

ISI Workshop: Donor Communications
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What God Has Taught Me About Communication in Almost 25 Years of Service with ISI

When I came on staff with ISI, the internet was in its infancy, barely perceptible to the average human being.

Now, here we are in 2019, and it's a huge part of most people's lives.

I'm simply curious. Tell me with a simple show of hands – and be honest – how many times in a week would you say you have contact with the virtual world?

10? 20? 50? 100? More?

OK, well, I'll be honest too. I'm up there.

I have that love-hate relationship with the internet I'm sure many of you in this room can relate to. But honestly, I mostly love it. I wouldn't want to live in another time without it.

Again, another question: How many of you use social media? (Pause for show of hands.) What is your main purpose in using social media? To get your ideas into the world? To tell others about Jesus? To show your perfect life?

My main purpose is to connect with people. To bring people together. To show Christ's love, not through direct evangelism online, but through cultivating relationship. To try to be interested over being interesting.

I'm asking these questions because I believe our subject today, focusing on the use of MailChimp (or any Email Service Provider – ESP) revolves around some of these same ideas.

I'm going to talk less about mechanics in my 10-15 minutes of sharing and more about the bigger, overarching issues – the WHY, the WHO, the WHAT, the WHEN and the HOW.

WHY use MailChimp (or another ESP) to communicate, and with WHOM?

I switched to using an ESP (first Constant Contact, then MailChimp – I've also used others for other reasons) from quarterly snail-mail correspondence in 2005. I did it because I could see how the internet was trending, and I knew it would be a more efficient way to connect with a larger number of people consistently.

I also have three kids. And back then, they were still pretty young. That was enough to make it worthwhile.

I still am in touch via snail mail with my donors (and a much larger group of people) around Christmas and, for the donors, one other time each year. But everything else is electronic.

So that's the WHY of using a tool like MailChimp.

Here's the WHO, for me:

Different from some of the others on this team of presenters, I have used the tool to communicate with a wide swath of people, not just our donors. That larger pool is about 450 people. I've got people divided into two groups: Donors (smaller) and General.

I do not use MailChimp to communicate with students or, in my case, international wives (as that's my focus now). I believe there are better tools for that.

The WHAT of MailChimp Communication

I have three primary objectives when I use MailChimp: 1) to communicate the cool things God is doing, how He's at work; 2) to connect with the heart of the recipient; and 3) to get them excited, encouraged and, as possible, involved – whether simply through prayer, as a volunteer, or financially.

But my strategy is to use STORY to do that. I have evolved into this strategy over the years. I approached it differently in the beginning.

In the earliest stages, I'll admit: I was all about telling what I was/we were doing. Essentially, how busy I was/we were with the work of the ministry. Personally, in retrospect, a stupid focus.

Giving long lists (even if written in paragraph form) is boring for the reader.

I mean, how many times have you received a Christmas letter where the person has listed off, in great detail, every single place they visited during the year and/or thing they did?

(Be honest: How many times have you written something like that?)

BORING!

No one wants to know all that!

People want to know the STORY God is writing in the lives of the internationals (and others) with whom you have contact. They want to hear about the connected stories of people.

So, if there's ONE thing you take away from what I've shared, it's to communicate using STORY. I'll tell you more about how I do that when I talk about the HOW. But please, please, for your own sake and your readers, don't drown them in a list of your activities or accomplishments, even if done for the Lord. It is such a sleep inducer!

Now, the WHEN of Communicating using MailChimp

Since 2005, I have communicated every single month, usually on the 1st of the month, occasionally a bit later, and have only missed three months ever. (One of those was an experiment to see who would notice, actually!)

People know to expect our e-Letter. In fact, our average open rate on our eletter is around 50% for the General group and 70% for the Donor group. Those are insanely high open rates, way about the "industry average" in the high teens and low 20's.

People are at least opening. I can't guarantee they read, of course! I have yet to learn how to get inside the inner workings of another human being's mind!

But, I usually get 10–15 responses to our eLetter each month, which is a good thing!

There *is* engagement, which is what I'm aiming for. And what you should be aiming for as well.

I've found it frustrating when I hear from someone rarely and then, all of sudden, when it seems to suit them, I get a barrage of correspondence from them. It turns me off.

Tbh, there are so many missionaries who are super chaotic, inconsistent or nonexistent with their communications with their donors, volunteers or larger audience. Don't be one of them.

So, I guess here's another big TAKEAWAY: Be consistent! You recipients should know (or have an approximate idea of) when they'll hear from you.

Finally, the HOW of Communicating using MailChimp

One day four or five years into my MailChimp journey, I took some time to explore how people were picking up my messages. And I discovered the % of people opening them on their mobile device was steadily rising.

At that moment, I realized I needed to simplify my delivery. No multi-column formats for me. Instead, I shifted to a single column, easy-to-format.

I call our monthly communication “DePalatis Mobile Ministry Minute.” I format it with a headline, appropriate Scripture, then short text, picture, text, picture, alternating all the way through. But to get to this point, I’ve actually been “gathering” over the month.

I put a file on my desktop. It’s labeled *Next ELetter” and drop anything into it – pictures, fliers, notes, ideas – I think may be relevant for the next eletter. Then, when it’s time to write one, I pray about it as I look at what I’ve gathered. I consider the season, of course. But I look hard for a “through line” for the story. Will I build this one around “Forgiveness?” “Celebration?” “Discovery?” “Suffering?” “Overcoming?” etc. Then I organize the graphics (1, 2, 3...).

Then I head over to MailChimp. Since I’ve been doing this so long, I already have the template. I copy the last eletter and, at that point, it’s simply a process of replacement. I often compose in MailChimp, but more recently I’ve been composing in Google Docs and then I jump over to MC and copy paste the text in. I pay attention to consistency of color, etc.

The header always has a picture of me and Dale, sometimes with our kids, sometimes with internationals. I want a person to open up the eletter and see us first, to make that association at the very top. I think it’s effective and draws them in, offers a familiarity factor. I keep the same format, but change the picture frequently: variety but predictability.

And this is how I do it. It takes me a maximum of 2 hours, often an hour or less. Then I schedule to send.

So that’s my way of doing it. It may not work for everyone. But it has yielded very favorable results. And, as an added bonus, has kept our donors informed and engaged.

Again, the focus should be on the communication and connection, not on listing a range of accomplishments. Keeping it readable, fast flowing and easy to skim through makes a difference. And giving your readers just a couple prayer points, a way they can donate and respond is good, too.

If you have any questions, please feel free to follow up with me. I’d love to be of any help I can.