

## Bad Serv

By William Powell

Experienced email users know how to keep their on-the-job correspondence suitable for print in the local paper. Unfortunately, the relaxed atmosphere of email mailing lists can seem far removed from the front pages, and professionals are finding out the hard way that a flip-pant comment can easily cross the line and turn into a PR headache.

Mailing lists or list servs, as they're often called, have become a popular way to share information with people

who have similar interests. Members post messages to a single email address. Those messages are then distributed to other members. Messages can be received individually or, as is common, in digest form. Lists are inexpensive to start, easy to maintain, and a good way to build a learning community.

The day-in/day-out exchanges on mailing lists give users the impression that they're among friends. For the most part, they are, but you never know who's



lurking (reading but not posting), and not everyone is who they seem to be. Mailing lists provide the option of anonymity, which encourages some people to reveal private information. For example, on one list I subscribe to, a member mentioned his battle with depression. Though it was certainly off topic, dozens of people responded to the group to lend support or to recount their own battle with the illness. The outpouring of encouragement and plain old good will were amazing. But anonymity isn't an option for professionals who want to network and exchange ideas in an open forum. Yet, members drop their guard even though their company name and title are attached. I've witnessed professionals forget all sense of decorum by insulting other members, airing dirty laundry, and doing untold harm to their careers in the process.

For those of you who are new to lists and discussion boards, or even if you're an old pro, consider these tips.

**Lurk before you leap.** One of the quickest ways to alienate yourself from the list is by diving into a controversial subject on your first post. When joining a new list, take time to gauge the tenor of the posts and the personalities of frequent contributors. A polite and brief introduction is always a good way to start. Also check the FAQ and the archive first. Even the kindest members can answer the same question only so many times.

**If you can't say something nice....** It's some of the best advice your mother gave you, yet that nod to civility is easily forgotten when you aren't talking to someone face-to-face. Although disagreements are a part of what keep lists interesting, don't speak in terms of absolutes and be conscious of your tone. A YMMV (your mileage may vary) or an IMHO (in my humble opinion) can help. But don't over use them.

**Don't troll or be trolled.** Trolling can be a devious and complicated activity, but

most trolls are posts in which someone expresses an opinion counter to the general opinion of the group, just to get a rise out of someone. Some people have made an art form out of trolling by couching incendiary topics in what at first appears to be an innocent remark. (See [www.teamtechnology.co.uk/troll.htm](http://www.teamtechnology.co.uk/troll.htm) for an in-depth look into trolling.) In short, let the weak-willed bite. Don't get caught in a troll and lose face in a flame war.

**Don't push or plug.** It's understandable that you're proud of your company's approach to LMSs, but share your experience and expertise objectively. Other members will admire you and your company more for it. **Give a little.** It's OK to lurk, but don't take more than you give. A mailing list that revolves around the posts of only a few people is boring.

**Fighting Flab the E Way**  
Eating SPAM puts on the calories, but fighting spam doesn't. In the Internet age, we're still left with good old-fashioned exercise to stay in shape. Even a Web loafer like me >>>>

Sometimes the Internet provides a solution that's so simple and so functional that it leaves people wondering, What's the catch? Such is the case with the online DVD rental service Netflix

[www.netflix.com](http://www.netflix.com).

I've been trying for two years to convince every movie lover I know that Netflix is so revolutionary that it will have them burning their video rental cards. Admittedly, I'm not much of a salesman, but the blank stares I receive must mean that some of Netflix's merits are getting lost in my pitch: There are **no late fees**, the drop box is the nearest mailbox, and you can watch a new movie nearly every night of the week for a fraction of what you'd pay at the video store. That's the best I can do. Visit the company's Website for more information. You'll be glad you did.

## QuickTip

Compared to spam, pop-up windows are a minor nuisance. But for those of you who are fed up with **pop-ups**, you can either try a new browser with pop-up protection—good choices are Mozilla and Opera—or master **Ctrl+W**. A **quick hit** of that combination will knock out pop-up ads as fast as they appear.

Gartner research reports that click-through rates for pop-up ads are twice that of banner ads, despite claims that pop-ups are more annoying. The **Ctrl+W** shortcut will keep you from clicking through to the ad's Website by accident, which is the likely cause of pop-ups' success.

To download a free version of Mozilla [www.mozilla.org](http://www.mozilla.org). Opera can be downloaded from [www.opera.com](http://www.opera.com).

»»» pumps some iron now and then. So, you can imagine my interest when I was told by a gym assistant that I could access the Internet from one of my gym's elliptical trainers. (If you're not familiar with the elliptical trainer, it's like riding a bike while standing up.) I immediately thought of catching up on the day's news and checking sports scores or email while I dutifully burned calories. Not only would I be fit, I'd also be informed. Brilliant idea. Poor execution. You think it's frustrating playing whack-a-mole with pop-up ads while sitting, try it while you're gasping for air at 130 revolutions per minute. Navigation is handled by touch screen, so typing a Web address is a feat better left to circus performers.

Of course, it's not the technology that's the problem, it's the application. I've been using the Internet in another way to help me with my workouts, and I couldn't be happier. ActivTrax [www.activtrax.com](http://www.activtrax.com) is an Internet service that acts as a personal trainer. Participating gyms provide on-site assistants to

help users should they have any questions, but your workout routine is delivered via the Internet and a new workout is waiting for you each time you visit the gym. Users can access previous workouts online, customize their routine, monitor their goals, and learn how to perform new exercises. The only feature that's missing is the occasional email to ask where I've been for the past two weeks and how many doughnuts I've eaten since my last workout.

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## Quick Clicks

Here's a sampling of learning and HR mailing lists.

E-Learning Leaders.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/elearningleaders>

TRDEV.

<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/trdev>

The Distance Education Online Symposium.

<http://www.ed.psu.edu/acsde/deos/deos.asp>

NETTRAIN.

[www.lsoft.com/scripts/wl.exe?SL1=NETTRAIN&H=LISTSERV.ACSU.BUFFALO.EDU](http://www.lsoft.com/scripts/wl.exe?SL1=NETTRAIN&H=LISTSERV.ACSU.BUFFALO.EDU)

WEBTOLL.

<http://trainingplace.com/source/thelist.html>

## An A for Effort

New technologies often make our lives easier, but for six University of Maryland students, **SMS technology** (text messaging via cell phone) was making their lives a bit too easy—until they got caught.

Six test takers and an additional six accomplices were **busted** in a sting created by university officials. Friends outside the classroom looked up answers to the **exam**, which were posted on the Internet, and then text messaged the results back to the SMS-equipped cell phones of the test takers. Pretty clever, but officials were one step ahead of the tech **tricksters**. The answers posted online were incorrect. Officials determined the **cheaters** by culling tests with the phony answers.

[Source/Wired News](#)