

The 'members-only' dilemma



Ivan Trundle

Manager, publishing
and communications
ivan.trundle@alia.org.au

Whilst it might not be clear to many, ALIA's National Policy Congress is a perfect example of democracy in action. The inaugural meeting in 2000 set about to make recommendations to the Board of Directors in the light of proposed sweeping changes to the structure of interest-based and regional groups, and in the following year, recommendations were made to offer improved services to members, particularly through ALIANet. This was finally realised in 2003, through a totally-revamped website, and with a 'members-only' section — with content expressly for members of the Association.

The 'members-only' section of the website took considerable time and planning to develop, and is now a flourishing integral component of the overall site. Whilst it is now impossible to quantify the amount of content explicitly (due to much of the site now being derived from database content), it is possible to focus on the 'static' pages, and to find some numbers worthy of publication.

By the end of June 2004, 3036 static pages of content exist in the members-only section of ALIANet. Of these, 2522 are Group pages. In other words, more than 80 per cent of the 'members-only' content pertains to Groups, and group activities. The Groups pages are thriving, and a range of diverse content is read daily, according to the ALIANet log files.

In addition to the numbers expressed above, there has been a wide acceptance of the value of a 'members-only' section of the website, and correspondingly, the Association's overall membership numbers are on the increase, after a number of years of gradual decline. It is impossible to confirm that a 'members-only' segmentation of the website has been entirely instrumental in the change, but has changed the nature of comments that are received by members. No longer do we hear the refrain that there is little value in being a member of ALIA since almost all of the information that the Association produced was available for free, either through the website, or through other channels. This has now changed: potential members of the Association now see the value in being a member, and in the ability to unlock doors (both literally on the website, and elsewhere within the profession).

Where possible, we have designed the 'open' sections of the website to offer 'teasers' that encourage non-members to see the value of membership and consider joining

in order to gain access to greater depths of information and knowledge.

Contrary to some views, offering a 'members-only' service is not flying in the face of the Association's underlying core values and principle of open access to information. Whilst a thriving culture requires 'the promotion of the free flow of information and ideas through open access to recorded knowledge' (ALIA Core values statement, 2002), there is a requirement for ALIA to be able to sustain itself via a thriving community that is willing to support the ideals and aspirations of the Association.

Without offering value to members, via a range of services including 'members-only' access, the Association would not have sufficient funds to be able to continue. Put bluntly, ALIANet comes at a significant cost to members of the Association.

Many of ALIANet's services are available without restriction, including more than two-thirds of the website, and many of the e-lists also allow non-member participation. Some of the most-popular services are provided as a service to the wider sector (our employment vacancies pages are heavily-visited by members and non-members alike), but ultimately these services require a funding base to be preserved. That funding base is also critical if we are to have a voice in the wider community. Consequently, the balance between what we offer to members and non-members must be considered and evaluated. And since membership of ALIA is mandatory if one is to participate in ALIA Groups, then the decision to place group pages in a 'members-only' section of the website is logical. However, to encourage non-members to see the value in being a member of the Association, we provide as many 'teasers' as we can to push the non-member over the 'threshold'.

Progressive enhancements are always being made to the full range of ALIANet services: thanks to the work of staff of ALIA National Office, and in particular Adam Steer of the publishing team, new list server software has allowed list owners to breathe a sigh of collective relief over their management. Additionally, Adam has been hard at work designing and implementing a new interface for ALIANet's website Events listings that offers greater options for viewing what is happening in the months ahead. In the background, we have also developed a new web-based mail interface for ALIANet account-holders. More on this exciting development in the next issue. ■

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