

Communications: Promotional Materials and Newsletters
“All the News that’s Fit to Click” – MassHousing Update Email Newsletter

In today’s world, no one media channel is sufficient to reach the diverse audience of a housing finance agency. The various populations served – from homebuyers to renters, from property managers to investors – rely on a variety of sources to obtain news and information. But how can communicators already stretched thin maintain these new, ever-increasing number of channels; drive traffic to them; and provide fresh content on a regular basis?

MassHousing uses a monthly newsletter to help address all three of these challenges. Perhaps paradoxically, *MassHousing Update* does not include articles on the Agency’s products, programs, events and accomplishments. Instead, the monthly email newsletter acts as an aggregator – it collects links to content already published on MassHousing’s websites and social media channels. This format reduces workload for communications staff, increases traffic to social media outlets and allows for a newsletter to be produced quickly and efficiently on a regular basis.

MassHousing Update is at the core of the Agency’s communications strategy. It allows dialogue with constituents on a regular basis and helps drive traffic to and interest in MassHousing’s social media channels and websites.

MassHousing has long published a newsletter: first in print and then, since 2005, via email. The conversion from print to HTML email resulted in significant savings in both costs (printing and distribution) as well as staff time. In 2010, MassHousing communications staff stopped writing articles specifically for the newsletter and began focusing content creation efforts on the Agency’s blog and other social media channels: Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube.

The emergence of social media channels means that news can be disseminated as it happens. There is no need to wait for a monthly newsletter to share information, but there is a benefit to aggregating your content once per month and presenting it in its entirety. It provides an opportunity for people who may have missed the information the first time, and it helps to reinforce the reality that the Agency is doing many things on many fronts.

MassHousing communications staff designed the HTML newsletter template and produce the newsletter on a monthly basis. The template maintains Agency branding standards and is easily adapted to include fresh imagery and links in each edition.

The *MassHousing Update* email newsletter is distributed monthly to 1,063 subscribers using a customer retention management (CRM) system called Soffront, which ensures that the newsletter is not blocked by external email filters and reaches the subscriber’s audience.

Unlike most email newsletters, *MassHousing Update* does not include articles. Instead, the newsletter is a collection of links to various items on the Agency’s social media channels and websites. Readers have been found to scan text rather than read online, so this format allows subscribers to quickly navigate the headlines and then click through for details on items of interest rather than wading through the full text of articles that may not suit that particular reader.

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In addition, the format makes use of content that has already been produced for MassHousing’s social media channels – particularly YouTube, Flickr and the MassHousing Blog – and the Agency’s websites. Rather than rewriting content for the newsletter, communications staff is instead able to focus on creating more and different content.

MassHousing Update is based on a template that uses standards compliant HTML and CSS (Cascading Style Sheet), something that could be created by anyone with a working knowledge of web development. While MassHousing uses the Soffront CRM system to manage subscriptions, distribution and the email list, there are numerous tools available to complete these tasks.

MassHousing Update is only distributed to those who have actively subscribed – currently 1,063 individuals. Subscribers represent the many MassHousing customer constituencies – homebuyers and owners, mortgage lenders, housing developers, property managers, government officials, members of the media and others interested in affordable housing in Massachusetts. Sending the newsletter using the Soffront CRM system ensures that the newsletter is not blocked by external spam filters or firewalls.

MassHousing uses its email newsletter to drive traffic to the Agency’s social media channels and websites, and increase awareness of products, programs and events. *MassHousing Update* consistently accomplishes these goals. Consider this:

- On weeks a newsletter is sent, masshousing.com sees between 1,000 and 3,500 more page views than the preceding week;
- The MassHousing Blog (<http://masshousing.typepad.com>) sees an average of 101 unique visitors each week; on weeks a newsletter is sent, the average is 139;
- Videos promoted in *MassHousing Update* receive approximately 80 views; and
- Flickr photo sets promoted in the newsletter receive approximately 30 views.

MassHousing Update is produced by staff of the Corporate Communications Department at minimal cost to the Agency. Aside from the Soffront CRM system that is used to distribute the newsletter, no special software is needed. (Soffront is used by the entire Agency to oversee communications and contacts for Rental and Home Ownership business lines, and was not purchased specifically for *MassHousing Update*.) The primary cost of the newsletter is staff time; approximately two hours are spent each month formatting the newsletter, collecting links, testing and maintaining the subscriber list.

MassHousing Update uses what’s on hand to deliver an effective product. Rather than requiring staff to write articles specifically for it, the newsletter instead collects links to recently posted, already existing content on the Agency’s websites and social media channels. This places minimal demand on communications staff that is thereby freed to produce a greater variety of information. In addition, *MassHousing Update* is sent using the Soffront CRM system that had already been put into use by the Agency. All told, production of the newsletter and management of the subscriber list requires only two hours of time from one Corporate Communications staff member each month.

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MassHousing utilizes new and traditional channels to speak to its diverse constituents and customers. The Agency believes that being responsive and open is vital to its success. *MassHousing Update* plays a central role in the communications strategy. It allows the Agency to speak to those individuals who wish to hear it, to highlight the most important information, products and programs and to drive subscribers to the Agency’s online channels where the dialogue can continue.

MassHousing Update furthers the Agency’s goals by communicating the value of its products and programs, encouraging partnership and patronage of the Agency, and celebrating its successes.

Links for the newsletter:

https://www.masshousing.com/imageserver/MHUpdate/0611//mhupdate_0611.htm

https://www.masshousing.com/imageserver/MHUpdate/0511//mhupdate_0511.htm

https://www.masshousing.com/imageserver/MHUpdate/0311//mhupdate_0311.htm