Did You Get My E-mail?
Moving E-mails Beyond the Inbox

By Susan J. Ellis

Electronic communication is miraculous, but do you know anyone who wishes they would get *more* e-mail? The challenge today is how to make e-mail and other forms of electronic communication effective in motivating volunteer action. Is it possible to make e-mails feel personal and welcoming?

E-mail, instant messaging, texting, and social media are tools that allow us to communicate quickly and inexpensively, but they are lifeless without the personalities and attitudes of the sender and receiver. Never lose sight of what makes your volunteer leadership effective:

- Commitment to and enthusiasm about the value of your PTA
- Clarity about what you are asking volunteers to do: specific tasks explained honestly (e.g., how much time tasks will really take)
- Volunteer options, including type of task, deadlines, and timing (e.g., days, evenings, weekends), and location (e.g., phone tree from home, science fair at school)
- Targeted outreach to new and potential volunteers as well as to the overworked few
- Acknowledgement of each volunteer's skills, talents, interests, and constraints
- Feedback, openness, and appreciation

None of these vital elements can be overlooked without consequences, and all can be extended through electronic communication. As a leader of volunteers in the 21st century, you need to approach electronic communication with a new mindset. Here are some practical ideas.

Set up an e-mail system

Organize your use of e-mail to help each new group of officers hit the ground running and let members know what to expect year to year. If no one currently in your PTA is knowledgeable about the technical aspects of e-mail, make it a priority to recruit a new volunteer to advise you and help you set things up.

Dedicated general e-mail addresses. First, it is well worth the small expense to establish a series of dedicated e-mail addresses that will not change each time there is a new officer or committee chair. For example, consider options such as: PTApresident@, PTAreports@, PTAclasstrips@, and so on for anything that is likely to get a lot of e-mail traffic. What you want is for everyone to remember some basic addresses for consistent, regular communication. You can redirect these public addresses to each volunteer's own in-box (or to several volunteers, as necessary), but be sure that replies or any other outgoing messages are also sent under the PTA-designated name. Of course, your leadership may share private e-mail addresses as they wish, but in addition to, not instead of, the official ones.

A great benefit of designated e-mails is that you can advertise these addresses to the public all the time and they never become outdated. Further, you can assign one or more volunteers to check a particular in-box and deal with e-mails sent to it. Messages won't get buried in private e-mail boxes.

Keep e-mail addresses up to date. Make sure that your method of collecting and updating e-mail addresses is working efficiently. This is important enough to warrant assigning someone specifically to this responsibility. Regularly ask people if they have changed their e-mail address, follow up on undeliverable

messages, and get several e-mails for the adults in each student's life (mother *and* father, grandparents, etc.). Invite interested community members who may not be parents or caregivers to join your list, too; these people can be potential sources of help throughout the year in various ways. Invite sign-ups on the school's website, at any face-to-face events your PTA holds, on order forms, and so forth.

Organize e-mails to target specific groups of recipients. Do not send every e-mail to everyone. Code your e-mail list so that you can easily extract categories of recipients for your e-mails. Make your messages relevant or recipients will soon ignore them all. Develop several different types of mailings, and perhaps design a nameplate for each to distinguish them visually. So, for example, once a month, any person who has expressed interest will get the *PTA Monthly Briefing*, but committee reports will only be sent to those involved, and class trip announcements will only go to parents and always provide key details.

Preschedule important automated messages. People don't want unnecessary e-mails, but you can support volunteers by automating quick reminders that arrive exactly when needed: meeting reminders, updates or last-minute changes to information about an event, or a sincere thank-you message waiting for them at the end of a long day of volunteering (with a link to an online survey where they can give you feedback right away). You might think that these sorts of automatic e-mails are too impersonal, but they actually show how much thought you have put into coordinating with everyone and concern for not wasting anyone's time. Everyone appreciates timely messages they can use, with a warm tone and thank-you somewhere in each message.

Communicate successfully

Even though we all write and get e-mails, it is surprising how few people use the medium effectively. But, you can show the way.

Use the subject bar! Have you saved 42 e-mails in your inbox, all headed "spring festival," but really on a dozen different subjects? Simply replying to the original e-mail over and over buries important information you and your volunteers need. Teach everyone to start communicating immediately with subject bars that help the recipient know what to expect, and to update the subject bar for every e-mail and response. You want your messages to pop out in an overflowing inbox, and you want to get people to read the most important ones first.

Decide on an acronym for your PTA and use it as the first word in all e-mail subject bars. So, the George Washington Elementary School PTA might become GWPTA and subject bars would begin to look like this:

- GWPTA INFO (or FYI): <subject><date>
- GWPTA: RESPONSE NEEDED [A.S.A.P.] or [by <date>]!
- GWPTA: Your information as requested. (to an individual)

A series of e-mails among a carnival planning committee would evolve like this over time:

- GWPTA/Carnival: Planning Brief #1
- *To which members would reply by adding to the subject bar*: GWPTA/Carnival: Planning Brief #1- Alicia response Feb 2
- *Back and forth on #1 would continue to show new dates, until the chair restarts the process with* GWPTA/Carnival: Planning Brief #2

Make E-mail Communication More Effective

Here are some tips for making your electronic communication efforts more effective:

- Decide on an acronym for your PTA and use it as the first word in all e-mail subject bars.
- Put critical information at the top of your message.
- Send several shorter e-mails that explain their content in the subject bars rather than combine lots of points into one long e-mail.
- Establish a feedback loop and always report back on your previous request: "Thanks to the 13 people who shared the following ideas… ."
- Avoid vague requests such as "we need volunteers for…," which is a *notice* but not an *invitation* to an individual reader.

You can see how this system allows every recipient to group every e-mail from the carnival committee easily, and to feel confident that everyone has saved the messages in similarly named folders. This procedure will quickly become second nature to everyone when they see how efficient it is.

Put important information first. People skim e-mails or only read what they see in their preview window. So put critical information at the top of your message. Begin with a short statement of what is in the e-mail, what action will be requested, and deadlines, if applicable. If you really want a volunteer to get you something by Friday, don't bury that fact in paragraph six.

Here are some more tips:

- It is better to send several shorter e-mails that explain their content in the subject bars than to combine lots of points into one long e-mail. This action increases the number of total e-mails, but each will be addressed to the proper recipients and give them only the information they need to know and act upon.
- Because e-mail addresses do not always convey the identity of the sender, suggest that people put their full name at the start of their messages, so everyone knows who is writing without having to scroll to the end.
- Avoid clumping key details into paragraphs and instead use bullet lists. Not only are these easier and quicker to read, but they make key information like date, time, where, and what stand out.
- Save people time by inserting a link to online driving directions to a meeting site or other such thoughtful information.

Encourage responses. If you want opinions or ideas, pose specific questions ("Please suggest two restaurants we might ask to offer discounts for our family dinner event" or "Give one positive and one negative outcome you think might happen if we hold an online auction") and make it easy to reply by return e-mail or an online survey. Also, to keep members responding to future queries, establish a feedback loop. Always report back on your previous request: "Thanks to the 13 people who shared the following ideas… ." This proves you really read their answers, even if you are unable to put every idea to work.

In the same vein, avoid vague requests such as "we need volunteers for…," which is a *notice* but not an *invitation* to an individual reader to do anything other than blindly offer you time. Instead, help readers consider whether they are interested and able to participate and give them instructions on how to accept a task and whom to contact. For example, a solicitation for help with a book fair might look like this:

Can you do any of these things?

- **Tuesday**
  —9 a.m.–noon—Set up tables and shelves
  —Any time—Put up posters

- **Wednesday**
  —10–11 a.m.—Accompany the kindergarten class when they go through the room.
  —1–5 p.m.—Serve a two-hour shift at a book table or as cashier.
  —1–5 p.m.—Be our DJ.

You can see that by giving more detail, you are offering choices for different days, times, interests (music, 5 year olds), and more. Once most of the slots have been taken, you can send a follow-up e-mail with only those positions still unfilled.

Don't forget to phone. Despite all the emphasis on e-mail, please remember that the telephone is still a powerful ally! Based on your knowledge of your members, consider whether a phone call is the best way to invite someone to volunteer, ask a question, or say "thank you" for some special service done well. For strong expressions of appreciation, a handwritten note always works best.

Virtual volunteering. A growing trend is virtual volunteering. Virtual assignments are a wonderful way to engage parents who can't offer in-person help or expertise, but can deliver such services via e-mail or teleconferencing through Skype, (**skype.com/intl/en-us/home**), **GoToMeeting.com**, Live Meeting (**http://tinyurl.com/23azzsw**), or FaceTime (**facetime.com**). There are many things that can be done electronically, including writing, editing, and translation projects; online research;

website design and maintenance; and offering professional expertise as needed. Of course, online service also needs management, so recruit a volunteer to coordinate what is being done virtually.
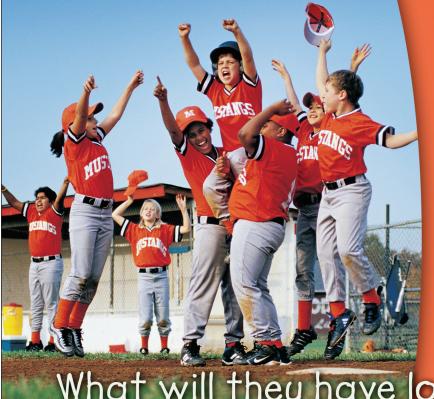
Clear and useful information, a warm and positive tone, and acknowledgement of input and volunteer efforts work for all volunteers. PTA leaders who combine these basics with innovative ways to engage volunteers will help students, families and schools reap greater rewards. **OC**

Susan J. Ellis is president of Energize, Inc., an international training, consulting and publishing firm specializing in volunteerism. She is the "On Volunteers" columnist for the national publication, The NonProfit Times*, and copublisher/editor of the international online journal,* e-Volunteerism *(www.e-volunteerism.com). Browse the 1200+ pages of free volunteer management information on the Energize website:* **www.energizeinc.com**.

Learn more about PTA's membership and volunteer data management system "Just Between Friends" **[PTA.org/online_membership_data_reporting.asp]**

Seven Steps for Organizing Volunteers **[http://www.pta.org/3549.htm]**