

5.00 Communication Technologies

E-mail is the most popular online technology. It is commonly given as the main reason for people getting online. In this section we will look at how e-mail works. We will also look at other new communication technologies which may prove useful.

5.01 What is available

There are a range of communication technologies that work over the internet. Let's look at some of the alternatives to e-mail.

Messengers

To communicate using an instant messaging program both parties have to be connected to the internet and both have to be running compatible software on their respective computers. Messages appear in a pop up window as soon as they are sent and conversations can continue as alternating sentences continually visible to both parties. If there was a single flavour of instant messaging program the technology would be more widely useful but there are several versions from different providers. This is their main disadvantage.

Web chat

Web chat is similar to instant messaging but works through a web page. Both parties need to be connected to the internet in order to exchange messages. You need some special software but the client you are talking to just needs a web browser. Lots of sites use a web chat program to provide technical support. There are possible applications for a practice web site including making appointments or for clients to request advice.

Conference

Instant messaging and web chat can be set up to work with multiple users simultaneously.

Texts

It is possible to both initiate and receive text messages, as sent between mobile phones in their billions, over the internet. To do so you need a subscription to a specialised service. Text messages have become widely used and accepted as a means of communication and you will certainly find a percentage of your clients happy to receive information that way.

The message "Spot is due for his vaccination, please call the surgery on 01234 567890 to make an appointment. The Vets" only uses half the available message length, and is cheaper to send than a postcard. Entering a text message through your computer is much easier than with the fiddly buttons of a mobile phone and much of the process can be automated.

Voicemail and fax by email

Another subscription service can make your fax machine and answering machine redundant and free up an existing phone line. You are allocated a new phone number for fax and voicemail. When someone sends you a fax or leaves you a message they appear as attachments to e-mails. Messages come out of your computer speakers. Faxes appear on your computer screen. These can be collected at any computer and can be sent on, copied, printed off and archived.

Voip

This is a developing technology that will carry voice messages over the internet. A subscription is required and the main marketing thrust will no doubt be based on potential savings on your phone bill. One to watch.

Bulletin boards and newsgroups

These are an area on your web site where authorised users can put a message online for others to access and comment upon. We include them as they have potential for a private advice area for your clients. Clients with a question go to your bulletin board and "post" the details of their problem. You, or one of your staff, visit periodically and post relevant advice in return.

E-mail lists

These are a variation on the bulletin board above. Instead of having to go to the board to post a query, clients simply send it as an e-mail to the list. The list then copies this to all subscribers. Your response is also sent as an e-mail to the list and again copied to all subscribers. A conversation can continue by simply replying to the list in the same way as you reply to any e-mail. An active mailing list can act as a useful focus for members of your local community and provide you with an opportunity to promote your products and services.

Web-cam

A web cam is a video camera that sends pictures over the internet. With a broadband connection these can be of reasonable quality. There are possible uses in monitoring patients. The video feed can be made private to vets and nursing staff only. The ward needn't fill with wires as there are effective wireless versions available.

5.02 E-mail plus and minus

E-mail has become the universal means of electronic communication and the most popular online technology. Let's look at its advantages and drawbacks.

The main advantage of e-mail for both the sender and the recipient is convenience. When you send an e-mail, you can do so at a time to suit your routine. The person you are sending it to can collect it when they have the time. A phone call, by way of comparison, demands that both parties find time simultaneously. You may have a quiet moment but your client is missing a favourite soap.

You've got a full waiting room when your client has put the baby to bed.

E-mail has developed its own syntax. Recipients expect information in a succinct form. Creating an e-mail when you have a brief message to send can be the work of moments. Many longer messages, sent regularly, can be simply copied and edited to suit the specific recipient.

When you have a longer message, or when a client has a broader query, then the process of creating an e-mail can help to get the point you wish to make set out clearly. The recipient has the whole text to refer back to as well – unlike the misunderstandings common to telephone conversations.

E-mails create their own record – unlike phone calls which may require you to take notes for the patient record.

The popularity of e-mail has meant that the technology has attracted the attentions of various parties with their own agenda.

Unsolicited commercial e-mails, commonly known as spam, have reduced some of the convenience of e-mail by adding a lot of time-wasting noise to everyone's mailboxes. Spam works because the e-mails are so cheap to send, effectively free, that it only takes one person in millions to buy a product to make it worthwhile. Meanwhile the other millions minus one have to assess the message and wear out their delete button. Spam filtration is getting better and legislation is attempting to deal with the problem but there will probably always be a background level of spam to ignore.

Basic e-mail is just a text file and can't do your computer any harm. Viruses, the e-mail born variety anyway, are carried in attachments to a basic e-mail and have to be run as programs on your computer before they can drop their payload. Html e-mail, that's e-mail that displays with coloured fonts, backgrounds and borders, is effectively an attachment that runs automatically and used to be a major route for viruses. Nowadays the virus writers have to develop psychological tricks to get recipients to click on attachments before they will run. You should ensure that any computer used to collect e-mail has a virus scanning program running – and that its virus definitions are up to date

5.03 How e-mail works

Understanding the basic building blocks that make up an e-mail system can help you get the most out of it in practice. Lets take the process in stages and follow an e-mail

An e-mail is just a computer file which you create in your mail program. When you click your send button your computer sends a copy of your e-mail to the domain name in the recipients e-mail address. This is a transaction very similar to your visiting a web page except that, instead of a web page coming to your computer, your e-mail goes to the recipients mail box.

A mailbox is just a block of filespace on an internet connected computer where a copy of each e-mail received is kept.

When you collect mail your computer connects to the distant computer where your mailbox is set up. This, again, is very like your browser collecting a web page. First it collects a list of the e-mails you have waiting. Then it downloads them to your computer one by one.

Collecting each e-mail still leaves copies remaining in your mailbox. Your computer has to send a specific instruction after downloading each item before they are deleted. This ensures that, if something goes wrong, there is a second chance to download it. You can turn the delete signal off. This is very useful if you want to collect e-mail from more than one computer. One at home and another at the surgery for instance. Collect e-mails at home but don't delete them from your mailbox. Collect them again the next day in the surgery so that you have a complete record on one computer.

Any e-mail you send can be copied to as many people as you like. Most mail programs let you set up groupings of your contacts so that you can mail them all at once. Be careful. Most options allow each recipient to see the e-mail addresses of everyone else you sent the mail to. This is alright if you are all working on a common project but far from satisfactory if you want to e-mail a block of your clients.

When you have a domain name for your practice you have exclusive rights to the huge number of possible e-mail addresses it is possible to create from it. It would be tiresome to have to set up mailboxes for every address you wanted to use. This is where forwarders come in. They act like a mailbox and receive mail but don't store it. They immediately send it on, forward it, to another mailbox.

By setting up a catch-all forwarder you can use any e-mail address created from your domain name. Any mail that isn't claimed by an existing mailbox or forwarder is sent on to one persons mailbox. You can use an e-mail address to, for instance, track an advertising campaign, and know that responses won't just disappear.

If e-mail could only transmit brief text messages it wouldn't have become universal. Attachments are simply computer files, any kind of file, and you can send them along with your basic message. You can send wordprocessor documents or digital photos, sound files or movies. If you can store it on a computer you can send it as an attachment.

You can make your e-mails pretty with bright colours, fancy fonts, backgrounds, graphics and images. You can even add sounds. This is all very well when you know that the person you are sending it to appreciates such things and has their computer set up to display all the effects. A lot of people don't and when your message arrives it isn't displayed. The pretty effects rely on the recipients computer running other programs apart from the basic e-mail display window. This is the kind of behaviour that viruses love. Most of the loopholes that

virus writers found have now been closed off and html mail, the proper name for the pretty version, probably poses little threat. There is still a residual reaction that means there are lots of people who only accept text e-mail.

5.04 Newsletters, etc

Do you post reminders to your clients as their animals come due for their annual booster, how much does that cost and how much could you save by sending reminders by e-mail?

If you could communicate with your clients between annual visits could you encourage better animal care and usefully promote your products and services.

You can collect e-mail addresses with a form on your web site, with a printed form in your waiting room and you can get your staff to ask clients for an e-mail address at reception.

It is essential to avoid accusations of sending spam. You must ensure that every e-mail address on your list has made a positive choice to join. The process is known as "double opt in". First, a client provides you with an e-mail address either online or in the surgery. Before adding them to your list you send them an e-mail asking them to confirm that they want to be included. You only add them to your list if they reply in the affirmative.

Newsletter

Like a printed newsletter, you collect up snippets of news and create seasonal articles and publish them all together periodically. This could be weekly, monthly or quarterly depending on the available resources.

You'll need three versions of your newsletter. One to be printed on paper for use in the waiting room, one as a web page for your web site and one to send as an e-mail.

Mailing lists

A mailing list can be thought of as a short newsletter. Instead of having to collect enough material to fill a couple of pages, interesting news or a special offer can be sent to your clients by e-mail straight away. With a bit of additional effort you can focus your mailings – send special deals on cat food just to cat owners, important information about cattle health only to the appropriate farms.

Site updates

You may be updating your web site regularly but your clients are probably forgetting to come along to take a look. If you can sign them up for notification of site updates then, every time you put new material online you can let them all know by e-mail.

Vaccination reminders

This is the only facility that we have found that actually guarantees you real savings on post, stationery and staff time. Each client that opts for e-mailed vaccination reminders will need details of their pets and the relevant

dates entered into the database – though the information can be extracted from most practice management systems. You still need to maintain a watch for deceased animals. Once set up vaccination reminders can be sent at the click of a mouse.