Use Technology to Make a Smooth Move

by Joe Stoddard

It doesn't matter whether you're pulling up stakes in search of a hotter housing market or you're headed for a banner year and just need to find bigger digs: Sooner or later, it's a pretty good bet you'll need to relocate your business. Moving the shop equipment and office furniture is only half the battle. Your company's contact information is your lifeline to clients, suppliers, subs, and coworkers. Changes to your e-mail address, phone and fax numbers, and postal address at best are a nuisance for the people who need to contact you and at worst can make your business look like a fly-by-night operation — a problem no contractor needs. With that in mind, here are some ways you can leverage technology to make a smooth move.

Moving Is a Project — Manage It Like One

Changing your business coordinates will require the same level of project management as any home-building or remodeling job. In addition to notifying all the people you work with, if you're making a physical move, you'll need to arrange new service hookups, reroute your snail mail, and order new printed collateral like business cards, letterheads, and brochures. Instead of just winging it, start by putting your familiar project or contact management software to work.

Use your PIM. In addition to being effective contact managers, ACT!, Microsoft Outlook, and other "personal information managers" (PIMs) have calendar features you can use to create a schedule of critical dates and times related to a move. Most PIMs also have a "group" feature that you can use to keep all the information related to your move — for example, the phone extension of the person you spoke to at the phone company, the name of your new postmaster, even the local lunch spots in your new neighborhood — separate from your day-to-day information.

Use your PDA. Personal digital assistants (PDAs) such as Palm computers and PocketPCs also ship with good software for tracking people and appointments, and have the added advantage of letting you enter information while on the run. Come to think of it, your Big Move could be the excuse to blow the dust off your hand-held gadget.

Get (and keep) your address book in order. The address book feature of your contact management program is the key to notifying everyone about your change of venue. But over time, it's amazing how many entries will wind up with the wrong contact person or other incorrect information such as an out-of-date area code. A month or so before your move, run through your address book to update information you know to be incorrect and weed out duplicate entries. Pay special attention to the e-mail and fax fields in each contact record — those will be critical for your group e-mail and broadcast fax efforts, as explained below.

Using a Group E-mailer

Sending your new coordinates to everyone in your address book who has an e-mail address is a great way to cover a lot of ground in a hurry. Unfortunately, in an effort to control SPAM (unsolicited e-mail advertisements), most Internet service providers (ISPs) now block e-mail messages that are addressed to more than a couple of dozen people at a time. Group e-mailer to the rescue. These spe-cialized programs will automatically chop your address list into ISP-friendly chunks, ensuring that your message goes through. A great one is Infacta Group Mail, which is available for free at www.infacta.com.

Use good "netiquette." Remember that your change-of-address e-mail is going to show up unsolicited, so you have to be on your best behavior. If you want to tick off everyone on your contact list, send them your new information in some file format they can't open. Just because you're a pro at importing an ACT! contact attachment or an Outlook Virtual Business Card doesn't mean anyone else in your address book knows how to do it.

HTML e-mail is another big no-no. It might be the current rage to send messages that look like web pages, but it's a terrible idea. Many of your recipients may not be able to open the message at all, and of those who can, not many will want to wait for your latest fancy logo or company picture to download — or be willing to risk your message containing the latest computer virus.

Bottom line, to make sure your change-of-address message stays in someone's inbox instead of going directly to the Recycle Bin, send your group e-mail in a plain ASCII text format and put your new contact information — all of it — in the body of the message (see figure, next page).

Use the BCC. The final faux pas when sending your new information is exposing everyone's e-mail address to everyone else in your address book without permission. Group e-mailers like Infacta eliminate that problem by always sending "blind," but if you use your regular
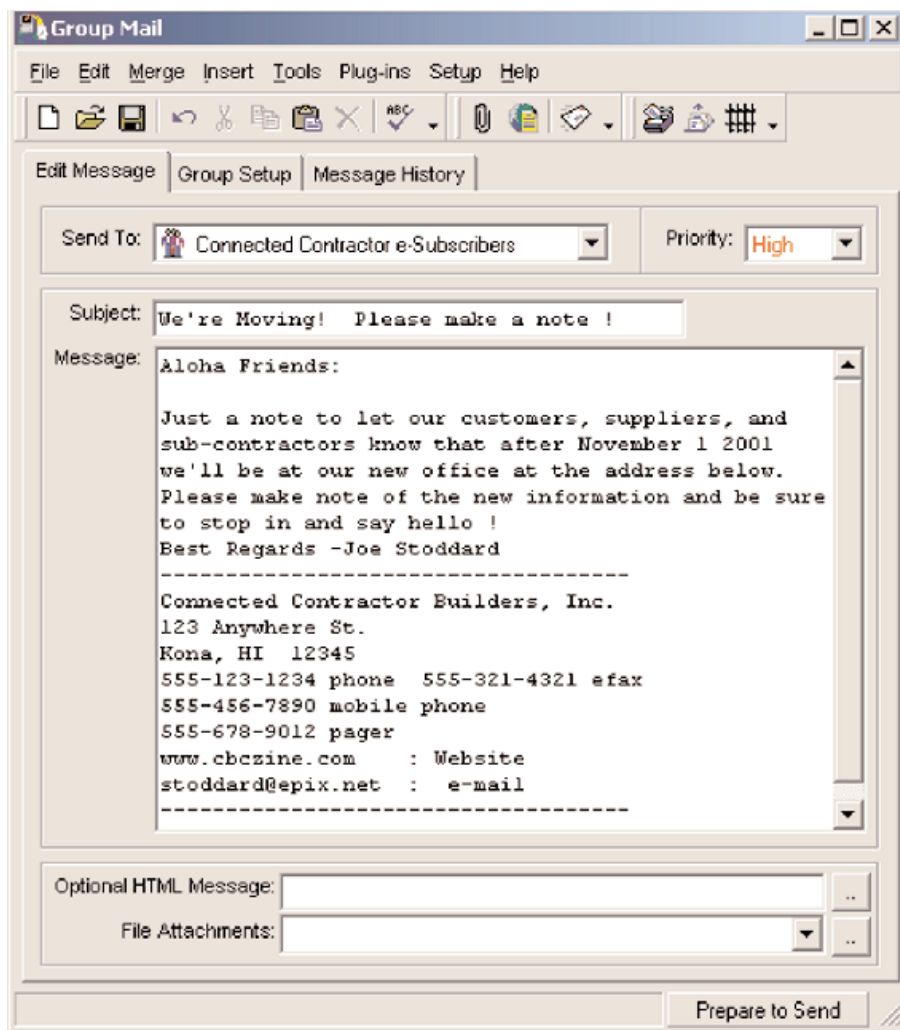
Infacta Group Mail takes much of the guesswork out of sending a change-of-address e-mail to your contact list. You can import your entire address book and Group Mail will automatically divide it into ISP-friendly chunks. Download a free version at www.infacta.com.

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tion on a single page. Include your logo and a bold one-line explanation at the top of the page requesting that the recipient note the changes. To maximize the reliability of a group fax transmission, and minimize the irritation of the recipient, send your group fax after hours.

Use WinFax Pro. For around $120, Symantec's WinFax (www.symantec.com /winfax/) can create group fax lists from most major contact management programs by importing a text file. If you happen to use ACT!, WinFax can read your contact database directly. WinFax has the added advantage of creating a transmission log so you can see who received your fax and who didn't.

Use eFax. If you don't want to spring for WinFax, for around $10 a month eFax (www.efax.com) offers you a fax number that stays the same regardless of where you land, as well as a way to send bulk faxes to your entire address book. The "plus" version of the service includes desktop software that can read the most popular contact management databases, including Microsoft Outlook and ACT!. The downside of using eFax is that there is no reliable transmission report — that is, you won't know whether your contacts received your fax — and, typical of most new application service providers (ASPs), the long-term survivability of the service is not guaranteed. Still, it's a handy tool to have if you're making a move.

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e-mail program you'll have to use the blind carbon copy (BCC) field. You may have to go into your settings or options to enable this feature. Some mail programs require at least one address in the "To" field to send a message. If yours does, use your own e-mail address there and BCC everyone else.

Tips for Group Faxing

There are still people on the planet who don't use e-mail. You may even be one of them. For them (or you), a group fax is the next best way to get your new contact information to the masses. Just remember that when you send an unsolicited fax, you're tying up someone else's fax machine and burning up their paper. To keep your change-of-address fax out of the circular file, forget the cartoon cover pages and send your new contact informa-