Chapter No. 6
"Communicating with our Users"
In this package, you will find:

A Biography of the author of the book

A preview chapter from the book, Chapter NO. 6 "Communicating with our Users"

A synopsis of the book’s content

Information on where to buy this book

About the Author

Michael Peacock (http://www.michaelpeacock.co.uk) is a web developer from Newcastle, UK with a degree in Software Engineering from the University of Durham. After meeting his business partner whilst studying at Durham, he co-founded Peacock Carter (http://www.peacockcarter.co.uk), a Newcastle based creative consultancy specializing in web design, web development, and corporate identity.

Michael loves working on web-related projects, and when he isn't working on client projects he is often tinkering with a web app of his own invention, his latest app is Learnr (http://www.learnr.co.uk).

He has been involved with a number of books, having written three books: Drupal Social Networks, Selling Online with Drupal e-Commerce, Building Web Sites with TYPO3, and acted as technical reviewer for Mobile Web Development and Drupal Education & E-Learning.

You can follow Michael on Twitter: www.twitter.com/michaelpeacock

For More Information:
Drupal 6 Social Networking

This book uses Drupal, a powerful and extendable Content Management System (CMS), to set up and manage a social networking web site using a range of powerful and feature-rich social networking modules that are available. By using Drupal, the site can be built and extended rapidly, and changed easily, as the social network evolves and grows.

This book is packed with practical tips not only for setting up a social networking site, but also for promoting and marketing the site, as well as working with the sites' users to help the social network grow and flourish.

What This Book Covers

Chapter 1 introduces you to Drupal, social networking, and the benefits of creating a social networking site.

Chapter 2 takes you through the Drupal administration interface in addition to discussing how Drupal works. It also walks us through preparing Drupal to become a social networking site.

Chapter 3 goes through the steps of allowing our users to contribute content to the site, using modules which are built into the Drupal core.

Chapter 4 extends the user experience with enhanced customized profiles and blog themes; and enables users to log in using OpenID, which can save them the trouble of remembering another set of login details.

Chapter 5 enables users to interact with one another, as well as build and maintain relationships with each other, forming groups to enhance these relationships and improving site communication and collaboration, and providing areas for users to comment on each other's profiles and viewing the activity of the other users.

Chapter 6 looks at communicating with the users of the social network through mailing lists, theme changes and Twitter feeds, to keep them up-to-date, and improve user retention.

Chapter 7 walks through the creation of a custom module, making use of Google Maps, to illustrate how easily the social network can be extended to meet almost any need. With these skills, the features provided on the social network are no longer limited to the Drupal core and user-contributed modules.

Chapter 8 introduces you to Drupal themes to install and enable new themes, customize existing themes and walks you through the basic steps involved in creating a basic theme of your own, allowing you to provide a unique design to separate your site from the competition.

For More Information:
Chapter 9 shows you how to deploy your new social networking web site, and also how to maintain it to ensure that it is in tip-top condition.

Chapter 10 goes through some useful stages in promoting your site through search engine optimization, social media and advertisements, as well as some useful advice on advertising, promoting, and marketing on the web. This helps to bring back visitors to your site, and also bring in new users.

Appendix A shows you how to install the Apache web server, the PHP interpreter and MySQL database server using the WampServer package.
Communicating with our Users

Our users can communicate with one another, which is great, but quite often as an administrator the need may arise for us to communicate with a user or users on our site. It may be to remind them about the web site or to inform active users about new changes to the site, which they may not have been made aware of.

In this chapter, you will learn:

- About mailing lists, and how to use them with our Drupal social network
- How to use an offline approach for contacting our users
- How to use blocks of content to get a message across to your users

Getting started

We are going to look at a few different modules, some of which we will use. These need to be installed first, so let's do that now to save us time.

The modules

We need to download the following modules:

- Addresses module (http://drupal.org/project/addresses) enable the Addresses, Addresses - Phone/Fax and Addresses - Users components.
- Simplenews module (http://drupal.org/project/simplenews)

And extract them to our sites/all/modules folder, and enable them via the administration interface.
A look back
We have already looked at one very important aspect to communicate with our users—user e-mail settings. Within the User settings page (Administer | User management | User settings), we have a group of settings under the heading User e-mail settings. These are various email templates that are sent to our users upon certain events, such as registration, account activation, password reset, account being blocked or account being deleted. The content of these emails can be very important depending on the nature of the web site. In our Dino Space site, we may use a very informal, welcoming and fun tone for our automated emails. But for a business-oriented social network, we would want to use a much more formal tone.

Modules
Don't forget, many modules also have their own email templates for sending emails to users, all of which can normally be changed easily from their respective sections in the administration area.

Communicating on an individual basis
As we have installed the contact form module on our site, we can also communicate with our users on an individual basis using the contact forms on their profiles. This is handy for those times when we do need to contact an individual user, maybe because of complaints against them by other members of the community, or perhaps to invite them to become a moderator or contributor to the site.

Alternatively, we can contact the user directly via their email addresses listed in their accounts, as this is viewable from the administration area.

Inactive users
We may wish to contact users who have not been active on the site for a long time, to remind them that the site is still there, and that they would be welcome to become active in the community once again. Drupal records the time a user was last active, which allows us to easily sort the list of users by their activity.

A module (Inactive user) is available for Drupal 5, which is intended to contact inactive users automatically, but (at the time of writing this) one is not available for Drupal 6. You may wish to keep watch on the modules list on the Drupal.org web site to see if anything comes up in future http://drupal.org/project/inactive_user.
Communicating with individuals publicly

Don't forget, we also have access to all of the communication methods available for our users to communicate with one another, such as replying to posts, commenting on content, or posting on their profiles. So if we need to contact a user, and we can contact them publicly, we can use these features.

Mailing lists

Drupal has a number of modules available for sending emails to our users. Many of them are still currently under heavy development, or had their development stopped after the release of a previous version of Drupal. One of these modules is Simplenews, which is a native Drupal system for managing newsletters.

One limitation of the Simplenews module, and most of the modules available, is that it can't send to all our users; it requires users to subscribe to the mailing list.

We can manage the Simplenews module via Administer | Newsletter. The features available to us are quite comprehensive. Let's have a look at how the module works:

- **Newsletters** are created and managed from here
- Users subscribe to various **Newsletters**
- Users can be imported into **Newsletters** to become a subscriber
- A message is sent to a newsletter (this is referred to as an issue) by creating **Newsletter** content
- Issues which have been sent are saved within the module
- Issues which have not yet been sent are saved within the module as drafts

By default, we have a **newsletter**, which is generic to our site based on our site name.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newsletters</th>
<th>Sent issues</th>
<th>Drafts</th>
<th>Newsletters</th>
<th>Subscriptions</th>
<th>Settings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List newsletters</td>
<td>Add newsletter</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newsletter name</th>
<th>Operations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dino Space! newsletter</td>
<td>edit newsletter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Communicating with our Users

From here we can also create new **Newsletters** should we wish so. The **Subscriptions** tab allows us to see and manage the subscriptions to our various newsletters, the **Sent issues** tab lists issues sent out to the **newsletter** lists, and the **Drafts** tab lists issues which are still being written. From within the **Settings** tab, we can set how new issues for **newsletters** are created, as well as the email address shown as the sender of issues.

```
Don't forget to set the permissions; you want your users to be able to subscribe to newsletters.
```

Users can subscribe to **newsletters** from within their account, or we can enable blocks for the relevant newsletters we have on our site.

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Account: My newsletters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Current newsletter subscriptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Select the newsletter(s) to which you want to subscribe or unsubscribe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>□ Dino Space! newsletter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
```

To send an "issue" to our newsletter list, we need to create the issue as a new content element via Create content | Newsletter issue.

We enter the subject of our email as the **Title**, select the newsletter to send the message to from the **Newsletter** drop-down list, and the message is entered into the **Body** box.

```
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title: *</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our first newsletter!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Newsletter: |
| Dino Space! newsletter |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Body:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Our newsletter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This will be the body of your newsletter. Available variables are: site (the name of your website), url (a link to your homepage), url brief (homepage link without the http://), date (today’s date), login uri (link to login page).
```

---

For More Information:

Beneath these options, we have some newsletter specific-options within the **Newsletter sending options** box. These options allow us to set the **priority** of the email message (this is often ignored by email clients), if we wish to request a receipt to see if a user has read the message (this is also often ignored by email clients) and finally, we can select a **sending** method.

There are three sending methods, which are:

- **Don't send now** — this won't send the message, and will save it as a draft.
- **Send one test newsletter to the test address** — this will send the email message to the test email addresses, which we can set in the administration area. This allows us to review the newsletter, as if we were a subscriber, make any final alterations and then send it to our list.
- **Send newsletter** — this sends the email to our newsletter list.

**How to send an email to all our users?**

We can use the module to send an email to all of our users, by taking advantage of the subscriber import feature. Within **Administer | Content management | Newsletters | Subscriptions**, we have the ability to **Import subscriptions**, as shown in the following screenshot:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newsletters</th>
<th>Sent issues</th>
<th>Drafts</th>
<th>Newsletters</th>
<th>Subscriptions</th>
<th>Settings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List subscriptions</td>
<td>Import subscriptions</td>
<td>Export subscriptions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**E-mail addresses:**
michael.peacock@peacockcarter.co.uk, richard@peacockcarter.co.uk

Supply a comma separated list of e-mail addresses to be added to the list. Spaces between commas and addresses are allowed.

**Subscribe imported addresses to the following newsletter(s)**

- Dino Space newsletter
Importing subscribers consists of entering the **E-mail addresses** (separated by a comma) and selecting the **newsletter** which we wish the user to subscribe to. To get all of our current members to subscribe to the mailing list, we could export all of our users' email addresses directly from the Drupal database, using a tool such as phpMyAdmin. If we use the tool correctly, we can even get the data in a comma-separated list ready to be pasted into the form.

**HTML emails**

In order to send HTML (that is, nicely formatted) emails, and emails as attachments to our newsletters, we would need to install the Mime Mail module from (http://drupal.org/project/mimemail).

**Give it a try**

We have covered module installation and configuration extensively; so why not try and install the module yourself and experiment with HTML newsletters.

**Legalities**

There are legalities involved with sending bulk emails, and mailing lists, especially with regards to SPAM. Most countries have their own laws relating to this. More information on the legalities of sending bulk mailings is available in Chapter 10, **Promoting your Site**.

**Throttling**

When web sites send out bulk email campaigns, it is important to be careful about their frequency of emails. If all emails in the campaign are sent at once, this could be seen as a sign of SPAM, leading to blacklisting on mail servers, and also penalties from many shared hosts. If emails are sent out slowly, it may take a long time for a campaign to be sent out to all recipients.

The Simplenews module allows us to configure the frequency of the emails sent. These settings can be accessed from **Administer | Site configuration | Simplenews | Send mail**. Here the cron box is checked, indicating that emails are sent each time the Drupal cron script is called. The **Cron throttle** defines how many newsletters are sent each time the Drupal cron script is called. By default, it is set to 20, which is very low. So this should be changed perhaps to 100 or 500. You may wish to contact your hosting company for advice on email limits imposed by them.
Third-Party Services

Besides allowing us to run our own email newsletter service from within Drupal, a number of the available modules allow us to make use of third-party mailing list systems.

**PHPList**

PHPList is a popular mailing list system written in PHP, if we were to use this system (particularly useful if our Drupal social network is part of a group of sites, or part of a larger site which does not use Drupal), we can use the PHPList integration module to:

- Synchronize users from Drupal to our PHPList system
- Send targeted mailings based on the values of a users profile
- Allow users to manage their PHPList subscriptions from within their account
- Bulk import into PHPList, if we already have a Drupal installation running with many users

This module can be downloaded from [http://drupal.org/project/phplist](http://drupal.org/project/phplist), while PHPList can be downloaded from [http://www.phplist.com/](http://www.phplist.com/)

PHPList involves some server configuration; so if PHPList is the solution for you, make sure you read the documentation thoroughly.

**Constant contact**

Constant contact ([http://www.constantcontact.com/index.jsp](http://www.constantcontact.com/index.jsp)) is an online email marketing service, which manages newsletter subscriptions itself, with a particular focus on privacy and security for subscribers on mailing lists. Drupal 5 had a module to easily link into a constant contact account, [http://drupal.org/project/constant_contact](http://drupal.org/project/constant_contact). This module, at the time of writing is not available for Drupal 6. But it is worth looking out for updates of this module or an alternative module to take its place if you wish to use constant contact to provide newsletters for your social network.
Communicating with our Users

**Google Groups**

Google Groups are essentially mini social networks that operate in a way similar to groups in our network with the Organic Groups module. Many organizations and projects, such as open source software projects, make use of Google Groups to complement their communication and collaboration areas. If you wish to use Google Groups to complement your social network, then there is a module to allow users to subscribe to your group directly from the site. The module can be downloaded from [http://drupal.org/project/google_groups](http://drupal.org/project/google_groups). This module would probably be of little use if you used the organic groups module because the organic groups module provides very similar functionality. Problems with using a service such as Google Groups is that we are limited in terms of controlling the layout of our communications losing any branding associated with our site, and a potential loss of revenue when we may have used advertisements on our site or on our own newsletter.

**Direct contact**

If our social network is an extension of something else, for instance an online supplement to an organization dedicated to the promotion and support of keeping dinosaurs as pets, then we may wish to contact users of our social network using an offline method.

The Address module allows users to supply a physical address and a telephone number, which means we could post newsletters to our users. This would primarily be of use to organizations which are already producing paper mailers to a wide audience, where the online social network is used to complement the services provided by these organizations; otherwise offline contacting may not be cost effective.

**The address module**

Having installed the address module, and having given users permissions to create an address book, we can collect the addresses, telephone numbers, and fax numbers of our users.

**Users perspective**

From the users perspective, they can easily store and edit addresses and contact details from within their accounts, via the Address Book tab.
Administrators perspective

Unfortunately, this module was designed to complement other modules (for example, the e-Commerce module) in providing a convenient location for users to store their address for later use (such as ordering products for delivery with the e-Commerce module). There is no back-end interface to allow us, as administrators, to view the contact details of our users. We can, however, gain access to the information from the database directly, and can then maintain our own records from there, or from the $user array via custom PHP code. An alternative would be to create additional user profile fields, which can be read only by administrators.

Content blocks

Modules and themes often make use of blocks to display small blocks of content in specific areas of the web site, generally including the web site's header, the sidebars on the left and right-hand side of the screen, the footer, and the main content area, as well as dynamic functionality, such as group information in the Organic groups module. Blocks we have previously been using, such as with the Organic groups module, are dynamic and populated by the modules that created them. Blocks don't have to be dynamic; we can create blocks of our own to display content that doesn't change dynamically.

We can make use of these blocks to display information and messages to our users. For instance, if we wanted to communicate with guest users, we could create a content block with information on the benefits of joining the site.
Creating a content block for anonymous users

1. Navigate to Administer | Site building | Blocks.
2. Select the Add block tab.
3. Enter a Description, Title and Body for the block, with the benefits of joining in the Block body box.
4. Under Role-specific visibility settings, select Show blog for specific roles for anonymous users.
5. Under Page-specific visibility settings, select the block to be visible on all pages.
6. Save block.

Once created, the block is displayed on our site for users who are not logged in:
Theme customizations for communication

We could also use the look and feel of our site to communicate with our users. The following are some examples of what we could do:

- A simple bar of information, perhaps relating to a specific feature
- Pop-up windows (although considered a bad design practice)
- CSS (cascading style sheets) pop ups with information
- A collapsible message, where the user can click an icon to expand an administrative message, which we can update periodically

These options require knowledge of HTML, CSS, and Drupal themes.

Summary

In this chapter, we looked at how we—as administrators can communicate with our users using a variety of methods including:

- Features that we have previously covered in other chapters
- Newsletters and mailing lists
- Third-party mailing lists
- Content blocks

We now have a fully functional social network. Our users can contribute to the site, communicate with each other, and we can communicate with them. In the next chapter, we will look at how easy it is to create custom modules to fit the needs of almost any site by creating a custom module of our very own.
Where to buy this book


Free shipping to the US, UK, Europe and selected Asian countries. For more information, please read our shipping policy.

Alternatively, you can buy the book from Amazon, BN.com, Computer Manuals and most internet book retailers.