CASE STUDY: How one Melbourne Car Club uses the internet to improve communications with Members.
By Mark Fenton, Editor and Webmaster for the Chrysler Restorers Club of Australia (Vic) inc

The Chrysler Restorers Club of Australia (Vic) inc has been in existence for more than 35 years and has been experiencing strong membership growth in recent years (>50% in the past 5 years), as well as a big increase in the number of members with internet and email access. This shift in internet capability has been due to existing members going online, as well as a large percentage of newer (younger) members joining up with the internet already part of their world. More than 72% of members have currently provided an email address to share with Club members via a printed Club Register, and to receive regular email communications from the Club organisers, so the opportunity has been there to improve the quality and speed of communication to members and to reduce cost, by eliminating snail mail postage.

I am sure that most Clubs have an internet presence by now, however unless the Club is lucky enough to have someone literate in Website maintenance it can be a challenge to take advantage of the faster and cheaper ways of communicating with members by email. I thought I would therefore share this Club's experience with some of the web based technologies that have been introduced, without professional website assistance, in the hope that other Club's can also benefit from some really useful stuff that is out there, and much of it is FREE!

We have our own registered Club domain name (chryslerclubvic.org.au), and a website hosted on a public internet provider (for a modest fee), and many other Clubs would also already have a website set up in a similar way. Other clubs will have taken up the options to run a simple introductory website on the websites provided by industry sponsors, such as Shannon's Insurance. The purpose of this report, is to suggest some other ways that Car Clubs, no matter how big or small, could use the internet to improve their communications and engagement with members, or to improve aspects of Club organisation.

This is some of our Club's experience, and it would be good to have other Club's share their experiences. Maybe it could be a topic for a future AOMC winter seminar?

1. How can you send messages to 300 email addresses at once? (that's how many we regularly have to send)
If you have tried to send bulk emails using your personal account before, then you would have soon realised that most ISP's have a sending limit of about 20 recipients at a time, and it is impractical to maintain small email "groups" to do it by sending the message 15 times to groups of 20 or so email addresses. Furthermore, if you do send them in large batches, many of them will not be received successfully as they may be blocked by the recipient's own ISP, eg when too many are received from the same sender in the same hour. For example, ISPs such as Bigpond can have a limit of about 10 per hour from a single unverified source, so it is not too hard to exceed these thresholds if you have lots of members with, for example, a bigpond email address.

Several years ago we starting using a free mailing list system (PHPList) set up on our website host site that is operated on a public shared hosting server. It had features to carefully control the sending of emails to members and it served us well .... until we needed to rely on achieving a 100% success rate for members receiving emails, and we found out we were not achieving that. We began to experience sporadic blacklisting of our emails, such that they were being refused by various recipient ISPs (with no notice to us or the intended recipient). The blacklisting was not our fault, but had been caused by another website, resident on the same group of servers as ours, intentionally or inadvertently sending spam causing the whole server to be blacklisted for several days at a time. Needless to say this was a disaster... especially as our Club now relies on email to send members their monthly password to download the online Club magazine. There was no option but to find another solution.

This is where we got lucky and found a significantly better service, easier to use, and also completely **FREE**. While I would have been reluctant to recommend PHPList as a mailing list for the novice Club webmaster to install and manage, I have no hesitation recommending **MAILCHIMP** to ANY club, large or small, who needs to scale up their capability for sending emails to large numbers of members (>20). There may be other services out there that offer similar features, but with this one

being completely free and with a limit of 12,000 individual emails sent per month, it is most unlikely that most Clubs, including ours, would ever need to pay for a greater limit. Look them up at http://mailchimp.com

Why do we like it, and what features do we use?

- It was really easy to set up with plenty of good information to understand what you need to do and why, so I was able to confidently set up the mailing list in just 2 nights after work (following our last blacklisting episode).
- We have configured it with a separate mailing list for financial members and another list for non-members/guests who also receive our online magazine. We also have some test mailing lists so that the designated Club email senders can test the system by sending a sample email out to just themselves, if necessary.
- We have set up email templates for different purposes which makes it very easy to create email messages with a consistent, professional look and feel. The default layout selected can be changed depending on the nature of the message.
- The members email addresses are easily maintained by copying and pasting the list from a spreadsheet when required. We generate this spreadsheet from our membership database so that it includes the members name, membership number, whether they have a CPS permit through our Club, and which membership level they have signed up for (our club now has 2 membership fee types - which determines whether they receive a printed/posted magazine, or whether they only receive it online).
- The financial member list can be easily brought up to date by reimporting and updating the existing list to ensure the members are correctly set up and classified. It only takes a few minutes each month to do this.
- Multiple authorised club personnel are able to log in to the MailChimp account and create a mailing campaign (email), selecting which mailing list(s) to send to, and in fact we can also target specific segments of our membership, for example, by only selecting the segment who have cars on the CPS scheme we can avoid hassling other members unnecessarily with specific CPS related reminders.
- With the correct setup, the list can be kept entirely private, and is not available for other purposes outside of the Club, while members, or non members always have the option to unsubscribe if they change their mind about being on the mailing list.
- "Bounced" emails are always a maintenance headache, however MailChimp efficiently monitors all bounced emails, automatically cleansing any email addresses that are rejected as undeliverable, while being more tolerant of bounces caused by temporary "Mailbox Full" and other non-permanent rejections. These cleansed email addresses can be monitored to manually keep our actual membership database up to date with valid email addresses.
- Emails can also be scheduled ahead of time, if necessary, to send a message on a future date. We do this to schedule a message with the latest magazine password to be sent to members 5 days before each Club meeting.

How can you set up proper Club email addresses?

Our club has a separate email address for every position on the Clubs committee, including mine (editor@chryslerclubvic.org.au), and for different groups of people such as organising sub-committees. As the personnel change, the emails addresses are redirected to the relevant members personal email address. This has the benefit of retaining the same club email addresses over many years, while people come and go and change their email address, and it provides some privacy to committee members by not exposing their personal email addresses too widely.

We originally did this by using the mailbox provided with our website hosting package and we could set up whatever email addresses and redirections as we like, using our registered domain name, but as mentioned above, this was crippled when the host server was blacklisted out of our control. It was necessary to have our mailbox hosted elsewhere.

There are many ways to do this but, if you have not done this already, consider setting up a free Google Apps email account for the club, and have it managed by the webmaster (NB: this is NOT the same as an ordinary gmail account - look up the difference between the two). Again it is FREE and most clubs would find that the upper limits of the free offering means that they would not need to pay for the more fully featured Google Apps for Business. Once you have the account set up it can be used to create actual email addresses using your registered Club domain name (eg @chryslerclubvic.org.au), although that may also require some additional setup if you have your club emails hosted elsewhere by your current website host (look for information on changing your domain MX settings).

One simple trick we use is to set up "email groups" so that emails sent to the group can be redirected to one or more personal email addresses, as required. For example the "group" called president@chryslerclubvic.org.au has only one member.. and guess who it is? In other cases we use groups to simplify the sending of emails to all members of a specific organising committee. Another example is using an email group to receive entries for our next National Rally, allowing multiple people to rotate through the role as time progresses. Yet another example is our PayPal email address, which is configured to send payment/receipt notifications to not only the treasurer, but also the Club's nominated PayPal Verification Officer who is responsible for administering the PayPal account on behalf of the less IT literate Treasurer, as well as other club officials responsible for maintaining the membership database (membership renewal payments) and the National Rally database (Entrant payments). Such group emails significantly improve the communication between the various Club officials and share the workload of managing Club responsibilities across a group of volunteers.

Need to survey your members?

Our Club Committee recently had a need to survey its members to investigate why the membership has grown so strongly in recent years, and to help plan the future to keep it growing strongly. But how could it be done easily? With more than 70% of members with an email address, a web based survey was ideal. After finding that there are many free survey services available on the internet (eg SurveyMonkey among many others) it was disappointing to find that that they all had fairly low maximum allowed responses (<100) and the downloaded results available for free did not allow for any reasonable cross correlation analysis between different answers, only simple totals for each question. The raw survey data was only available with a subscription. However, as usual, with a little bit of searching, the ideal (unlimited responses AND completely free) solution was soon found. It does require the Google Apps account mentioned in the previous section but as I am finding out, the team at Google really are providing lots of good stuff for nothing. In this case a very professional looking online survey was created within minutes, using Google Apps Forms, and was emailed (using our mailing list) to all members for a response. And respond they did, in droves! The results are automatically presented in graphical output and/or the raw data can also be downloaded for further analysis and investigation.

So if you are considering surveying your members, find out more about doing surveys using Google Apps Forms (Google it!)

PS: For what it is worth, despite our initial hypotheses, our increase in membership was not entirely due to the new Club Permit Scheme (CPS) requiring owners to be a member of a car club - only 30% of new members joined for this reason.

Have you got a decent Photo Gallery?

Most people would be aware that there are many decent photo galleries available for free in www land. In our case the photo galleries available in our website hosting package were OK, but very clunky to use and upload photos into. However by setting up an account on Picasa (another free Google product that can be set up using your Club Google Account) we have easily maintained multiple photo galleries for different purposes, including an impressive photo gallery of almost 200 members cars and another one for entrants for our next National Chrysler Rally in 2013 (look for them as examples on our website www.chryslerclubvic.org.au)

Need to share files?

Again there are many FREE options available to allow teams to share data files without emailing them to all and sundry. It can be done by "sharing" files, and automatically synchronising the file(s) across multiple user PC's via the internet. We have been using DropBox (www.dropbox.com) to enable two of our Club databases to be shared "seamlessly" across the internet. For example, we no longer have to email the membership database from one person to the next as the different users take holidays, or need the up-to-date information for research or reporting or magazine address list generation. The MS Access database file is automatically synchronised across multiple members PC's, eliminating the need to regularly pass it around by email (it also requires some simple reservation/ file locking strategies to avoid simultaneous file use but that is for another discussion). It also enables the database "front end" to be easily maintained so that all users automatically have the latest version of reports and other functionality, without getting the often "technology challenged" users to correctly do the update themselves.

The same strategy (file sharing using Dropbox) is in use for the database managing entries for our next National Chrysler Rally in 2013. In this case, it is particularly effective, allowing one person to record new entries, another to check and follow up on anomalies, and another to support and coordinate the reporting from the database, with all of us accessing the SAME data. It has enabled the workload to be very effectively shared by 3 people living in different parts of Melbourne. This sharing of workload is important for all volunteer organisations, including Car Clubs, if we are to avoid over-working the usual few who offer to do these tasks, and by being able to share the load we can get more people to actually volunteer.

Running a remote IT Service Desk?

From time to time, our Club officials have a problem with their PC, or with using one of our shared Club databases, or they have simply forgotten how to do something. As the Club webmaster I want to help them out, but there is nothing worse than having to jump in the car, go to the other side of Melbourne to fix something simple, often in just a few minutes. We have been therefore using another, you guessed it, FREE internet service that allows me, in seconds, to connect to their PC and take control of their monitor, mouse and keyboard, to investigate (and hopefully fix) a problem, install some new software, or show them how to do a new task - all without leaving home!. If this is what you need, then check out TeamViewer atwww.teamviewer.com. I also use it to help my elderly interstate parents keep their PC working correctly and to reassure them about how to do stuff on the computer when they are feeling challenged.

But also consider this in reverse.

What if it is YOU who is the IT challenged user who needs help? Use TeamViewer to ASK someone to help you solve a problem (by sending them an email with the required link to connect to your PC), without them having to make the journey to your place. After a few seconds of agreeing on connection IDs and authorising passwords (on the phone) you will be off and running. It works great, and not only suitable for Club business. For example it might allow a friend, or your more IT competent son/daughter who does not live at home, to more easily help you out with sorting out simple PC problems. This may be beneficial for you as well as for Club related problems. Every member of the Club could benefit from this sort of strategy, although sometimes you still need to deliver it to the local PC service centre for more extreme help, or for hardware servicing!

Anything Else? What about facebook?

Well yes, we have also recently set up a Club facebook group. Admittedly it was done with some reluctance by a Committee of mostly "old farts" (me included) who had better things to do than spend precious time supporting yet another stupid internet dothingy. But boy, with almost 100 group members joining in the first month, did it take off!

The Committee had been looking for a way to effectively engage with the newer members who did not necessarily come on the organised Club runs (attended by the same "old farts") but preferred instead

to get together with other like-minded Chrysler fans to organise their own adhoc/impromptu runs, or coffee stops, or drive-in nights etc. But best of all, after setting it up as a Club facebook group (www.facebook.com/groups/chryslerclubvic), it is the members themselves who post all the content with plenty of brags, car pics, for sale/wanted notices, event reports, photo uploads etc.

As one of the administrators/moderators, all I have to do is sit back and watch and enjoy it. As the Club webmaster, I find it is so much easier than trying to keep a website up to date with interesting new content because it does not need to be always funneled through one person (me). And as the Club's long standing editor, I am also very grateful, as it provides plenty of interesting photos and stories for the monthly Club magazine. It has also been a successful mechanisms to entice new members to actually join the Club (you don't have to be a member of our Club to be accepted as a member of the facebook group - but it does not seem to take long to convert them!).

In Conclusion:

I hope retelling these experiences will benefit other car clubs, no matter what size they are. All car clubs face similar issues of potentially diminishing relevance or declining membership, and by embracing available technology I believe it will help them to remain relevant and strong. The whole car club movement will benefit from that.

I have learned much about doing these sorts of things on the internet by simply giving things a go, but it often starts with an idea, a suggestion and some encouragement from someone about how it could be done. Can your Car Club benefit from any of these suggestions? Or maybe you have also done something worth sharing. Lets hear about it.