

2.5.1: Email Chains and Listserv

Learning Objectives

- Discuss the use of email chains and listservs

An early digital method of professional group communication was through group or mass email chains. One advantage of using email is that the sender can easily add as many recipients as they want, either by using the To, Cc, or Bcc fields in the header. Any replies from the recipient(s) are stored under this original email and allow for interactive comments and replies from all parties in the designated message group. These stacked emails containing response messages on the same topic are called an **email chain**. However, more often you will hear it referred to as an **email thread** since the phrase “email chain” currently has a negative connotation because of its association with chain email practices. Chain emails are a type of email that asks recipients to forward the email to multiple people. These are considered to be a type of spam, or electronic junk mail, since they often contain false information, hoaxes, or a version of a Ponzi scheme.

One common use of email in retail is to provide information to customers, such as a sale promotion or recall of defective items. Since email is an affordable way to reach a large customer base, it is tempting to want to send out mass emails. Yet, a mass email approach to sending this type of information can quickly become unruly since there are so many recipients, and all participants are allowed to respond to the original sender or each other. This can lead to threads of responses being embedded within other threads, making it difficult to find specific information easily. Also, mass emails run the risk of violating recipients’ privacy by disclosing all of the recipients’ email addresses if the sender does not use the appropriate Cc or Bcc option.

To address these limitations and potential liabilities, companies have developed mailing list software, more commonly called a listserv. Listserv software was created to help manage larger numbers of users and for commercial purposes. Listservs provide a way to reach thousands of people via email when they subscribe to the listserv. Listserv software also manages the “subscribe/unsubscribe” administration and allows threaded discussion of the email content among the users on the list. The term listserv (written by the registered trademark licensee, L-Soft International, Inc., as LISTSERV) has been used to refer to electronic mailing list software applications which allow a sender to send one email to the list, which then transparently sends it on to the addresses of the subscribers to the list.

The Sierra Club

A modern and successful example of a company using listserv technology is The Sierra Club. The Sierra Club is a 600,000-member grassroots environmental organization. It is a nonprofit, member-supported public interest organization that promotes conservation of the natural environment by influencing public policy decisions: legislative, administrative, legal and electoral.

Manually-administered mailing list systems that rely on human administrators cannot keep up with the demand of such large groups. Tens of thousands of club members were excluded from receiving timely information and participating in email discussions while waiting for a human administrator to add them to the subscription list. With today’s listserv software service, management and subscription procedures for mailing lists are simple and flexible, leading to increased growth and specialization of lists run on modestly priced hardware.

Learn More

You can find more real world examples of companies using listserv software at the [L-Soft Case Studies website](#).

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