one sentence on p. A23.

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