

Email is a survivor among engagement tools

Sometimes, it's the tried-and-true methods of engaging that make all the difference. As social media consumes increasingly more of the time we spend working to engage, it's important to not overlook the effectiveness of one of the oldest communication technologies at our disposal: email. Though social media garners a lot more discussion, email is still a mainstay for how we communicate at work and with the masses.

Savvy communicators know email is still the king of communications technology, despite social media's rise, and despite the fact that email traces its roots to the early 1970s. And it's not going anywhere soon. Who would want it to? It works. For most, email is critical to navigating their professional and personal lives. As local government employees, we complain about how much email fills our inboxes and how much time it takes to digest it. But we digest it, anyway. The public does, too. Aside from spam, email is where we maintain a bit of control over the barrage of information we receive, and that equates to trust. We place more trust on an email from a known or selected source than we do for most of what clogs our social media feeds. Judging by the strong open rates achieved by Chesterfield County's weekly email newsletter, Weekly Update, the public also maintains a lot of trust within their inboxes, which is why we continue to value email as an engagement tool and invest in its use.

Chesterfield County has long provided residents a newsletter, which has gone through many changes over time. Once a print product of various forms and under different names — for several years its equivalent was even printed among the pages of a local shopper publication — the newsletter's one constant has been its ability to be recognized as a trusted source of county-specific information. And perhaps nowhere else has our county newsletter garnered more attention than as a newsletter delivered via email. Among all the things competing for Chesterfield residents' attention, Weekly Update upholds a fairly high status. It regularly achieves open rates exceeding 30 percent — industry experts say anything over 20 is outstanding — and subscription numbers continue to rise, with few choosing to unsubscribe. In fact, percentages of county residents subscribing to Chesterfield's e-newsletter compare to the likes and follows on our Facebook and Twitter sites. Considering the amount of time invested daily among staff to develop social media content, then post and tweet it, our e-newsletter's return on investment is arguably higher because, collectively, it takes much less time to produce.

As social media users figured out long ago, online readers have short attention spans. So, we keep content pieces in Weekly Update brief and link to details for readers who choose to absorb more, driving readers to our website. We save time by using an email marketing service and the templates it provides, making it efficient to plug in text, images, video links and graphics. While the main portion of the e-newsletter carries countywide information, links are maintained to individual pages on the county's website that carry readers to information specific to their magisterial districts. Because those district pages are updated regularly,

production of the e-newsletter is seldom hindered by the need for fresh content. We also use Weekly Update to cross promote popular local government services and programs, as well as our social media feeds. Social media content is often repackaged for the e-newsletter and vice versa, another significant timesaver. Boil it all down, and our e-newsletter carries a truckload of engagement potential that shows its — and email's — worth each week.

The e-newsletter isn't the only way we engage with email. Residents who want to receive notices about upcoming community meetings and other programs receive email notifications, as well. At most meetings and programs, we solicit contact information from residents, especially email addresses, to keep building our audience. Best of all, residents choose what, if anything, they want to receive by email, further building trust. Subscribing to Weekly Update and other email notifications is easy at chesterfield.gov/enews.

Over time, we've learned that the best engagement plans include lots of tools, new and old. For more information about Chesterfield County's e-newsletter, contact the Chesterfield County Department of Communications and Media at 804-748-1161. *Or, even better, email us at* cm@chesterfield.gov.