

Communications – Promotional Materials & Newsletters **MassHousing’s E-Newsletter**

Summary

Despite the growing prominence of social media and other Web-based tools, email remains a popular and effective communication channel. The *MassHousing Update* email newsletter capitalizes on this fact and delivers timely, concise news to a subscribership that represents all segments of the Agency’s customers and business partners. *MassHousing Update* is produced entirely in-house, is cost-effective, and is a vital component of MassHousing’s greater communications strategy.

Most importantly, *MassHousing Update* succeeds in driving people to the Agency’s websites and encourages them to interact. Subscribership continues to rise, as do clicks and registrations for items and events promoted in the newsletter. In short, *MassHousing Update* accomplishes its goals while remaining efficient in terms of cost and time.

Evolution of *MassHousing Update*

In October 2005, *MassHousing Update* went from a quarterly, printed-and-mailed publication to a monthly email. The goal was to provide more information, more often, at a lower cost. The e-newsletter has gone through several iterations since 2005, decreasing the file size while refining the design. The most recent redesign transformed the newsletter from a collection of articles and images to an aggregation of social media posts, news articles and other items from the previous month. The result is a more robust product that requires substantially less time and energy to produce while at the same time more effectively drawing in the reader and making a read of the newsletter seem interesting and worthwhile.

Innovation

Email newsletters are certainly not unique, but *MassHousing Update* is innovative in a number of ways. It has successfully made the transition from print to email by taking advantage of and adhering to online conventions. The email itself is constructed using standards-compliant HTML and CSS, which makes it readable in the numerous email services (e.g., Outlook, Gmail, hotmail, et al) used by Agency subscribers. A Web-based version is also available as an alternative.

The email itself is transmitted using MassHousing’s CRM system, Soffront, which increases the likelihood that a bulk email campaign passes spam filters and reaches the subscriber’s inbox. Soffront also helps MassHousing manage duplicate and invalid emails.

The most recent innovation for *MassHousing Update* lies in the philosophy behind its latest incarnation. The new version is a collection of links to already existing items on the Web. The benefits of this are two-fold: it re-uses existing content rather than requiring staff to re-create or duplicate it; and it drives customers and business partners to MassHousing’s social media channels like Flickr, Facebook, Twitter and the MassHousing blog, which creates more opportunities for interaction.

Replicability

Through all its iterations, *MassHousing Update* has been built upon a template into which text and images can be copied and pasted. In previous versions, articles have been written by staff in the Corporate Communications Department, and links have been provided to MassHousing's website, the websites of the Agency's business partners and customers, news articles and press releases—items all HFAs have, create or have access to. The new version of *MassHousing Update* links to blog posts, photos, news articles and other items, most of which had been created by Agency staff. Many organizations use CRM systems to coordinate communications and interactions with their customers, but this is not essential to operating an e-newsletter. *MassHousing Update*'s first email subscribers were kept in a spreadsheet, subscribe and unsubscribe requests were handled manually, and the email itself was sent out through Microsoft Outlook. No advanced technology or special skills are necessary to execute a high-quality email newsletter.

Reaching Target Audiences

Since its inception, the email version of *MassHousing Update* has only been sent to those who completed a subscription process. MassHousing is sensitive to concerns over email spam, and wants to share Agency news and insight with those who wish to hear it. Subscribers include people from all areas of MassHousing's constituencies: developers, lenders, property managers, social service providers, real estate brokers, consumers, government workers, and other HFAs.

The initial subscriber pool was assembled through a multi-pronged approach that included links on masshousing.com; an email campaign to contacts of Agency staff; and an article in the final printed *Update*. This campaign resulted in approximately 450 subscriptions. In total, more than 1,000 subscription requests have been received. In moving forward, *MassHousing Update* relies primarily on word-of-mouth referrals to grow its subscriber list. Links to the Web version of newsletters are posted on the Agency's websites and social media channels. But the handful of new subscribers each month more likely comes from forwarded copies of the email newsletter.

Measurable Results

MassHousing Update's primary goal is to drive subscribers to the Agency's websites and social media outlets. Traffic on MassHousing websites, the blog and other social media channels generally increases the day the newsletter is sent, as well as the day after. In addition, new subscription requests are most common in the days following a new *Update*.

The June 2010 edition of the newsletter resulted in 328 more page views the day it was sent and 505 more page views on the day after it was sent (compared to the previous week). The Agency's Flickr photostream, which was introduced in the June 2010 issue, resulted in 56 clicks. Two photo sets released just prior to this issue received 24 and 39 views, respectively. The MassHousing blog, which was heavily linked to the newsletter, received 82 views the day the newsletter was sent, about eight times greater than a typical day.

Benefits that Outweigh Costs

Because all aspects are handled in-house and use hardware and software that exists for other purposes, *MassHousing Update*'s costs are limited to staff time. In the past, newsletter articles

were written by two members of the Corporate Communications Department, requiring no more than two hours total. Formatting photos and the HTML code behind the newsletter, updating the subscriber list and sending out the email required another two hours. The new format requires even less time, since it aggregates links to existing content, and requires about one hour total.

No matter how one views the statistics on click-throughs, page views, and subscriptions, *MassHousing Update* is a cost-to-benefit bargain.

An Effective Use of Resources

MassHousing goes to great lengths to communicate with its partners, peers, customers and constituents, and the *Update* is an example of that. Only an estimated four hours of staff time was required each month to produce an e-newsletter and speak to a substantial audience. No additional monies are spent for *MassHousing Update*.

The new format and philosophy of the newsletter makes for an even better use of existing resources. MassHousing is making an effort to utilize social media tools more effectively to communicate about its accomplishments and programs, and is now producing content for a blog, Twitter feed, Facebook page and Flickr photostream. The new newsletter format allows the Agency to communicate the same information as before, if not more, without requiring staff to rewrite articles and re-crop images. It is reusing and repackaging existing content while exposing more people to MassHousing's social media channels.

Achieving Strategic Objectives

MassHousing prides itself on being an innovative, responsive and transparent organization. The Agency recognizes the power of information and takes seriously the responsibility to communicate with its constituencies and partners. *MassHousing Update* has been and remains a key component of the Agency's communication strategy. It allows the Agency to deliver news to people who request it, to highlight the topics and programs it finds most important, and to drive visits online.

MassHousing Update furthers the Agency's goals by communicating the value of its programs and encouraging participation in those programs. And it adheres to the Agency's commitment to using the most current and effective tools in as economical a way as possible.