

A Grand Lodge of Maine White Paper



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Connecting with your Members

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Introduction

In January, 2008 Grand Master Gerald Leighton sent one of his periodic e-mails to the Craft, the subject of which was the implementation of a 'calling system' to leave messages for lodge members. This had been mentioned in a recent magazine he had received from the Grand Lodge of Pennsylvania and seemed to represent a forward-looking use of technology.

This message provoked a large number of responses asking for more details as well as product recommendations.

Because the Grand Lodge itself had not used this technology, there was no 'ready resource' for information beyond the comments in the article from Pennsylvania. It was clear, though, that a number of Maine Masons were eager for more details.

Accordingly, the Grand Master contacted the Grand Lodge Webmaster and they discussed creating a document which would provide a more broad discussion on this topic and which would include both the potential and the ostensible problem areas as well as providing points of contact should lodges/districts wish to pursue this further.

This white paper is a result. Please note that it is current as of the date of publication but things change rapidly so you should check to be sure that any prices and capabilities are the same (or better) than shown here. We will attempt to periodically update this white paper as additional information comes to our attention.

Please remember that mention (or lack thereof) of a particular company, product, or service in this document does **NOT** constitute a recommendation by the Grand Lodge of Masons in Maine or its officers.

Problem Statement

Lodges, Districts and others are seeking better/more timely ways to keep in touch with their members. Increasing mailing costs and the time necessary to print, fold, stuff and mail notices – particularly for items of urgency (upcoming Masonic funeral, for example) eliminate that as an option. E-mail, once seen as the means of instant communication available to us, is now often ignored or deleted unread. In some cases it may be read several days after being sent. Telephone remains perhaps the best alternative but with our busy lives, making as many as several dozen phone calls is time-prohibitive for anyone. The ‘phone trees’ which have proven useful in the past always seem to require much tinkering and often are abandoned within a few months of their implementation. Is there a way to use different, newer technology to accomplish our goal? Perhaps....

Discussion

In today’s marketplace there are two primary options for making direct, personal contact with a (larger) group on a timely basis: online service bureaus who will deliver your message by phone using their equipment or purchasing your own software (and, perhaps, hardware) to interface with your personal phone line.

There are pros and cons to each option with some decisions based on currently available cash versus long-term commitment.

Many of the services and products referenced here or found through an online search will include an ability to comply with the federal ‘Do Not Call’ law including phone number comparisons which may, in fact, defeat your calling process unless there is a ‘by request’ override. Many calling services we examined did not allow such an option since they themselves were unwilling to have their business shut down as a result of some unscrupulous subscriber. Unless the product/service you choose has some type of DNC override capability, it should be removed from your consideration.

The alternatives below also, in most cases, provide for calls to be made within certain time parameters. You don’t want to be calling your members at 3AM! Some solutions allow you to set times *per person*, a nice option when you have a number of elderly members who don’t want phone calls after, for example, 7PM.

Another option you’ll likely want is the ability of your messaging system to recognize and respond to answering machines. No doubt you’ve received a sales call of some type where the call began before your answering machine had finished its message and had begun recording losing the first minute or so of the message. With so many people using answering machines today, this should definitely be a required element in your selection.

Remember that a number of features offered by these systems should be unnecessary for a Masonic notification system: they are designed for businesses complying with federal laws but you’ll pay for those features regardless. If you don’t understand what a ‘feature’ does, you may buy more than you need.

Specific Contact Points

A review of the web produces a number of alternatives. Below are the ones which seemed the most promising:

Software Solution – You own it

- The primary advantage to purchasing a piece of software is that once it's bought, you own it. Secondly, it's going to require at least basic computer knowledge.
- The primary disadvantage is that it will tie up your own phone for perhaps several hours while the calls are made. (If you have and actively use a cell phone, this might be good use for a phone that's rarely used any longer but it could be problematic for you regardless and the telephone company reserves the right to convert your phone to a business line if they were to observe you doing this....)
 - A secondary disadvantage is that it can only be operated by the person on whose computer the software is installed.

We located only one reasonably priced software options allowing you to input multiple calling lists: Voicenet Communications - <http://www.voicent.com/> . This software was \$299 at the time of writing. A secondary company was found: Call-Center-Tech.com - <http://www.call-center-tech.com/voice-broadcast-software.htm> but their website provides no pricing and asks you to contact them leading us to believe that their solution might be far more expensive than the average Masonic body would wish to bear.

Service Bureau Solution – You purchase services and pay-as-you go

There are many solutions which can be generally considered as 'service bureau' services. Most seem to offer the same services including, as mentioned above, many things that would be inapplicable for Masonic needs.

- The primary advantage of using an online solution is the ability to allow more than one person to send messages.
 - This advantage could become a disadvantage if the number of calls causes members to 'resign' from the service.
- The primary disadvantage is that one must generally purchase a 'block' of calls which could be far in excess of what will be used. With most providers, the block was on a 'use it or lose it' basis. Would your lodge make 5,000 calls per year? If not, you'll be throwing away money.
 - The secondary disadvantage is that the company involved could easily go out of business as many internet-based companies do. We strongly suggest you look for Better Business Bureau Accredited Businesses to at least assure yourself of the reputation of the organization.

Here are some companies that offer service bureau solutions:

Voice I/S, Inc. offers different packages for churches, non-profits, etc. They can be found at <http://www.notificationserver.com/>

OneCallNow boasts 20,000 schools, coaches, religious and community groups use their services. Their website is at <http://www.onecallnow.com>

Protus Voice appears to also handle political campaigns. They are at <http://www.protus.com>

CDYNE Notify! charges a monthly maintenance fee of \$9.99 with a 12cent per call charge if you have under 1,000 calls per month. Their website is <http://www.codenotify.com>

Calling Post has a three plans and say there's no subscription or obligation. Calls can be done for a cheaper price if you allow advertising as well as the call but such things might be very unwelcome. The company's name was provided by Bro. Randy Rudge. <http://www.callingpost.com>

Another company mentioned by Bro. Rudge was Callfire. They offer calls as low as 3.5 cents but with some stipulations. Their web address is at <http://www.callfire.com> Bro. Rudge notes that he has used these systems to send notices about dues and holiday greetings as well.

Bro. Kevin Campbell uses VoiceShot and reports it has worked very well for the two times he's used it. 12cents per call with no startup costs. <http://www.voiceshot.com>

Implementation

Before subscribing to or purchasing any such technology, you are encouraged to do a careful benefit/usage analysis. Some lodges or Masonic organizations will feel that a \$300 piece of equipment or 15 cents per call is a small price to pay for 'getting the word out' on a timely basis while for others, this would be a luxury of the highest order.

Phone calls definitely have the 'power of persuasion' when encouraging attendance at various events but good stewardship requires careful consideration before proceeding with any purchase or commitment.

It would be most prudent to survey not only present active participants but those who are non-active to ascertain if they would be receptive to receiving such messages.

Remember too that '*a little can go a long way*' and that overuse of such technology will do nothing more than anger recipients and cause them to 'opt out' of future messaging. You should clearly advise recipients of the expected frequency of calls and then be very diligent in not exceeding that amount except in the case of an emergency. A notification system can only be effective if everyone doesn't decide that it's too intrusive.

And finally: do have a plan for what should be and what shouldn't be said in such calls. Before they are recorded, remember that what you say will likely be heard by FAR more than just the intended recipient so 'cutsey' phrases and non-professional things should be

avoided. And, of course, remember that political and religious oriented messages should never be in a phone message any more than you would put them in a lodge Trestleboard.

VoIP

Voice over Internet Protocol (pronounced *voyp*), also known as IP Telephony, Internet telephony, Broadband telephony, Broadband Phone and Voice over Broadband, is a process whereby calls are sent over the internet. It has received considerable attention because of a caller can speak directly with others on the other side of the world for just pennies as compared with regular phone rates. While VoIP is a possibility instead of your own phone, you should carefully question your VoIP provider to see whether they will allow a 'broadcast' service and you should ensure that your software will do it also. (You may need a more expensive piece of software and, perhaps, additional hardware.) You'll also need high speed internet access; this will not be an option for dial-up users.

Summary

Options abound but research is required. If you're considering a phone notification system, we hope this summary will give you some leads and some ideas.