



**Web-based e-mail  
newsletter  
applications  
for churches**

by Lauren Hunter

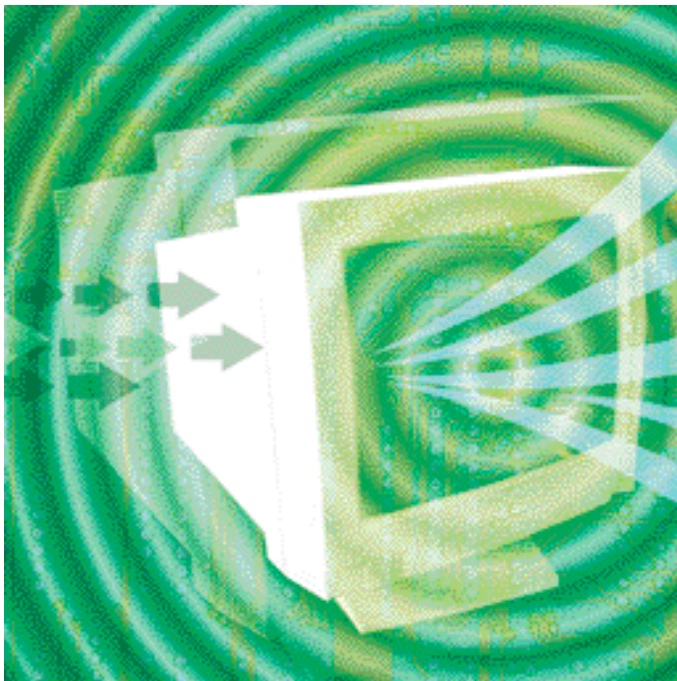
**E**-mail newsletter applications reflect several important trends affecting the world of software for churches and faith-based organizations. The first trend is for many service providers to offer its Software as a Service (SaaS) as an Application Service Provider (ASP). This model has been around for some time, but it is steadily being adopted by organizations everywhere. In the way of traditional software, this means that upgrades are treated differently because the software is accessed via the Internet. Software providers can immediately update software on their end instead of having the user manually install software on their end.

The second major trend in the software industry is the growing utilization of Customer Relationship Management (CRM). CRM software lets you keep track of individuals and track everything about them: name, address, family details, volunteer interests, etc., and give you the power to share this data and allow everyone to view and edit their parts of it as needed.

This allows people in different ministries or departments to track and monitor the shifting needs and interests of its members. Church Management Software is in many ways CRM software that has been customized to meet the needs of churches. Some innovative church management software providers have combined these two trends by providing Web-based programs that you can access from any location anywhere.

In light of these two trends, some software service providers have gone a step further and added e-mail newsletter applications to their Web-based goodie bag. E-mail newsletter software services combine these two popular trends by operating as software as a service (SaaS) and providing tools to manage direct communication with members (CRM). Whereas it was once unique for an organization to communicate via an e-mail newsletter, now this type of communication has become standard.

With recent advancements in technology, programs can be customized and integrated with existing software, e-mail addresses can be uploaded from a variety of programs including church management software, Outlook, and other e-mail programs, and specific information can be requested by users so that they only receive the news that they want to get. All these



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tools take communicating with church members to new heights and offer major benefits.

### **Personalization**

There are all different types of personalization techniques for e-mail newsletters. One way that many churches communicate with their e-mail newsletters is to send out weekly event update newsletters with specific information targeted to match the interests of the members. By sending out regular details on church events and happenings, members can be encouraged to become more active in ministry and participate in more programs.

Some e-mail newsletter services provide an opt-in process for those registering to receive newsletters to check out different aspects of ministry related to their interests. Each ministry leader would send their content and edit the content and send the newsletters to its members. Each member would receive a newsletter that only contains information that they requested for specific ministries and programs.

Because of the technology involved, so many elements of an e-mail newsletters can be customized so that the information doesn't appear to be spam—which no one wants to receive.

For example, some services provide ways to personalize newsletters by adding their name or title to the top content item and the event date, kids names, and more. Through WYSIWYG (what you see if what you get) content management tools, users can easily edit and layout content making it easy to personalize your newsletter for your readers.

Most companies provide options to either have a custom template designed to match your church's overall Web site design and/or offer a selection of pre-made layouts to choose from and insert your logo.

### **Offering More**

As with any software these days, security and safety features need to be top-notch. Some services

provide double opt-out security, meaning a subscriber must click on an e-mail sent to them and follow the link to truly opt-in. In addition, all services must provide a way for subscribers to opt-out if they choose. Bottom line: it is critical for all e-mail newsletter providers to closely follow security and spam regulations.

One of the most beneficial ways that e-mail newsletters can increase your church's ministry efforts is by being able to track delivery of the e-mails, see how many people have opened the e-mail, how many people have forwarded the e-mail, and even compile this information into easily readable reports. By letting staff view this type of marketing information, churches can be well on their way to increase ministry success.

Some providers might offer additional features such as a "send to a friend" button near the top of the e-mail so that the newsletter can be easily forwarded. "If you can't view this, click here" buttons can also be helpful just in case the particular e-mail format is not accepted. Therefore, some providers have a way to edit both the HTML and plain text messages, and even give subscribers a choice of how they'd like to receive their newsletters.

Last but not least, e-mail newsletter services offer extremely affordable ways for your church to communicate. Instead of spending thousands of dollars per year on mailing and printing costs, you can use digital technology to send e-mailed versions for a fraction of the cost to your church. Some providers charge for this service based on the amount of e-mails sent while

others charge per number of subscribers—either way, it's a great deal and can offer lots of savings while increasing communication and providing great insight into your audience.

One place to begin is to talk with your current church management software provider. Many of these companies are starting to develop many add-on type services such as e-mail newsletters that work well with your existing software. There are also independent service providers out there that provide online calendaring, ticketing and donation software that provide e-mail newsletter services.

In the software world, there are tons of e-mail newsletter marketing services, but sticking with a provider that knows the needs of churches and can assist you by personally setting up your account and creating a unique layout is really the best way to go. ❖

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*Lauren Hunter is a trade writer and public relations consultant specializing in the faith-based and nonprofit technology markets. She currently consults to ACS Technologies ([www.acstechnologies.com](http://www.acstechnologies.com)), and ServiceU ([www.serviceU.com](http://www.serviceU.com)), both of which offer e-mail newsletter services to their clients. For more information on how Internet and software technology can improve your organization, contact Hunter at [lauren@laurenhunter.net](mailto:lauren@laurenhunter.net).*

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