

Team Working



Society of Virtual Assistants



The SVA guide to communication is designed for charities, organisations and teams to encourage communication and team collaboration.

We'll cover:

- Questions to ask about your organisation and how you currently work
- Types of communication—pros and cons
- Data protection
- Email etiquette & file sharing
- Newsletters – including mailing list providers, getting people to sign up and what format to use
- Communication—forums, blogs, SMS texts
- Websites
- Fund raising
- Meetings

But first, here are a few questions you'll need to ask yourself before getting involved in communicating with your organisation and with the public.



Questions:

- *How many people are in your organisation?*
- *How do they like to be communicated with?*
- *Where do your funds come from?*
- *Do you have a website?*
- *How many volunteers do you have?*
- *What are their skills?*
- *How often do you meet?*
- *Who has to be involved in decision making?*
- *What are your costs in running the organisation?*
- *Can you get these costs or services donated?*

Communicating:

There are many ways to communicate with people but a lot of it will depend on how they like to respond. For example, there's no point in communicating via email if half your members don't have a computer or, having everyone's home phone number if you are going to call them during the day while they are at work. However, for very large organisations, personal contact or post is going to be excessively expensive.

Type of contact	Pros	Cons
Email	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be branded and personalised • Can track opens and click thrus • Cheap and quick to send 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not everyone has email access • Timing can affect responses • Not everyone is diligent about checking their messages regularly
Forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great for interaction and referencing • Can track visitors and enquiries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be time consuming to moderate • Must be updated regularly with new content in order to encourage visitors
Mail	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be branded and personalised • Everyone has a mailing address 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You won't get great response rates from this (somewhere between 1-5%) • Not traceable • Time consuming • Expensive to print, post and create (stuffing envelopes anyone?) • Not instant so will require more planning • Not interactive • Not as easy to capture info
Notice / Poster	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can be put in a relevant position and catch attention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not good for calls to action, as it's quite a passive medium • Not traceable
Personal contact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fantastic response • Will get great feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Needs to be carefully scripted to create consistent data • Time consuming
SMS Text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cheap and quick to send 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not everyone has a mobile phone • Timing can affect responses



Data Protection

Before you start communicating with anyone, please bear in mind the legalities of holding personal details.

The Data Protection Act came into effect a while ago and works on the basis that anyone who processes personal information must comply with eight principles, which make sure that personal information is:

- Fairly and lawfully processed
- Processed for limited purposes
- Adequate, relevant and not excessive
- Accurate and up to date
- Not kept for longer than is necessary
- Processed in line with your rights
- Secure
- Not transferred to other countries without adequate protection

The second area covered by the Act provides individuals with important rights, including the right to find out what personal information is held on computer and most paper records.

Should an individual or organisation feel they're being denied access to personal information they're entitled to, or feel their information has not been handled according to the eight principles, they can contact the Information Commissioner's Office for help. Complaints are usually dealt with informally, but if this isn't possible, enforcement action can be taken.

Further Reading & Resources

If you aren't sure whether you need to register as a Data Controller please use [this tool](#) from the Information Commissioner. Registration costs £35 and can be done [online](#). The Information Commissioner has also supplied a guide to [Email Best Practice](#).



Email

Email is a great, cheap, effective way of communicating. It's instantaneous, can be sent quickly with multiple recipients and can contain information in a variety of formats. However, the main issue with it is making sure your emails get delivered and that they are not wrongly identified as spam.

ISPs (internet service providers) assess each email going through their servers and give it a spam rating. They check for things like how many people it is being sent to, whether the BCC option is used, certain words in the title or text which are commonly used by spammers (such as free, **, capital letters etc.) and also whether or not the sender has been identified as a potential spammer before. To avoid these filters, ask your recipients to add you into their email address books and also make it really easy for your newsletter recipients to unsubscribe without reporting you as spam.

As a general rule, if you are sending emails to over 20 people you must use mailing software to send individual emails so that your email is not reported as spam. The danger is that even if you only send one email that gets reported as spam, all your future outgoing emails may be identified as spam, whether they are to multiple recipients or not. Please see the section on recommended mailing providers.

EMAIL ETIQUETTE & SHARING INFORMATION

If you are using a central email address used by several people there is an email etiquette to follow:

- BCC: the central email into any replies or actions you take on emails. That way everyone knows what is happening.
- Remember too to leave a copy of the mail on the server so others can download it.
- Use a shared server such as www.smartsheet.com to store documents, databases and contact details.

Getting people to sign up to an email newsletter

Bearing in mind the principles outlined, you need to make sure that people have actively opted in to your newsletter—the easiest way of doing this is to give them something they want in it!

- Add a sign up box to your website.
- Put a sign up link on your signature at the bottom of your emails and forum profiles.
- Keep a clipboard with sign up sheet & pen handy in the office, in the car, at any event you go to.
- Self-addressed and reply paid postcards with “Sign me up” and a space for their email address.
- Put these in coffee shops, community centres, networking events etc.
- Give them a reason to sign up—enter them in a prize draw, give them a special offer, or a free report when they sign up.

WHAT FORMAT TO USE

We've devised a matrix of the advantages and disadvantages for all sorts of newsletter production. It shows the pros and cons of choosing a distribution channel and offers some helpful suggestions as to how to create your newsletter.

Format	Pros	Cons
PDF	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most people can open • Free software to create such as CutePDF 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No clickable links without professional software • Some people won't like receiving an attachment • It is not secure unless security is added which means recipients can change
PDF with clickable links	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can make interactive with web links / emails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need professional software • Some people won't like receiving an attachment
HTML	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Great dynamic, interactive content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need programming experience • Not everyone can open HTML in email
HTML – from template	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to use • Can be combined with mailing software • Email report capability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can look a bit "off the shelf" • Not everyone can open HTML in email
Blog	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy to use • If hosted on your website can increase SEO by refreshing content, meta tags, and hits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If hosted by someone else (e.g. blogger) it won't give SEO benefits • Will need to send email to remind people to look on the blog
Plain text	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone will be able to open 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very boring! This will probably result in less response
Word document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most people will be able to open 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recipient can change content • Not as flexible as some other formats • Some people won't like receiving an attachment
Plain text link to a page on your website	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Everyone able to access • Will increase SEO by refreshing content, meta tags, and hits • Can make interactive with web links / emails 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need programming experience



MAILING LIST PROVIDERS:

- www.constantcontact.com: Rave reviews from everyone for this! Great starting point to build your database and create simple, “no code” emails.
- www.aweber.com: For the more advanced newsletter user who manages client lists and uses automatic sequential autoresponders. Will need coding to create emails.
- www.xtreeme.com/followupxpert: This runs from your desktop and can do sequential autoresponders, again you’ll need coding experience.
- www.graphicmail.co.uk: Does sequential autoresponders and will also send SMS texts.
- www.getresponse.com
- www.emailaces.com
- www.ultimatemarketingcenter.com
- www.listmailpro.com
- www.ezinedirector.com
- www.yourmailinglistprovider.com
- www.myemma.com

Forum

If you decide to start your own forum, be prepared to act as referee between strong personalities and opinions! However, it's a great way of creating a useful resource for your organisation and you can organise it by category (e.g. a community centre might have Dance Classes, Kids, Adult Education and Suggestions sections).

Whilst it is possible to use an open source code like www.phpbb.com and build your own forum using a database hosted on your server, we'd suggest starting with something simple like www.forumer.com to get you started. Administrating forums can be tricky enough without having to worry about backups, databases and design. The downside is that www.forumer.com is missing a few useful features such as the back up facility (allowing you to move content to a new home), emailing the members and multiple spam user deletion. It also features Google Adwords adverts at the top of the forum, but they aren't too intrusive.

We used www.forumer.com to start our online community of Virtual Assistants and when we moved to the new forum we simply locked the old forum stopping any more posts and referenced the link on the new forum so people could check previous posts for information.

We suggest a couple of things to keep your forum clean:

1. **Enable account activation by Admin only (so you review each new member before they are allowed to post).**
2. **Enable visual confirmation (so each user has to type in a visual password thus discouraging spam bots from automatically registering).**
3. **Ban spam IP address and email domains as you delete them.**
4. **Censor words—viagra, porn, swear words etc. so that they can't appear on the forum.**
5. **Recruit a team of moderators who can edit/delete posts in your absence.**
6. **Regularly review who is registering and clear them out (often a daily task when using free software).**
7. **Add a "report to moderator button" to get contentious posts forwarded to admin team.**

Blog

Blogging is a good way of getting your message across without the headache of administering a forum. You can post pictures, news, diary dates and much more without the need for programming experience.

If you host it on your own server using a tool like Wordpress it can also help with SEO on your website.

Remotely hosted blogs like www.Blogspot.com won't help with SEO but will help build a better relationship with your audience.

See also our websites section.

Social Networking

There are a wealth of social networking sites out there offering everything from videos, pictures, comments, links and music. There is a danger that if you invest your time in several of these your site will never be up to date.

They don't offer any SEO benefits but do aid networking.

Personal Contact

Working with a self-development organisation, we found the best way of getting members to come along to their meetings was to assign a "buddy" to call them and remind them. Each council member had between 10-15 people to phone and the response was fantastic.

This only works if you have willing volunteers and a relatively small number of people to gather.





SMS Text

The entire world seems to have a mobile phone now. It's always with you and even if you go of range it will deliver the message to you as soon as you come back into civilisation... I can't think of many places a mobile phone signal can't reach nowadays though!

Before you think that you'll be sitting in front of your mobile painfully keying in each individual message, think again! There are a number of SMS text services which can take a database of names and numbers, upload them and send the same message (personalised if necessary) to each person with just one click.

These can be scheduled to send at a later date or they can go all at the same time.

e.g.

SENDER: _____

Dear _____, please remember your appointment
with us at _____ on _____.

SMS PROVIDERS:

www.kapow.co.uk

www.clickatell.co.uk

www.graphicmail.co.uk

www.e-txt.co.uk

www.bulksms.com





Raising Funds

For any organisation raising funds will always be their lifeblood. We'd suggest you open a separate bank account for accounting transparency and consider free business banking such as www.anbusiness.com

We'd also suggest setting up a www.paypal.co.uk account to receive money via email and online. Paypal have a variety of integration tools such as   buttons, donations, recurring donations or subscriptions including free trials. Paypal take a percentage of each transaction (typically below 5%).

For selling digital products we highly recommend using www.payloadz.com. This could include MP3 recordings, online courses, a PDF report or online guide (such as this one!). Again they make money by either taking a percentage of the sale (15%) or using a flat fee each month depending on your levels of transactions. The good news is that unless you earn over \$100 in any given month it's free.

Another great way of raising funds is to join an affiliate scheme and earn money off selling someone else's products to your members. Good examples of this are:

- **Amazon's Associates page.** Generally you'll earn about 5% on any Amazon sales made through your portal, be that books, CDs, DVDs, household appliances, computer equipment....They sell just about everything these days!
- **Spreadshirt.net.** Design your own T-shirts, mugs, umbrellas, badges and gizmos. Ideal for voluntary organisations as there is no minimum order and the payment processing and shipping is all dealt with by them.

Don't forget

Your members are your most valuable asset. Try to get them to donate or sponsor costs involved in running the organisation in return for advertising.

Websites

Traditionally hiring a web designer is fraught with uncertainty and delays—and that's just the clients! However, it is getting increasingly easier to do so you don't need IT skills to have a web presence.

- www.123-reg.co.uk: our recommended domain dealer, we really love their simplicity and the customer service and help guides are excellent too.
- www.myspace.com: great for general info, a presence and some interactive features.
- www.wetpaint.com: a wiki site which allows users to collaborate to build their own community.
- www.blogspot.com: write your own blog.
- www.mrsite.co.uk: we quite like this site builder, as it's an all-in-one package and reasonably flexible.
- www.societyofvirtualassistants.webitup.co.uk: a website with CMS (Content Management System) capabilities meaning you can update it yourself.

However, because these aren't hosted individually it may be hard to get traffic to your site as, generally, it will be ignored by the search engines unless it has lots of links, lots of existing traffic and lots of relevant keywords.

For search engine optimisation tools we just love:

- www.seomoz.org: Lots of sensible advice and tools to check your website.

And for SEO courses:

- www.26weekplan.com



Meetings

A lot of time can be spent trying to get everyone together on the same day, at the same time, from all across the country—not fun! Invariably people can't make it and often the notes aren't 100% accurate and not a true reflection of what went on and was discussed.

- If possible record meetings using www.olympus.co.uk/voice recording devices so you can either send a copy to everyone or have it transcribed by a Virtual Assistant or dedicated team member. For buying dictation supplies we recommend: www.dictationsupplies.com
- www.skype.com have a chat facility on their VOIP phone using text chat—obviously this works a lot better when the organisation is for virtual assistants, a lot of whom are professional typists! Their conference call is okay for a few people but any more than 4 and it starts to get a bit crowded with people talking over one another.

SVA invested in an online hosted chat room which is available for hire and has the ability to:

- Host voice and text chat
- Show powerpoint presentations
- Mute all delegates except for the speaker
- Record the conversation and download the text chat
- Visit websites in real time
- Poll delegates

If you would like more information about using this service please email info@societyofvirtualassistants.co.uk.

In Summary

A lot of time can be spent trying to get everyone together on the same day, at the same time and with the right information. By using online tools you can efficiently manage your data without need for central offices or meetings.

If you have any feedback or comments on this guide please email info@societyofvirtualassistants.co.uk



Society of Virtual Assistants

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