Electronic Newsletters! The Why and How of Them

By Lissa Lord

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Development of an electronic library newsletter introduced our subscribers to a creative approach of locating information pertinent to legal research. The research needs and interests of law faculty and students were, indeed, the focus. Before beginning this project I underlined what I knew about library newsletters:

- The editor has a thankless job
- Nobody . . . No BODY wants to contribute articles
- The editor sends out notices to potential authors
- The editor reminds those authors of the deadline
- The editor states, apologetically, that the deadline was last week
- The newsletter is formatted and printed on an carefully chosen eye catching paper
- The newsletter is mailed out
- Colored pages fall into trash baskets around the library … the receiving end of the mailing list.

Why do it?

Has the library’s mission changed in light of cyber libraries and easy access search engines? The mission of the library has always been to collect, maintain and provide access to resources of information. The users' expectation of the library as an information resource remains the same today as in the past. While the library’s mission remains the same, the packaging is different.

Our library has an increasing presence on the Internet and we recognize that solid legal research can be done in part, if not completely, on the free Internet. It is because of electronic
communication that we can publish an electronic newsletter. And, it is because of electronic communication that we need such a newsletter. A print newsletter, it seemed to us, would not be the most effective way to inform our subscribers about the new resources available by way of library access --- be it physically on site or virtually on the Internet. We needed to go electronic.

**First Things First**

After the definition of a mission and audience, our electronic newsletter needed a title. So many good and ridiculous ideas came to us in our brainstorming sessions. The process is similar to the process of selecting a name for a new baby. And, like a new baby's name, when the right one is suggested it hits home. **The Friday5** would stand as the. It fit our goal of publishing a newsletter every Friday and including five sections within each issue. For continuity, we would stick to five standard headings each Friday: (1) News from the Library (2) Database of the Week (3) Government Publications (4) Websites of Interest (5) Technology Tip.

Steps taken before publishing an electronic newsletter include:

- Define the audience
- Name the publication and give it a theme or mission
- Edit text for the Web; bring graphics into the newsletter; obtain permission to use
- Include the most current information
- Deliver the product
- Embrace flexibility and change
- Archive the topical information in the newsletters as well as past issues

**Defining a changing audience**

Our focus audience began with the faculty at UMKC School of Law. For several months, only faculty read the Friday5. Response to the newsletter was positive, so much so that we enrolled law school administrators and staff as subscribers. Broadening the scope of readership allowed the library to improve communication with departments like Career Services, Admissions and Student Advising. We have included published information specifically for these groups and for the faculty as well.

Readership of the Friday5 has expanded to include all UMKC law students, campus educators by request, and legal professionals interested in the research underlined in the electronic newsletter. The Friday5 is now sent to a total subscription base of around 600. We have now added a subscription form to each issue and receive new subscribers each week.

**Delivering the Product**

How to effectively deliver the electronic newsletter to its audience? The first edition of the Friday5 was published October 6, 2000. Here we learned about the method of delivery.

The text and graphics were formatted using Microsoft FrontPage as a setup tool. The contents were copied to an open email message using MS-Outlook and sent to all Faculty included on the faculty distribution listserv.

If the newsletter was opened on campus using Outlook, the publication looked very smart. But, if the Friday5 was opened through a less sophisticated email system like Hotmail or Yahoo or even
Outlook Web, it appeared in Courier font with little red Xs instead of graphics. The look of our debut electronic newsletter was not dependably what we said it was going to be.

Upon receiving several notes from faculty who checked their email at home … after hearing "what did you send us?" and "can I get a print copy?" … a solution was called for. And, the solution was Issue No.2.

After testing various methods of delivery, we (our tech trouble shooter and I) decided to give the newsletter its own folder on the library's server. Here we house all graphics, text, notes, archives, and issues of the Friday5. This smoothed the path for electronic delivery. The second issue of the library’s information advance sheet would be delivered by way of a hyper-linked URL in a single email message sent to the faculty listserv. This method would work no matter what kind of email system the receiver was using as long as they had access to the World Wide Web. One week after the first issue bombed, the second issue of the Friday5 was available to all of its intended receivers with a dependable result.

Tips for delivering an electronic newsletter:

- Put the newsletter in its own folder on the library's server
- Include sub-folders for graphics, text, notes, archives, issues
- Deliver via a hyper-linked URL in a single email message
- Send to a listserv group of subscribers in one email message

Email delivery works! The October 26, 2001, email to the faculty looked like this:

This week the Friday5 goes to St. Louis for the Mid-America Association of Law Libraries (MAALL) and you can now download the issue to your PDA!

Click Here:
www1.law.umkc.edu/library/friday5/10-26-01.htm

How to Select Web Editing Software?

It is wise to get reviews of various programs that are intended to perform similar functions. Where to find software reviews? All "top of the line" web editors are reviewed often on CNET, ZDNet and other computer journals and websites.

It is always more efficient to select a program that is compatible with the software already loaded onto your computer. If you are on a network, talk with the network manager who will consider compatibility, shared use, licensing, remote use, etc. When the selection is made and the software installed, we strongly suggest that you use only this particular program to edit web pages and sites on your server. Small command and coding variances in software brands can lead to a huge quality difference separating amateur and professionally managed websites.
How to Edit Text for the Web?

We use Microsoft FrontPage. It is part of the Office 2000 suite and therefore is compatible with Word, PowerPoint, Excel, Access and Publisher. The toolbars and options are similar in look and function. We can cut and paste from one software program to another, which allows for a versatile toolbox to be used by the editor of the electronic newsletter.

**Suggestion:** View the finished product using all the Internet browsers you have available to you (Internet Explorer, Netscape, Mosaic, Lynx, etc.) with a goal of editing a publication that looks professional in all browsers.

**Suggestion:** save possible future topics, recommendations and suggestions in a "clipboard" file so you have a reserve to draw from. I cut and past URLs and text into this file nearly every day.

**Screen Print:** FrontPage opened directly to the website for the Friday5.

On the left are folders within the Friday5 directory on the Web. The right window is the working document, the storyboard, of the December 7th issue in the design stage.

Efficient Use of Graphics

It is important to limit the size and number of images per newsletter. In the Friday5, we use graphics that relate directly to the selected five topical units for each issue. We use product names and images to enhance, identify and link to the information highlighted.
How to capture an image from an existing Internet site:

- In most cases, use mouse “right click” over the image
- Select "Copy" from the menu
- Paste into a graphics program (i.e.: Photoshop) and edit to a minimum pixel size
- Save the edited image into the newsletter's image folder
- From the webeditor, insert the image into the newsletter

Copying the Arch:
This image of the St. Louis arch was copied from the MAALL Website, edited in Adobe PhotoShop, exported as .gif image and inserted into the October 26th Friday5:

Searching for Images (this example can be duplicated in all major search engines)

- AltaVista
- Select "image Search"
- In our example, search for "st. louis arch"
- 22 results

- Right click of the mouse, select "copy"

Image Tips while in the graphics editor: Get the size down!

- Copy image into the graphics editor (i.e.: PhotoShop) before you insert it into the HTML code
- Crop image --- just the information you need
- Change image from RGB to Indexed Color with adaptive colors
- Goal = under 50K for a faster loading graphic
- Rule of thumb: Export as a .GIF image

Obtaining Permission to Use

Asking for permission to publish a graphic form another website is often so easy to do that it must not be avoided. I send an email to "comments" on the website where the image was found and usually hear back rather quickly from a gracious site manager. If there are no "comments" or "permission" email options and the image is strongly someone else's property (not mass produced clip art, for example), I write a letter requesting permission (if a mailing address is provided). I always include the origin URL and the destination URL. Also, I present facts about how we are using the image and include our "educational" purpose in constructing the web page. I keep all requests and responses in a file in the Friday5 folder.
Even though the Friday5 is developed for educational use only, I often send messages to copyright personnel or content managers associated with a product. The Martindale-Hubbell legal directory free website was redesigned the day before we featured it in the Friday5. I emailed congratulations on their new look and they were gracious about being featured on our website complete with an "approved" Martindale logo.

I have been turned down only once in my requests to publishers. Overwhelmingly, the permission process is positive and leads to good marketing opportunities for both the vendor and the law library.

I do not, as a rule, ask for permission from government sites. Government images are in the public domain.

Permission:

- Ask... Simple action brings good results
- Send email inquiry to "comments" on the visited site
- Write a letter if there is no electronic contact
- Keep all requests and responses in a newsletter file

**How to Keep Current: Email Updates**

A component of any newsletter is NEWS. How to keep current with news of legal research is made a bit easier by subscribing to email news services.

As shown in the graphic, I have a message from MSWTips, which is a new tip on some feature of Word 2000, which may fit the content heading "Technology Tips" in the Friday5.


When I visit most news sites, I look for "Subscribe to our newsletter" and select what I want to subscribe to and where I want it delivered. Sometimes, there is a choice of delivery format (text, HTML, rich text).

To keep current on the design of electronic publications, I keep an eye on the CNET subscription service, which offers a choice of several newsletters dealing with current information technology -- software, design, application and use.
Refdesk.com is my personal favorite for "keeping in the know." For example, I invite you to take a look at the Link of the Day for October 8, 2001: Defense Almanac.

This is a terrific site for our newsletter readers and was selected for a recent Friday5 under "Government Publications."

Archiving Newsletter Issues

I have approached the subject of archiving by asking myself, as editor, what is the most efficient way to access information from past issues? And, I have come up with two nice but not perfect solutions.

The Friday5 index file contains a listing of all Friday5 issues by hyper-linked date. This is useful if I remember what issue contained what information. How do you index the many pieces of information contained within an information newsletter?

The 5thFriday is a mega index. All sites selected for the weekly newsletter publication are listed in a broad subject arrangement at the 5thFriday. We wanted to create a database where readers could go to reference a previously highlighted Friday5 topic.

Archiving the Friday5:

- Friday5/index.htm is a collection of all weekly issues listed by date
- Friday5/5thFriday.htm is a summary of the sites selected in the weekly Friday5

Is Anyone Out There? Tracking Response to the Friday5 weekly newsletter

After about six months of Friday5 weekly publishing, I set my Outlook email to send me a "read response" for my outgoing messages so that I'd know if someone opened the mail I sent them. Then I created a directory called "Friday5 Read Messages" and had Outlook automatically file the read Friday5s to this folder.
I have been pleased that most of the Friday5 messages I send out are opened. By now, folks know what kind of information the newsletter contains and they still open it. This is a good way of tracking the acceptance of our electronic newsletter by subscribers. Recently, I've asked for monthly statistics on site visits to the Friday5 address. This will give another profile of user response.

I also keep a folder marked "Friday5 Responses" into which I file all comments, suggestions and kudos I receive through email responding to the Friday5.

Tracking Response:

- Set Outlook email to send a "read response" to notify you if your mail is opened
- Keep the newsletter interactive by offering several ways for readers to send comments
- Pay strict attention to all comments, suggestions and kudos
- Keep monthly statistics of visits to the newsletter website

How Do We Know We're Meeting Our Goal?

Listening to what the readers are saying keeps the entire process of electronic publication flexible. The only complaint we've had was with the first issue . . . "There is a trace of the ransom note about all the fonts and styles …" This is a pretty strict comment but we now have a solution: we offer a Text Only alternative with each graphic issue.

Each comment is an opportunity to keep improving, moving forward and researching "a better way" to publish an electronic newsletter that is appreciated and read for its content. We've developed an acceptance for change in the appearance as well as the handling of the electronic newsletter.

General Comments from Friday5 Readers

"What a great idea to let us know what has come in (New Books). Please do this regularly. In particular I want to grab the Bederman book, Int'l law in antiquity" -- Faculty

"I think that the section on Career Services Job Listing is excellent. I really like the daffodil background too. Thanks so much for all of your help!" -- Administration

"Just in case you overlooked Friday5, there is an article about Mary Tiera Farrow that you may want to review." -- Staff listserv

"In case I haven't told you, I really appreciate all you're doing with the Friday5. I'm learning so much!" -- Library Staff

"Many thanks, Friday5 - very clever and helpful!!" -- Secretary

"Your newsletter is pretty neat. I like it as a way to give new information." -- Student

"Thanks for including me in the message. We are keeping a "history" of this transformation at UMKC, so your newsletter will become part of the archives." -- Chancellor's Office

On the Special Edition: September 11, 2001
"Thanks. This is a splendid resource -- albeit in the context of immense sadness." -- Faculty

"I applaud you for the lovely and memorable work! Thank you." -- Secretary

"You did a wonderful job with this. Just the right tone and look. It is just so sad." -- Librarian

"I have added it to the LLRX.com Newsstand information that I have compiled on the tragedy. See: http://www.llrx.com/newstand" -- Webmaster

Electronic Newsletter Expansion

The School of Law is a community and the Friday5 from the Law Library has become a neighborhood weekly. Legal research and awareness is vitally important to our readers so we send them information that is packaged in a concise, scholarly and sometimes entertaining format.

We are serious about providing information worthy content. During the aftermath of September 11, 2001, legal research and awareness have never been more pertinent to our community.

- Faculty are reading the newsletter
- Faculty comment on topics they would like to see in the newsletter . . . “This would be a good one for the Friday5"
- Faculty, staff, students, administrators send us comments, suggestions

Because of the weekly emphasis on electronic information, we began to add Special Reports to our current awareness offerings. These resources have been valuable spin-offs of the Friday5.

Friday5 Special Reports"

- Research in Response 9-11-01 (now a link on Library Resources: Concerning the WTC/Pentagon Attacks)
- Black History Month
- Election 2000
- News of Interest to Law Students
- Ronnie White To Testify

Information Kiosk

Expansion of the idea of electronic newsletters is inevitable. Enter the Information Kiosk. Our Kiosk sits at the entrance of the library. It is a large monitor with a PowerPoint slide show that automatically moves through information slides of interest to the law school viewer. Shuffled throughout the slides are library hours and holiday notices, announcements of lectures, seminars, courtroom sessions, etc. This was an idea waiting to happen and the response has been positive. This slide show is now available from the library's website for viewing from any Internet accessible computer. We're thinking of incorporating it into our PDA download collection. We consider the Information Kiosk an extension of electronic newsletter publication and an example of how information packaging is evolving into an electronic venue.
The Electronic Newsletter: What Next?

We want to support the experimental quality of the Friday5 while presenting research quality information and tips to our audience. We want a fresh clean design with innovative points of access. In the coming year, we're going to offer bits of streaming video, a search engine for the site and formats compatible with accessible computing.

Expand the concept of information packaging:

- Text only version
- PDF text
- Download to PDA
- PowerPoint version
- Translation into various languages
- Read with a screen reader
- Email direct version

In Conclusion

The concept of our electronic library newsletter has become a solid publication that is delivered on time directly to the email mailbox. It is indexed and accessible 24/7 with content that is pertinent and abstracts that are to the point and brief. The hyper-linked resources have become part of a growing information database that is accessible from the library's website. The mailing list is growing by word of mouth and the interactive subscription option in every issue. The Friday5 has been the subject of several presentations in the Kansas City area and at the Midwest conference of law librarians. It is our plan to allow the process to continue and not to hamper progress with expectations.

- **How to Publish an Electronic Newsletter** (Slideshow)
- Subscribe to the Friday5, delivered to your email mailbox, on Fridays
  Send your request to:
  [Lissa Lord](mailto:lissa@llrx.com)