

Your Fan Club: The Personal Marketing Tool

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"If you would like to be added to my mailing list, please put your e-mail address on one of the cards up front and put it in the collection bowl." I give this little speech before or after (or both) almost every lecture I present. And when I leave the premises, I almost always have a few cards with names and e-mail addresses scribbled on them. (Sometimes people leave their own business cards, which I prefer since the pre-printed e-mail addresses are usually much easier to read.) Sometimes I have gone home with as many as fifty new names for my mailing list. These people are my "fan club."

I generally do not use the term "fan club" with these good folks, but some of them follow my career really closely and it is obvious that they appreciate something I'm doing! I began collecting e-mail addresses about four years ago when someone asked me to let her know when I was going to be speaking in her area again. I smiled and said I would try to, but you know that would be almost impossible unless I happened to already know the person (and where she lived). But it occurred to me that I could do such notification *en masse*. Yes, it is true that all my speaking engagements are listed on my website and updated usually at least once a week, but I know that most genealogists will not, of their own volition, go to my website to check where I might happen to be lecturing. It is up to me to let those interested individuals know (and, hey, some of them turn out to be society presidents and program chairs).

Collecting the e-mail addresses

When I make my announcement about the mailing list, I always include a guarantee that I *never* share e-mail addresses, nor do I send out jokes, petitions, stories, virus warnings, or other forwarded-type e-mails; those e-mail addresses are solely for the purpose of receiving my monthly e-mail newsletter. (I also ask that they reciprocate and leave me off their forwarding lists as well—most do.) I remind them that writing clearly is of paramount importance; this is not like the old days when the postal carrier could guess at an illegible address and get it right because he/she knew everyone on the block! I have printed up business-card size blanks that have a spot for "name" and "e-mail address." (Personally, I like to have an actual name to go with the e-mail addresses; it makes it easier to keep track of people that way). The cards and my little "bowl" (a collapsible doggie bowl that is made of fabric so it packs away easily) are kept in a separate carrier that also holds my spare projector bulb, so it always goes with me to my presentations.

Cataloging the addresses

Originally I just kept adding the names and e-mail addresses to a list entitled "groupies" that I kept in my primary address book. Then one day, when I tried to send my regular e-mail, my server told me I had too many names. I broke the list down and have been breaking it down ever since. I now have five lists. One contains "friends"—those who may or may not be involved in genealogy but have an interest in what I am doing (or at least, I think they do; they tell me they like to read the newsletter). Then I have the early list—those who were the first to fill out cards (back when I had made a feeble attempt to separate the folks geographically, an experiment that became unwieldy within the first two attempts of applying it). I have the "early 2009" list, the "late 2009" list, and the "2010" list (which, so far, has not had to be split into "early" and "late"). Everyone gets the same e-mail, it just goes out five different times.

Note about the e-mail collections: I back up my e-mail address books every time I add a new batch of names, just in case my server crashes. I do the backups in a "comma separated" format, and those

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address books are further backed up on an external hard drive, on a flash drive, and on an outside server.

Sending the newsletter e-mails

Before we go any further, remember, in *all* cases, the e-mail newsletter or mailings *must* be sent BCC ("blind carbon copy"). If you do not know what that is, find out before sending out anything! To send out your mailing with all your recipients' names and e-mail addresses visible is a gross violation of their privacy. This is so essential that I just cannot emphasize it enough.

Originally I put my entire schedule (chronologically) into the text of the e-mail, forgetting (or just not knowing) that different servers would display the text in different ways (some seemed oblivious to all of my carefully placed indentations and paragraph returns). What a mess! Thank goodness someone was kind enough to send me a copy of what she had received. (Even when I sent myself a copy, it was easy to follow; not so with what my friend had found when she opened the e-mail.) So now I send the newsletter as an attachment, and I organize it quite differently.

The newsletter

I set up my newsletter with a nice heading that identifies who I am. (Remember, for some of the recipients, it may have been a month or more since they saw me; they may even have forgotten putting that card in the doggie bowl.) I include my photograph, my website information, my blog information, and my contact information (all important elements if I want them to consider booking me for a lecture or seminar). Then I have organized all my upcoming presentations (clarifying which are for the current year and which are for the upcoming year) as follows: "California" (Los Angeles area, Bay area, Inland Empire, Orange County, High Desert, Coastal Cities, San Diego, etc.) and "other" (by states, listed as applicable, for the upcoming bookings).

Listings include the date (and I add the day of the week as well), the sponsoring organization and town where it is located, and the titles of my presentations. (For those that involve music, a special notation to that fact is included, since many of my "fans" are interested only in the musical programs.) I do not list addresses or exact times for the presentations, but do indicate if the meeting is morning, afternoon, or evening. Exact times and locations are not always static, so I encourage people to visit society websites —which are linked on my website—or e-mail me for specific information closer to the date of presentation.

My newsletter carries the insignias of my associations: APG, BCG, and, of course, the Genealogical Speakers Guild. Lately I have also added a small map to our local Pacific Region office of the National Archives since so few people know where it is located. I close the newsletter with a reminder that the most up to date information on my bookings can be found on my website and that, if they need further information on location, times, or costs, to let me know. I want to help them get to the lectures, if they want to attend.

Newsletters are sent as attachments and I send them in two formats—invariably, if I send it in Word, someone will tell me he/she cannot open it; if I send it as a PDF file, someone else won't be able to open it; so I just send both now. In the cover e-mail I let folks know that both attachments are the same document.

The "cover" e-mail

When I send off my mailing (it started out to be quarterly but now is sent every month, unless it's holiday time and I don't have anything new or pertinent to report), I use a cover e-mail to explain what is being received. I remind them that they are receiving the newsletter because they "put an e-mail card into my mailing list collection bowl at a seminar or presentation I gave, . . . have signed my guest book on my website, . . . have told me [they] wanted to be added to the list, or I have assumed (based on some conversation with [them] or someone [they] know) that [they] wanted to be notified about my

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activities." I also invite them to send me an e-mail if they wish to stop receiving the newsletter and I will remove them from this list. I get about one of those a month, usually because the person is no longer doing genealogy.

My e-mail letter also gives them some personal information (not too personal, but enough so that they get a sense of who I am) that helps to make me more approachable and we develop more of a peer relationship that way. Usually I will report on a recent event (the latest seminar I attended, something I learned that might be helpful, a new source for finding materials, etc.), advice about something coming up in the near future (if I am going to be presenting somewhere within the next week, I'll want people who may be in that area to know and they might not get around to looking at the newsletter until after that event happens), and something to look forward to (topics of presentations I am working on, an article that I wrote and will soon be available, a new CD that is in production, etc.).

I also provide links for pages on my website (the calendar or my writing projects, for instance) as well as links for other pertinent things (our local NARA facility, the Genealogical Speakers Guild, or APG). I remind people about my blog (with a link, of course) and my Facebook identification (with link). All of these become part of the personal marketing program that reminds folks who I am and what I do. I remind them that I am booking into the next year and encourage them to tell their society program chairs as I would love to come to their organization to do a lecture or music program. And I always thank them for their support and encouragement.

Without the people in the seats, speakers would be very lonely! I am thankful to be able to do what I love, but that does not come without the audience. So my audience keeps me working, and by maintaining my "fan club," they also help the word spread that I am here, I am available to speak, and I have something important to say and to be heard. Develop your fan club and you will have a personal marketing tool that is as old as time: "word of mouth" has always been one of the best forms of publicity!

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