The art of attachments

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What follows is a discussion on 'best practice in relation to the dissemination of information via e-mail to groups'. I'm often asked about ALIA's policy (and also ALIAnet's policy: the two are not always congruent) on sending attachments by e-mail. It is becoming a very hot topic, if only because so many people are having difficulties with the process. But before we launch into technical possibilities and limitations, it would be useful to take a step back and consider the broader picture.

E-mail communications are now so frequent that many believe that it is ubiquitous. It is not — far from it — but for the sake of this discussion, let us assume it is. There are many factors to be considered before an accurate assessment can be made of the best way to disseminate information, and to communicate via e-mail.

We already have in place codes of ethical conduct [http://alia.org.au/alianet/e-lists/netiquette.html is a good place to start] and advice on how to use the medium, but often these codes are overlooked for the sake of expediency. In these 'drag-and-drop' times, it is all too easy to add an attachment to a broadcast e-mail and assume that 'communication' is achieved.

Far from it. E-mail is an unusual tool, in that what is written is not always what can be read. Mail software (often referred to as 'applications', or 'packages') varies enormously from desktop to desktop and the 'go-betweens', such as mail servers (found at both ends, and in places in between), can be and are configured in a myriad of ways: all of which can conspire to make mail attachment transport and delivery precarious at best.

Aspects to consider in the equation:
Cost
Mail sent is free, but mail received costs. This is why we get so much spam. It is also why so few of us consider the 'payload' we send. How different it would be if we had to pay to *send* e-mail. Consider the ramifications of sending to an e-list of 7000 subscribers. Now factor in sending a bulky attachment. The charging regime in Australia is based upon bytes received (you might pay a flat rate to your ISP, but the rates charged reflect assumptions made about bytes of data received).

Communication value
There is a distinction between sending an e-mail to an individual and sending to a group., few people consider (the 'drag-and-drop' mentality again) the implications of sending large amounts of information to large groups of people. In this age of information overload, we often assume that broadcasting to many is a quick and effective way of communication. This may be true, but the opposite is also true: the value to a recipient low if s/he is merely one of many receiving the same information. It may be disregarded (no personal value is perceived). Targeted mails, on the other hand, can add a great deal of value into the information.

Virus potential
Plain-text e-mails (that are plain, unformatted readable text in the body of a message) cannot transmit viruses. Attachments, however, are an easy method of transmitting viruses, trojans, and other nasty surprises. When the most popular operating system on this planet started building 'useful' tools to better integrate e-mail with the operating system, this weakness was rapidly exploited by virus-makers. Consequently, mail servers routinely strip attachments that look even slightly suspicious, in order to protect the end-user and remove the risk of virus propagation. Unfortunately, most mail servers have to be configured to be more aggressive that most end-users would like, but this is the price we pay for 'integration'.

Payload
Many mail users are unaware of the impact an attachment can have on the overall size of the mail message. This article can be used as an example: the plain-text version of this article will be less than 10 kilobytes, but if I were to send it as a formatted attachment in, say, Microsoft Word, it would easily blow out to 20 times this amount — or much more (50 times or greater) if I was not careful about how I saved the document. This might seem a trivial concern in these broadband times, but the impact on the recipient can be severe. Cost has already been mentioned, but many recipients will have their mail account blocked if the server/ISP limits are exceeded. And some mail software cannot display some document types: so the communication could be lost altogether.

Strategies for dealing with this dilemma
Is there a better way? Charts, images, complex layouts, tables and colour information can contribute to richer and more informative communication, and there are times when they are unavoidable. So, here's some tips about getting the message across economically.

The best strategy of all is to place the document on a server (web server, or ftp server) for access, and point the recipients to the URL, but with a teaser to encourage the recipient to view and download the document. This way, those who have the inclination or capacity to view it will do so — at less expense to their mail account and less strain on the mail transport system.

If you can't do this (not everyone has a friendly web server at their disposal), then make sure that the document is saved without all included revisions ('Save as...' does the trick), and then name it with the following considerations:

- Avoid long filenames (stick to less than 20 characters in total to be safe). Create names with no spaces or unusual characters like slashes and ampersands, which can up- ▶

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set some mail servers. Do not include more than one full-stop (reserve this for the delimiter between the filename and the document type).

- Make sure that the filetype is appropriate: '.doc' for Word documents, or better still, save the file as an RTF document and an '.rtf' filetype. Ensure that your operating system is not hiding the filetype, or you might end up with a filename like 'document.doc.rtf' — which invokes the wrath of the mailserver (see the first point above).

- Do not use macros a file for transmission, they will arouse suspicions on mail servers.

- Make sure that your file contains no virus or trojan. Run your anti-virus software!

- If you send an attachment to an e-list, you will most likely compromise the web archive of the e-list, if one is kept: most e-list server software cannot deal with attachments very well.

One last point: many mail servers are set to remove virtually all attachments in a vigorous, aggressive manner: so all this preparation might be for nought. But before you vent your spleen at the system administrator's draconian, megalomaniacal rules, consider the fact that 99.99 per cent of computer viruses are propagated by attachments. ∎

Library technician educators meet at neXt2005

An enthusiastic group of library technician educators welcomed the opportunity to meet with members of ALIA's Education Reference Group during neXt2005 where they explored a broad range of issues relating to implementation of the revised Museums and Library/Information Services National Training Package. Some twenty library technician educators and other interested stakeholders discussed the skill sets employers require of library technicians and considered how these, and higher skill levels which might be expected in the future, relate to the different qualifications offered within the package. Other issues discussed included requirements for work placements as part of course delivery, the entry of private providers into the market (and the implications of this in relation to the responsibilities of Registered Training Organisations such as the TAFE institutions) and credit transfer arrangements for students seeking to articulate to library and information studies at university.

A key outcome of the meeting was reaffirmation of ALIA's role as a recognising body that regularly visits institutions offering library technician courses. However, given that the Association had significant input into the development of the training package and that courses are subject to the quality assurance mechanisms set out in the Australian Quality Training Framework, the course recognition process might better focus on resourcing and course delivery issues.

Library technician educators congratulated the Association on providing this opportunity to meet during neXt2005 and reiterated the importance of ALIA's role in bringing together educators and other stakeholders in such fora. Using feedback obtained at the meeting the Education Reference Group will be developing a draft model for course recognition at library technician level. ∎