Email and the swine practitioner

Electronic mail (email) is a burgeoning new form of communication among individuals and groups throughout the world. In addition to one-to-one individual messages, electronic communication now includes discussion lists and newsgroups that allow persons interested in a given topic the opportunity to discuss that topic with other interested people across the globe.

Dr. Morgan Morrow, Chair of the AASP Communications Committee, met with Drs. John Waddell, John Deen, and Thayer Hoover to discuss how electronic forms of communication can benefit swine practitioners.

How do you use email?

John W: I just started — I used to be on the PIC system. At first I used it quite a bit, tapping into the limited library, accessing the cash flow system in the early days, etc. It was a convenience. I still prefer to fax or phone if I want to talk to someone one-on-one. If I want to tap into a group or send a message to multiple people, email makes more sense. It is easier to slack off on checking my email than it is to ignore a fax, etc. I've talked to my partners about getting one subscription for our whole practice to share.

Thayer: I use it for communication, I disseminate technical information through the reps, I communicate with the home office and it's very valuable — I use Dendrite® or Genie®. I log on once or twice a day, and the reps are required to log on at least once a day with their call plan. People unload their own email. We don't have access to the Internet.

Morgan: Have you thought of getting onto NOAH?

Thayer: Yes, but we have a librarian in our company who does an excellent job on literature searches, so it's harder for me to justify NOAH.

Morgan: How do you prioritize your email in comparison to faxes or phone messages?

Thayer: It's my secondary or tertiary — phone mail is first. Then email, then fax. The one thing I don't like about email is that it's much more cumbersome to use to create a nice document on the other end, whereas something like cc mail lets you download a Word document,so you have a lot more flexibility to create a visually pleasing document.

John D: I started with PIC email, then entered the academic community and began using the tools they have. Now I use email as the primary means of communicating and am quicker at responding to my email than I am a fax or phone message.

I answer my email as quickly as I can — you can dispose with the superfluous niceties. I think it's the most efficient way to communicate and I'm really trying to promote that as the primary way to communicate with me.

John W: One difference is that you're at your desk, and I'm in my truck — that's my place of work. When I get home at night, I've got access to my desktop, but I don't always get there with pressing family activities. It might be a software issue for me, too, if I had one of those navigator systems.

John D: You can get software that will automatically fetch your email when you boot up. There are a lot of differences in email software. In some practices, secretaries download all messages, print them out, and distribute them to their respective recipients.

You can also cut and paste from your email message to your word processing program. I also belong to a number of electronic discussion groups, on various topics, that I find helpful. You can tell the listserv software to "set digest" and it will send all the messages for the day in one group, which cuts down on the amount of separate messages you get.

Nowadays you hear a lot about "cruising the Net" — is this your vision of where you want to go in the future with email?

John W: I hear those terms, but I don't have the time or money to sit there and explore for hours and hours.

Morgan: What would you really like to find on the Net?

John W: I'd like to communicate with friends in Europe.

Morgan: What about from the information perspective—being able to jump in to the Library of Congress or whatever?

John D: The USDA is getting pretty good at getting information on hog prices and current hog markets out there, and extension services are getting a lot of information onto gopher.

John W: We have dataline in our practice and come in in the morning and get info about local markets.

Thayer: I bought America Online for that purpose a year ago, but we are concerned about the potential for virus infection or industrial espionage, so they told me to take it off my company computer. I would like to be able to communicate with my European colleagues within the company. I have a real struggle phoning and faxing people in Europe.

John D: Yes, it can be a lot less cumbersome and also helps keep costs under control.

Morgan: One of my main uses of email is to tap into a newsgroup of Australian news, posted by people who volunteer to put this information on the Internet.

Do I need to be worried about getting a virus from the Internet?

John D: Not really if you aren't downloading whole programs—if you limit yourself to downloading email. The experts say that because email is inert, it can't be infected by a virus.

John W: What if I wanted to send some PigCHAMP® data — would that be a problem?

John D: No—that's a text file and not a program. The problem can occur when you're downloading entire programs, like kid's games.

Where would you like to see email communications 5 years down the road?

John D: For now, faxes have competed successfully against email because it is not as easy to ignore a fax. It's more a people question than a hardware or software question now—people have to figure out how they're going to use it, how they're going to handle their volume of mail. Some people complain about the volume of their email. There needs to be a lot more computer literacy. Probably the biggest constraint is the proprietary nature of knowledge in the swine industry — people are not eager to just give information away. The service many swine practitioners charge for is their thoughts. They're going to be uncomfortable giving them away for free.

John W: As long as the information on the Internet is available for free, the perceived value will be low. Not only that, but people are reluctant to ask questions that they are worried will be perceived as idiotic in a forum of their peers.

Thayer: I would like to be able to communicate electronically with customers and clients and would like to see it so that vets can communicate with their clients. Most serious swine practitioners will have computers if they don't already.

John W: The technology has got to become more convenient to use — I want to be able to fetch my email on my laptop using my car phone modem as I'm driving down the road. More of our clients are going to have to become more technologically capable — we could do things like transfer lab reports via email to our clients, but right now a lot of my clients don't even have fax machines, much less email.

How can the AASP help practitioners get started on email?

John W: You have to spend the time and money to do the learning curve. Little articles in *Swine Health and Production* would be helpful to get people trained to use it. Right now, I would say get on to NOAH — it may not be the best access, but it's the easiest. I use NOAH to get access to SWINE-L and the Internet.

John D: It's not the cheapest if you want to go directly to the Internet — maybe we should look into what the dairy people are doing with MCI Mail as an alternative.

Morgan: The cheapest email accesss line heard about is about $15.00, and NOAH is about $70.00, with its enhanced package of services.

John W: NOAH is an easy program to use — I also use it to communicate with the AVMA office.

John D: There are a lot of companies that are just in the business of providing generic Internet access to people — most of these companies are local — more and more of them are in rural areas and are using cooperatives to cut costs for rural users.