

Publishing the family directory in the digital age

Everyone looks forward to receiving their family directory and with the ever expanding digital environment (smart phones, iPads, etc.) there are new publishing options and security concerns for your PTA to consider. The good news is that these options can save your PTA both time and money and provide better security than a paper version. This article will explore the following publishing options and their security implications to both your PTA and member families:

- Printing – a printed copy of the directory with physical distribution.
- Desktop – a directory file that resides on the reader's computer.
- Online – the directory data is hosted online and accessible through the internet.

A primary concern we all face is keeping the directory from falling into the wrong hands (both for privacy reasons and to make sure that the directory is not used as a marketing tool). Keep in mind that your families have a vested interest in guarding the directory since their own information is in it as well. (Ironically, at our school the only abuse we have had is one parent, who was in the directory, sending spam emails to solicit his real estate business).

Printing

Paper printing is still the most common form of directory publishing. However, with today's easy to use, and readily available, scanning tools it is actually the least secure. When you print on paper you cannot prevent families from giving a copy to a friend or scanning it to a PDF and then re-distributing it (in fact we have heard of this happening at a couple of schools). Most home printers now come with features which make it easy to scan a document in minutes. Another drawback to the printed directory is the lack of ability to track where unauthorized copies came from.

Desktop

A desktop directory is a file (typically a PDF) that resides on your families' local computer. The file is not on the internet and doesn't require the family's computer to be connected to the internet to view it. The desktop directory is easily distributed via email. In addition, parents can print just the pages they need (class lists, phone numbers, etc.) thereby saving paper and the environment.

There are two primary security options for the desktop directory:

PDF encrypted with Digital Rights Management (DRM)

DRM is the technology used to protect music and eBooks. Using this method the directory file is licensed to a single computer so that it can't be passed on to another user. While this is probably the most secure publishing option it is also the most cumbersome to install and manage for both the directory coordinator and the family. The family has to install a reader, then



a license key and then download the protected pdf file. I have found that many families have difficulty navigating the process and dislike the restrictiveness of DRM. Some are also reluctant to install a new program on their computer due to the potential of introducing a virus.

In addition, if you allow printing (and we have found that almost everyone wants the option to be able to print) many DRM systems have issues on the Mac operating system that can limit the effectiveness of DRM security.

Protected PDF with “social DRM”

While an unprotected PDF has no security, and DRM has very restrictive security, there is another option called “social DRM” which is becoming popular. This consists of password protecting the PDF (using either a single password for the school or unique passwords for each family) and then watermarking the directory pages with the family’s personal information (typically their name plus either email address or phone number). The PDF can be opened and viewed with a standard PDF viewer and doesn’t require any special software.

While this doesn’t prevent the directory’s re-distribution it acts as a significant inhibitor since you can trace copies back to the family who improperly re-distributed it. The password also limits unauthorized access should the file find its way into unwanted hands. As with standard DRM there is also the ability to disallow printing (although, as noted above, most families want the option to print). A protected PDF provides security, is easier to use than standard DRM and also allows your families to have a copy on multiple computers.

Online Search

Online search is an easy to use, secure, low cost publishing option. Each family can be provided a unique username and password with the option to search for family and student contact information (without the ability to change or download data). Searching can be done from any device with a browser, including smart phones. A good search program will only display the contact details for one family at a time thereby making it difficult to “farm” the database by cutting and pasting information displayed on the screen into another application. A useful feature of online search is the ability to provide active links where users can click an email address to initiate an email or click a phone number to initiate a call (think smart phone). The main drawback to online search is the lack of a printed copy. However, most people are either at their computer or smart phone when they need to look up information in the directory.

Conclusion

With the progression of technology there are now more options for publishing a family directory than just traditional printing. Your PTA needs to consider the security, ease of publication, ease of distribution and ease of usability by their families when deciding how to publish their directory.

Finally, these options are not exclusive of each other and can be used in combination. For example, our local high school provides both a protected PDF and online search. This gives



their families the ability to print and also provides instant online and smart phone searching while on the go.

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