

EMAIL SOLIDARITY

Using email to connect with members, guard our privacy and foster our rights

- Learn how CUPE locals obtain and use members' personal contact information
- Discover best practices in distributing information to your members

It seems every time we make a purchase these days we're asked for our email address. Does a retailer really need our email address to complete the transaction?

Of course not. But email marketing works well. Really well. In fact, digital marketers continue to report that email marketing remains among the top ways to connect with people. That's why businesses continue to push to get your contact information. At the same time, with the increasing ease of electronic transactions such as banking and online bill paying, our "real" mail mailboxes can feel light while our email inboxes seem to fill up fast.

So with an ever-increasing volume of email from a variety of sources, many CUPE activists at the local level are hesitant to ask members for their personal contact information because they believe that members do not want to give out their information.

All of us are, rightfully, concerned about privacy. The revolution in electronic communication has spurred the development of privacy protection legislation in every Canadian jurisdiction over the last 15 years. This is a good thing, but it's also been put forward as a reason we can't have our own members' contact information.

That concern is misplaced. The reality today is that email is an essential tool for reaching our members and for building greater support and activism in the local.

Privacy is a right and representation is a duty

Let's get to the privacy issue once and for all:

- The union has a statutory duty to represent all employees of the bargaining unit.

If a union can't communicate with the employees in the bargaining unit, it can't represent them. Therefore, the union has the right to its members' contact information. And, it has a right to same information that is in the possession of the employer. In fact, employers are obliged to provide this information to the union. At the same time, the union must keep the information confidential and not share it with any third party. However, the employer's information may not include personal email addresses. It is in the union's best interest to collect that information directly from the members. In fact, asking members for their information is a good reason to go talk to them. To make the collection job easier, let the members know how you will use their email and let them know that it will not be shared with any commercial or external party.

Strike! A balance, that is

As with any communication, there is a balance. Don't overdo your emails, especially by sending too much information or inappropriate information. Used properly, union activists have found that members really appreciate getting good information about their union and how it spends their dues dollars. Remember that it is our members' right to have access to union information without having to ask for it.

Ten tips for email solidarity

We have learned through experience what works and what doesn't when it comes to collecting email addresses and using email to connect with our members.

Here's how to use email to connect members, guard their privacy and foster our union rights:

1. Bargain the right to members' contact information (and the format it is provided in) right into your collective agreement. Not only is this the simplest and most accurate way to obtain this information, it cements the understanding of this right with the employer and avoids costly labour board disputes. If that information does not include personal e-mail addresses, you will need a list of members and their contact information in order to ensure you contact everyone in the bargaining unit to get their email address.
2. Keep the list confidential and use it only for union business. Do not share the list with third parties or give out personal email addresses to other members of the bargaining unit – ever.
3. Send only relevant information to members. Think about what members need to know for full participation in their union – things like executive contact information, meeting times and places, important decisions and union updates on bargaining and workplace issues.
4. Do not use the list for personal causes such as a particular member's favourite charity fundraising drive or other personal issues.
5. Use the information sparingly and establish a schedule for regular emails. You might find once per week is enough, or every two weeks, or even once a month, depending on what information you want to send.
6. Your email messages should include links back to your local's website or social media pages where the member can get more information, or more frequent updates.
7. Make sure the subject line is clear and that messages are brief and to the point.
8. Ensure your message is error free. Proofread, proofread, proofread.

9. Say hello and tell them who you are. Open all email correspondence with a salutation and close with a signature that includes your own contact information.
10. Remember, email communication is not private. Your message can be forwarded to any other party. Therefore, make sure to use appropriate language and craft messages for public consumption.