AA AND ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS April 2005 No. 19

The purpose of this guideline is to provide practical help for AA members, groups, Intergroups and Regions who wish to use electronic communications in their service work.

From the 12 Concepts: "Quite rightly, each new generation of AA world servants will be eager to make operational improvements. Unforeseen flaws in the present structure will doubtless show up later on. New service needs and problems will arise that may make structural changes necessary. Such alterations should certainly be effected, and these contingencies squarely met. Yet we should always recognize that change does not necessarily spell progress. We are sure that each new group of workers in world service will be tempted to try all sorts of innovations that may often produce little more than a painful repetition of earlier mistakes."

Introduction

This Guideline is not intended to be a technical manual - it outlines the broad picture for members intending to use these communication methods. It includes experience on using email and on producing and using websites. There is also information available on the web site www.aaservice.org.uk.

Email

Electronic mail is a widely used and accepted method of person-to-person written communication; it is cheap, effective and very fast. It is used regularly as a service tool in AA, but as with any service, we need to ensure the Fellowship's Traditions are maintained whilst getting the most from this "modern colossus of communications".

When using email we should consider the anonymity of the recipients of messages. Sending messages to multiple recipients that disclose the email addresses of everyone on the list is a potential break of someone else's anonymity. However if all recipients' contact details are available in the Service Directory, or are already known to each other, then it may not be a problem. It is also a good idea to obtain a recipient's explicit permission before using their workplace email address for AA correspondence. As an alternative, when using internet access from work, members can set up a free "web based" account. These are password protected and the emails sent and received from them cannot be seen by anyone else. They are easy to set up.

Use can be made of the BCC (Blind Courtesy Copy) facility when sending AA mail to multiple recipients who wish to remain anonymous from each other.

It is also worth noting that email address books used for AA correspondence on a home PC may be available to all residents in the home.

Bulk Email or Spam

The term "Spam" is now widely seen as a derogatory term for unsolicited email. That is - email sent to a recipient who is either not known to the sender, and/or mail that has not been specifically requested by the recipient. It is seen as a major nuisance.

Individuals or groups who use email to spam or 'bulk mail' messages to recipients who have not specifically requested such messages run grave dangers:

- They are in danger of losing their Internet account. All UK Internet Service Providers (ISPs) prohibit the use of bulk mailing in this way.
- Some states in the USA already have legislation allowing people to seek damages against "spammers".

- Your Service Provider (ISP) may be legally entitled to pursue damage claims where the bulk mailing has caused disruptions to the equipment or services offered to other users on the system.

- There is a very real danger of loss of reputation: Organisations that indulge in bulk emailing, very quickly obtain bad reputations for themselves.

It is strongly suggested that AA members do not send bulk unsolicited email messages for AA service, i.e. email "mail shots". By doing so they could be 'bringing the AA name into public controversy' and damaging the reputation of A.A as a whole.

Electronic Communications Liaison Officer

Various Regions and Intergroups have produced their own websites. It is helpful to remember that there is no need to let the speed of the technology dictate the speed of our actions in these matters. Some of these Local Service bodies have found it helpful to appoint an Electronic Communications Liaison Officer (ECLO).

The ECLO should have at least 2-3 years of sobriety (ideally more for a Regional ECLO), together with a strong understanding of the Traditions. Given that many local websites are visible by the general public nationally, a potential ECLO should have as good a practical understanding of the Traditions as a PI Officer. This qualification is more important than any technical knowledge. It is helpful if the ECLO is comfortable with technology, understands its potential, and is able to guide the implementation and maintenance of a website (either themselves or through hired help). However picking the first technically able and enthusiastic person for the ECLO position is not necessarily a good way forward.

As well as an ECLO, a small Electronics Communications Committee can be set up. This could include the PI officer, and Vice Chairman of the sponsoring body (Intergroup, Region, etc). Also this committee is the ideal forum for less experienced, but very technically skilled members, to be involved. Having a committee like this helps to ensure a website is set up based on the group conscience of the sponsoring service body. While planning and setting up the website, the Committee can inform and consult with the local AA community and any other service bodies which may be affected.

Local Website Address

All websites have an address. For example: www.aaservice.org.uk is the address of our national service website for members, and www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk is the website address of our national "newcomer" website. Other examples of websites include www.southwestregion.org.uk The ".org" refers to the fact we are a non-profit organization, and the ".uk" refers to the fact we are in the UK. The vast majority of such addresses begin with "www." (which means World Wide Web). A web address like this is also called a "domain name".

The local service committee will need to register, and probably purchase, a domain name. To preserve Alcoholics Anonymous'

trademarks and service marks, individuals and AA groups are asked to avoid using certain marks ("AA"; "Alcoholics Anonymous"; "The Big Book") in their domain names.

This whole issue of choosing and buying a domain name can be bypassed by the local service committee if they utilize the website space provided free of charge to groups by GSO. The local service committee can place their website there and it will become accessible through the address www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk This free web space is in the interest of maintaining unity and protecting the integrity of the A.A message. To find out more go to www.aaservice.org.uk.

Content of Local Websites

The group conscience of the local area will determine the specific contents. However the type of content usually comes under two broad headings:

1.   Services for members
2.   Information for newcomers and professionals

The first could include such items as digital copies of the last few year's minutes of the Intergroup or Region, password-protected contact details for members of the service body, local experience of previous service officers, etc. The second type could include a list of local meetings and information about what AA is. It could also have information about AA for probation officers, doctors, etc.

Regarding the information about what AA is, and information for professionals - it is worth noting that the national AA website (www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk) already provides this service. So it is questionable whether it is helpful for local AA websites to repeat this information. In fact such a large amount of repeated information around the

internet in the UK could make AA seem disorganised to a professional or newcomer searching the internet for information about us.

In regard to local meeting details, it is vital to ensure these sites are kept up to date.

Permission should be obtained from G.S.O. prior to including published AA material in a web site. However, web sites created by AA Intergroups, Regions and central offices are permitted to quote a phrase, sentence or brief excerpt from AA literature - such as the Big Book (Alcoholics Anonymous), Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions, The AA Service Manual, and Conference approved pamphlets - without a prior, written request to do so. When this occurs, the proper credit line should be included to ensure that the copyrights of AA literature are protected. After a quotation from a book or pamphlet, the credit line should read: "Reprinted from (name of publication, page number), with permission of AA World Services, Inc."

The AA Preamble is copyrighted by the AA Grapevine. Beneath it, and beneath any article or cartoon reprinted from the Grapevine, these words should appear: "From the (insert date) Grapevine. Reprinted with permission of The AA Grapevine, Inc." If you wish to include items on your web site that are currently available on the G.S.O. web site, we suggest that you link to the appropriate pages of that site.

Paying for the Local Website

If the local service body uses the "official" web space provided by GSO, then the whole process can be free, and need not be paid for. Otherwise the Intergroup, Region, etc will need to pay to have its web pages kept online (or "hosted").

In keeping with our Seventh Tradition, AA pays its own expenses and this applies on the internet as well. Free web hosting sites are

available on the Internet (apart from the GSO one), but often require the inclusion of mandatory advertising space or links to commercial sites as consideration for their use. To avoid confusion and to guard against inadvertent association or promotion, care should be taken in selection of the web host site.

Linking to other Websites

Since an Internet site may be viewed by the general public and is capable of potentially being seen by millions, it constitutes a form of 'broadcast media'. The major difference between conventional broadcast media and the Internet is the ease with which items may be copied and linked together electronically, which can cause an implied affiliation.

Linking to other AA web sites may have the positive effect of significantly broadening the scope of your site. Information contained on these sites becomes instantly available to those visiting your site. However, since each AA entity is autonomous and has its own group conscience, an AA site to which you have linked may start to display information which your group conscience finds objectionable; and there is no way to know when this might occur, or to prevent it from happening.

Linking to non-AA sites is even more problematic. Not only are they much more likely to display non-AA and/or controversial material, but linking will imply endorsement, if not affiliation, regardless of the contents. In the final analysis, experience suggests that, when considering linking to another site, one must proceed with caution. G.S.O. has attempted to avoid some of these pitfalls by not linking to any other site.

Private and Public websites

Unless the Region, Intergroup, etc specifically sets up its website to be private,

the site will be publicly viewable by anyone - member or non-member who can get hold of the web address. However, certain information that could be usefully put on a local website (e.g. service officer email addresses, group contact numbers, conference delegate phone numbers, confidential minutes, discussion forums, etc) may not be suitable for public viewing.

The national service website for members, www.aaservice.org.uk, is password protected. Local service bodies can take a similar approach. Either members could register to get access to the website by some procedure (e.g. emailing the ECLO, or by an automated online procedure). Or a single password could be used and changed every few months with that password being published in the regular paper minutes.

Attraction and Promotion

We observe all AA's principles and Traditions on our web sites. We practice anonymity on AA web sites. An AA web site is a public medium which has the potential for reaching the broadest possible audience and, therefore, requires the same safeguards that we use at the level of press, radio and film.

However simply putting up a website available to the general public is not breaking the Traditions. As our co-founder, Bill W., wrote: "Public information takes many forms - the simple sign outside a meeting place that says 'AA meeting tonight'; listing in local phone directories; distribution of AA literature; and radio and television shows using sophisticated media techniques. Whatever the form, it comes down to 'one drunk carrying the message to another drunk,' whether through personal contact or through the use of third parties and the media." The needs and experience of people in your own area, will affect what you decide to do.

"Unofficial" AA Websites

There are no "unofficial" AA websites as such. The only websites which can truly be called AA websites are those endorsed by an official AA body e.g. www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk, Regional, and Intergroup websites. Members are obviously free to produce their own websites as they see fit. However, just as outside of the electronic arena, members are responsible for ensuring the Traditions are followed in their own sites. For example:

- Personal anonymity at the Internet level - if a member states in the website that they are an AA member, then they would not normally give their full name or photo on that website.

- Non-affiliation with outside organisations - if the website is clearly AA related, then anything that makes the website seem to affiliate to outside organisations can also cause an implied affiliation with AA.

- Not stating opinions on outside issues, avoiding public controversy, etc - Once again when a website is clearly AA related anything that is an incitement to public controversy, or states opinions on outside issues, could make the general public believe that AA itself is actually saying these things.

Although we are all free to produce websites, we are each responsible for protecting AA so that it is there for the newcomer, just as it was there for us.

National AA Websites

As already mentioned, AA UK has two national websites:
www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk and **www.aaservice.org.uk.** The first provides services for newcomers and for PI. The second website provides many useful services for AA members, including creating local websites and stored copies of the Service Handbook and Guidelines, AA Service News, forums and online meetings.

Summary

The internet can be used to help AA PI work and 12th Step work, as well as increasing the efficiency of our internal AA services. We are responsible for making the best use possible of the internet. However, we also need to take responsibility to use it in a way that fits in with AA's Traditions.