

Working the Net

Abstract: Jas Breslin gives a brief overview of how email discussion forums can be used by information professionals and information providers to enrich and enhance relationships.

Keywords: vendor relations; email; networks; discussion lists

Introduction

These days it is easy to believe that networking is just a matter of cheesy canapés and chilled chardonnay, but there is another very effective form of networking that is right at the end of your fingertips, via your computer keyboard.

We are talking about discussion lists, a.k.a. email forums or LISTSERV@ systems, which you may or may not already be familiar with. The primary purpose of these discussion lists is to help link together groups of like-minded people so that they can work in a more collaborative and effective way, sharing experiences and expertise via email. People who join these email discussion groups are called members or subscribers.

Many readers will work, or have worked, in small teams or as a solo librarian, or may be new to the profession. Being members of, and involved with, the discussion lists can save you time and hassle because you do not have to reinvent the wheel each time you are involved in a new project. You can post questions or ask for advice from your peers and the lists can give you access to the experience and knowledge of information professionals in other organisations, which is a real advantage when you are outside your normal comfort zone. There is also the added value of having access to an online archive of emails which have been sent previously to the group, meaning you can check to see whether someone has asked a similar question in the not so distant past, or compare trends over time.

List members

You might ask what types of people subscribe to these email forums. In the context of legal information provision, the majority of people are information professionals who want to be part of a wider community. Then there are those who want to share their experiences and are happy to give their views on particular situations. There are also those who post questions or

surveys, trying to find the answer to a specific research question, learn a new way of finding information, or look to find out how specific processes work in similar organisations. Often the same person will assume both these behaviours during their daily working life.

Subscribers to lists are often not aware of the fact that it is not only librarians who are members of these email discussion lists. Suppliers and vendors also sign up as members so that, for instance, they can increase their knowledge of the information sector, or see if their company is mentioned in discussions that take place in the public forum, either in a positive or negative way.

Lis-Law email discussion list

For readers based in the British Isles, probably the two most popular general discussion lists dealing with legal information are Lis-Law and BIALL, but it is important to note that there are many other lists out there which readers can become members of if they have a specialist interest.

Lis-Law has been helping law librarians in their work and related issues for over 12 years. Lis-Law is run by the National Academic Mailing List Service and can be accessed at <http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/>. If you are not currently subscribed you need to go to the Groups tab and search for the list and then subscribe, joining over 1000 other active members. Once you are subscribed, you receive all postings made by other subscribers, which are sent via email to each subscriber securely and individually.

This author is one of the co-managers of the list, which involves monitoring all postings which are made to ensure there are no breaches of copyright, or stepping in if discussions become rowdy. There is no pre-requisite to becoming a subscriber, you just need to have an interest in legal information and law libraries, with particular reference to UK and EU sources. Lis-Law has subscribers from across the globe, who work with European legal information. Discussions can vary from trying to source a specific case report or asking for advice on buying new software for a knowledge management system to online database pricing issues. The requests and questions

posted to the Lis-Law discussion list clearly show how diverse our role as information professionals has become.

BIALL members email discussion list

But however useful Lis-Law is, it is not the only, and arguably it is not the most effective, of the discussion lists available when it comes to dealing with vendor relations. BIALl members will be pleased to discover that the other player in this game of knowledge and networking is the BIALl Members discussion list. The archives for this discussion list go back to 2003, and although subscribers to the list must be paid up members of BIALl, you definitely get your membership money's worth. If you want to join this list and you are a BIALl member already you can register at <https://www.mailtalk.ac.uk/cgi-bin/webadmin?A0=BIALL>; this list is run by Mailtalk.

You may not realise but there are some powerful agents working behind the scenes of the BIALl email discussion list, trying to ensure that views and opinions, thoughts and rants, are taken seriously and dealt with professionally. Like the Lis-Law list, there are managers for the BIALl list who monitor all postings. But there are also committee members from some of the BIALl sub committees who monitor this list for specific issues.

The information professional's perspective

So what exactly is the point of the information professional subscribing to these types of discussion groups? We have already mentioned that the lists are a forum for obtaining information and sharing experiences, but there are other reasons too. For instance, a librarian might be planning to subscribe to a new online product and, if they feel uneasy about the terms, price or restrictions being imposed by the vendor, they may want to post a message to the group to see if there are others who are in a similar position, or have been, and how they have resolved the issue.

Another example is where one person is having technical issues with a database/software. They need to find out whether others are experiencing the same problems, as the vendor is informing them that they are the only ones and therefore he does not plan to spend any time or money on trying to reach a resolution.

A third popular query that comes up is identifying what resources there are in a specific area of law e.g. Islamic law, or English language versions of legislation issued in a specific country.

The discussion group connects people in organisations with similar interests so that they can lobby an information provider to sort out problems or concerns

that need to be addressed, or even make a request to develop new products that would be popular if brought to the marketplace.

The vendor's perspective

So what do the information providers, suppliers and vendors gain from subscribing to an email discussion list? As mentioned above, some vendors and suppliers just want to better understand the law librarian's world and so monitor the list to see what sorts of issues regularly come up. This can enrich face-to-face meetings for both parties with the vendor understanding underlying issues that the librarian faces and thus knowing how they may be able to assist the librarian, who does not need to explain that they have had budgets cut, or that purchasing trends are moving towards electronic rather than print products in their special sector. This kind of monitoring can also be of value to the vendor when they are developing new products for the market, or looking for honest feedback on existing products.

Other vendors are looking specifically to see if there are any postings about their own organisation, or about their competitors. Sometimes librarians do not contact a vendor to iron out a problem so this might be the first time the issue has been aired. The vendor will also inevitably emit a cry of glee when they see a competitor politely panned or placed further down the rankings on an informal survey.

Yet others are looking for marketing opportunities, so when they see a posting where someone is looking for resources covering a particular type of information, the vendor may email that person and explain what their product can do to help with that sort of query.

LIG and vendor relationships

The Legal information Group (LIG) is one of the BIALl sub committees and is currently chaired by David Percik (our guest editor for this LIM issue). One of the remits of the Group is to foster and develop relationships between BIALl members and information providers be they publishers, agents, suppliers or distributors, dealing with all types of media. LIG will also represent the interests of BIALl members in 'appropriate forums'.

In the context of email discussion lists, LIG monitors postings made about (and by) vendors and suppliers and the products that they supply. For instance, a subscriber (possibly an information professional) may post a message to the BIALl list complaining about what they perceive to be outrageous subscription renewal pricing for an online database. Other members will reply, giving their views or sharing the experience they had when

they renewed the subscription for their organisation. LIG will pick up on this posting and will quite often step in and post a message to the BIALL list and explain that others have encountered this issue previously, or that they are happy to approach the vendor and discuss the issue as a third party mediator, or that they are already working with the information provider on this very point. So you can see that the discussion list can act as a starting point for lobbyists. These days, if LIG does not step in, a knowledgeable person who has perhaps served on the LIG Committee previously will formally ask LIG to take up the case. This happens particularly when discussions on the list become vociferous and plentiful and LIG will try to head off the discussion well before it gets to the stage where defamatory or discourteous comments may inadvertently be made.

One of the most important services which LIG provides is to facilitate communication between information consumers and information providers and this can manifest itself as an email posting from LIG to the BIALL list to summarise their contact with the provider, or circulate a statement on behalf of the provider.

Conclusion

The email discussion lists can be an excellent tool for consolidating and enriching vendor relationships. The lists can put information providers and information professionals in contact with each other in a way that may not have been intended when the message was posted, but that can be the basis for a fruitful and lasting relationship.

It therefore makes sense to be courteous when you are posting emails to what is essentially a more public forum than you might have originally thought. It is wise to be polite and only post messages to the email forum where you say what you would be happy to say to an information provider if they were standing in the same room as you. As we all know, email messages can sometimes get misconstrued when they are taken out of context.

Hopefully, having read this article, you have a wider understanding of how the email discussion lists work and this knowledge can help enhance your relationships with vendors.

Biography

Jas Breslin is currently the Regional Information Resources Manager, Europe, at Morrison & Foerster (UK) LLP. She is a former BIALL Council member and has been Council liaison to the Legal information Group (LIG). Jas is one of the co-managers for the Lis-Law discussion list.