

► BUILDING CAPACITY



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Trusting Email to Build Capacity

Editor’s Note: A need exists within environmental health agencies to increase their capacity to perform in an environment of diminishing resources. With limited resources and increasing demands, we need to seek new approaches to the practice of environmental health. Acutely aware of these challenges, the *Journal* publishes the Building Capacity column to educate, reinforce, and build upon successes within the profession using technology to improve efficiency and extend the impact of environmental health agencies.

This column is authored by technical advisors of the National Environmental Health Association (NEHA) data and technology section, as well as guest authors. The conclusions of this column are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NEHA.

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The very first email was sent in 1971. By the mid-1980s, the world accepted email as a convenient, fast, and inexpensive means of communication. We all rely on email every day. We are experts. So why raise this topic in 2023 with the promise of building capacity?

We Still Do Not Trust Email for Important Notices

In fact, most environmental health departments (maybe most local government departments) still send paper mail by the U.S. Postal Service routinely, with the windows envelope representing the last major improvement in mailing.

My pitch, bearing testimony to the benefits of an all-digital mindset, often meets resistance. Yes, there is serious resistance to retiring paper, postage, and handling.

Here are the most common questions along with recommendations.

Can I Be Certain My Important Email Is Delivered and Read?

You cannot.

Yes, there are schemes that promise digital email read receipts and open tracking, but these are not reliable. These schemes could not be used, for example, in an enforcement case.

Aside from certified mail and other services that require a signature, even traditional

mail may never be delivered, opened, read, and acted on.

Can We Avoid Important Emails Going to Spam?

This issue is something we can manage. It is not completely out of our control. In fact, getting email through to the inbox is a bit of an art and a science.

Nearly every email service scores incoming email for likely spam. Note, too, that more advanced systems (e.g., Gmail) also watch how the recipient previously responded to emails of the same type. If your previous email was moved to trash without opening it, then your next email might go straight to spam. It learns.

Follow these simple practices to increase delivery rates:

- Use a familiar from name and a meaningful subject line. Most recipients decide what to do with your email seeing only the sender, subject, and date. For example:
From: Smith County Environmental Health Department
Subject: 2023 Retail Food Renewal Invoice
- If you can, personalize the email greeting. Using “Dear Joe Smith” is superior to “Dear Operator.”
- Design an email body with substance. Also, take the time to deliver an email body with useful information. A paragraph that explains the reason for the email and its importance weighs mightily when detecting spam.
- Reserve the last few lines of every email for the agency’s name, address, and phone number.
- Use a real reply-to address (e.g., smith-countyeh@smith.co.us) that is monitored.



Image © iStockphoto: Devonyu.

Using a “noreply” address is common but less desirable.

- Make sure the sender email address is the same as the reply-to email address. And use your agency’s actual domain name. You may have to ask your IT department or software vendor to align the email addresses you use.
- Rethink attachments. While sending the invoice or permit as a PDF attachment is convenient, attachments can also impact your spam score. It could be more secure to use a personalized hyperlink (e.g., to your public portal) to view and download the PDF.

What Happens When an Email Bounces?

A bounced email is a blessing. The mail systems are informing you that your important email was not delivered, either due to a bad or incorrect email address or (infrequently) that their email system is offline.

Using a reply-to email address that is monitored, either by a human or by your data system, will help you find and fill these gaps. Your data system should record a bounced email. That way, staff can see that the message was not initially delivered. If the email address was just wrong, fix it and resend. This step might require a call to the operator or even an inspector visit.

As a stopgap, agencies can always print and mail the notice via the U.S. Postal Service as a one-time service.

What if Our Operators Do Not Have Access to Email?

This issue might seem improbable but it does occur. Agencies must navigate these waters thoughtfully, taking care not to inadvertently exclude some operators.

Still, email services are free and easy. Even without a mobile phone, free internet access, public computers, or in-office kiosks could fill this gap.

While some owners, operators, or managers might not have email, they might have access to text messaging. Sending text messages in place of email is possible. There are services for pushing text messages from your data systems through pay-per-message gateways. Check with your IT department or software vendor for the best approach.

Does your agency still generate paper and physical mail in 2023? Making the switch to digital is easily defended considering the obvious savings and convenience. If you are still on the fence, take measure of similarly sized agencies. ❁

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Did You Know?

Does your health department need an intern to help with your important work? The National Environmental Public Health Internship Program is a 400-hr paid internship opportunity that links environmental health students with internship placements at qualified health agencies. There is a rolling application process for agencies. Learn more at www.neha.org/nephip.



Show them you are an expert.

You are dedicated to environmental health. Earn the Registered Environmental Health Specialist/Registered Sanitarian (REHS/RS) credential to let your community and employer know just how much. The REHS/RS credential is the gold standard in environmental health.

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