



OTTAWA PC NEWS

Vol. 19 number 9

The newsletter of the Ottawa PC Users' Group

November 2002

CLUB NEWS

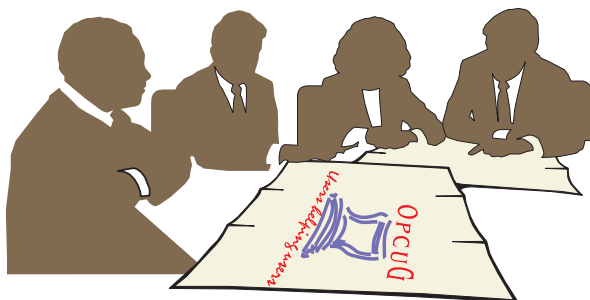
OPCUG Elections

Wayne Houston has volunteered to head up the election committee for the upcoming elections for the 9-member Board of Directors. His first task is to accept nominations. The rules are as follows;

- All nominations must be received by December 31, 2002
- All nominees must be members in good standing of the OPCUG, Inc.
- Nominees may nominate themselves or may be nominated by another member.
- Nominations may be submitted in writing; by email to awhouston@sympatico.ca, by postal mail to Wayne Houston, 6405 Sugar Creek Way, Orleans, Ont, K1C 1X9, or in person to Wayne at a general meeting of the OPCUG.
- Nomination should include the fact that the nomination is for the Board of Directors for 2003, your name, address, phone number, e-mail address, and membership number (if known). If you are nominating someone else, the same information for the nominee should be included.

Confirmation of receipt of nomination will be by e-mail only. If more than 9 nominations are received, there will be an election at the February, 2003 Annual General Meeting.

All members are encouraged to consider running for a position on the Board. If you want to find out more about what is involved, please speak to any current Board member.



CLUB NEWS

Membership has its rewards

by Joc Doire

***** \$5 Reward *****
*****\$5 Reward ***** \$5 Reward *****

A \$5 reward is offered to any member who can locate confused, lost, or frustrated newbies, experts or anybody who deals with computers and brings them to our membership director Mark Cayer.

Mark will have everything ready to quickly process the subscription and get your reward. You can go out and help as many poor souls as you can find, and then we will do our best to help them with monthly meetings, monthly newsletter, SIGs, message board, web site, etc or by simply having a place to chat about computers.

Good luck to all!



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Next meeting:

WEDNESDAY, November 13th, 2002

Alpha Five Coming Up by Bob Gowan



Remember “the good old days” when software companies showed up for presentations with lots of goodies and everyone left with something? Well, guess what? Those days are back with our Wednesday, November 13, 2002 presentation by Alpha Software!

Bill Hanigsberg of Dawson College, Montreal will be demonstrating the latest version (A5v5) of Alpha Software’s flagship database product, Alpha Five. Three years in development, this new version represents a complete re-writing with compatibility for all versions of Windows and many new, powerful and easy-to-use features for both end-users and professional developers.

Version 5 gives end users enormous power and flexibility through its built in Field Rules, visual Report Writer, fully integrated e-mail, backup, integration with MS Office, security and data manipulation tools. It’s new “Action Scripting” allows non-programmers to build complex and sophisticated custom applications as if they were experienced programmers. There are also dozens of “Genies” to lead them through the process.

Alpha Five Version 5, with its built in Xbasic and Xdialog languages, was designed to maximize the productivity of professional developers. It provides a state-of-the-art development environment, with its Xdialog Genie and enhanced, multi-pane Script Editor with bubble help, auto-complete logic, colour coding, auto-complete expressions and much more. Developers are finding they can produce sophisticated applications in as little as 20% of the time required to do the same thing with the most popular competitor’s product.

Come watch this demo and get a free trial version of A5v5 to try it out yourself. One lucky OPCUG member will receive the main door prize — a full boxed version of this great new product. Others may receive either an Alpha T-shirt or a cool Alpha mouse pad.



CALENDAR

Meetings	Date	Time and venue
OPCUG General Meeting	Wednesday, Nov. 13 th	7:30 p.m. Auditorium of the National Museum of Science and Technology, 1867 St. Laurent Blvd.
Internet SIG (I-SIG)	Wednesday, Nov. 13 th	Come and join our discussions!
Developers SIG	Wednesday, Nov. 13 th	Immediately following the main OPCUG presentation, and occasionally at other locations in the region.
Delphi User Group	TBA	8:00 p.m. at Chapters Store in the Pinecrest Mall (at the Queensway)
Ottawa Paradox Users Group	3 rd Thursday each month	6:00-8:00 p.m. — Corel Bldg 1600 Carling Ave

Please note that unless otherwise noted, SIGs meet at 9:00 p.m. (immediately following the OPCUG General Meeting).

CD-R and CD-RW Burning 101 - part 2

by Dunc Petrie

The September Orphans' SIG generated a discussion about the techniques to burn a CD-R or CD-RW. Or, more precisely, why the burner didn't burn. Further to that discussion, here is an assortment of tips and techniques. [*continued from last month*]

You may be faced with a real problem if you decide to delete and replace your current burning software (either with the same program or with another). It may also occur if you attempt to upgrade existing software to a newer version (whether you follow the simpler "install over" routine or the "delete and install"). This problem arises from low-level software drivers — called the ASPI layer — that are most often supplied by Adaptec. Discussion of ASPI in depth is deliberately avoided here; you can have a look at www.adaptec.com if you want to pursue it. Without laying out all the permutations, apparently these files are sometimes (I don't know why) not totally removed or not upgraded (although this is nominally part of the upgrade routine) properly. The resultant mixture of old plus new plus corrupted drivers produces a predictable result. Worse, all the system reports and upgrade logs may say that everything is working correctly. The user forums offer only bleak hope of successful repair for the inexperienced. Detailing the procedures would consume another essay. Unless you know what — specifically — to look for as filenames and delete them (varies with each installation) then the only realistic solution for non-techies is to restart from scratch.

It is best to have a dedicated partition to hold the data (or songs, or whatever); at the very least, defrag the partition that holds the data before burning. This is a must for older systems and a helper even if your system does have buffer-underrun protection. The burning software will create a temp file (similar in concept to Windows swap file) to arrange the data to correspond with its way of doing business. Make sure that there is sufficient unused space on the partition to allow this to operate efficiently.

In the face of repeated problems ("coasters") you could create an image file and then burn the image to the blank. The image file creates a file format that has already performed the translation of "computer file format" to the "CD-R media format" (you may see the terms ISO9660 or Joliet). This eliminates a processor-intensive step in the burning process. While more time-consuming, its less demanding system requirements might prevent wasting media.

Nero offers (don't know for Easy CD Creator) the option to 'Test (No burning)'. This is certainly a worthwhile choice to see if everything is setup properly.



Dust and fingerprints are the most common enemies. Avoid getting anything on the writing side of any media. Visually inspect the surface before loading the media into the tray. If there is foreign debris use canned air and not your breath to remove the particles. Why? You do not want to replace dust particles with saliva particles. If you need to remove fingerprints do not use solvent-based cleaners and wipe from the centre to the periphery in a straight line: not circularly. I personally am leery of CD burner cleaning kits. Seems overboard — much like floppy drive head cleaning disks that often created more problems than they solved. While a burner can always fail, in my personal experience they don't become dirty very frequently: unless, perhaps, they are under your home's central vacuum exhaust.

I think that I may have stated during the SIG that the best assessment — albeit brutal — of CD-RW is: "The question to ask is not if it will fail but when." Initially, I admit, I saved data to CD-RW media. But, single-use media (CD-R blanks) was a lot more expensive than today and the media reuse was attractive. Today, I find it easier to remain exclusively with CD-R. There is a newer format, titled Mt. Rainier, that will incorporate packet writing capability into the OS and make CD-RW more convenient (but not necessarily more reliable) by allowing formatting on the fly. There are a few of the latest drives (40X or 48X) that claim they support it; however, it is not directly supported by any version of

Continued on page 4...

CD-R and CD-RW Burning 101 ...continued from page 3

Windows (including Win XP) to date — and is therefore untestable. To implement it, in addition to operating system and burning software support, it requires both hardware and firmware revisions; it is much more than a software upgrade. This would, I believe (perhaps, hope?) create one theoretical advantage: inter-readability; that is, Nero could read Roxio and vice-versa (and, incidentally, all media created under any other Mt. Rainier compliant packet writing software) since the OS would perform the formatting operation. Have to wait and see, I guess. Historically at least, version 1.0 of anything was often less than stellar.

I have no idea why the following sometimes worked (on Win 9x/Me systems — maybe it would on Win 2K/XP but have had no need to use it). Sometimes a reboot — following a failed burn — is enough to kick-start it. This failure usually seemed to follow the intense activity required to define the archive for burning (selecting all the files and folders etc and defragging). Maybe, the system resources needed refreshing; maybe, it allowed Windows to reset something, I don't know; maybe, it was an illusion; but, sometimes it worked. In fact, as a preventive measure, I once (half-jokingly) suggested that a problematic machine should be rebooted just before commencing every burn. That is, get the files for the archive assembled, defrag if necessary and then reboot. Do nothing except initiate the burn process. Surprise, it worked... and continues to succeed to this day! Is it really necessary? I don't know but I don't really want to challenge success.

If you are installing a burner into a system that has seen moderate use (in contrast to a new system), you may save yourself a few coasters if you were to reinstall the operating system and applications right now (rationale in the next paragraph)!

Given Windows' (particularly the 9x and Me versions) propensity to somehow progressively corrupt itself with the passage of time, I recommend that you seriously consider a system backup immediately following the system setup. That is, install the operating system, the burner drivers and burning software and your principal software applications and utilities. Before you run anything, "freeze it in time" by Ghosting, Drive Imaging or whatever you have available. While there is always a chance of a pristine installation not working, much more frequently a system slowly deteriorates as the Registry is burdened with the detritus of installed and removed software and the system has endured a few blue screens of death. When it finally fails (and rest assured, it shall) you will save a lot of time by merely restoring a known good configuration in a fraction of the time that re-installing everything from scratch would require. This approach will prove quicker, I assure you, than trying to patch, replace or repair.

I hope that you can glean something from this article to assist you. One final thought (particularly in Windows 9x and Me): if you have problems installing the burner during a new Windows install consider trying to install the burner after the OS is functioning correctly. To avoid its detection by the hardware Setup Wizard you must, of course, remove the power and data cables from the device until the Windows

installation is complete. If your hardware is newer that the OS then Windows wouldn't have the ability to recognize the hardware and supply drivers anyway. Even if there are drivers embedded in Windows, sometimes better compatibility results from the manufacturer's latest offering. A small detail, but, hey, sometimes it works! Windows 2000 users (and I assume Windows XP) have an option within the install routine to specify that they possess specific drivers for hardware that is not in Windows database. In this case, leaving the burner attached will allow this process to proceed.



CLUB LIFE

Reduce, Reuse, Recycle

Bring your old computer books, software, hardware, and paraphenalia you want to **GIVE AWAY** to the General Meetings, and leave them at the table near the auditorium's entrance. *Please limit magazines to publication dates of less than two years old.* You may **TAKE AWAY** any items of use to you. Stuff left over at the end of the meeting will be sent to the recycle bin.



Rewind... by Bob Gowan, OPCUG Historian

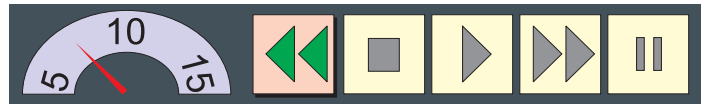
This is the first of what I hope will be a regular feature of *Ottawa PC News* leading up to our 20th anniversary, next spring, and beyond. In this column, I will provide some “snapshots” of the group’s history, as recorded in a sequence of previous newsletters. We plan to scan the issues covered in this column and post them in the Newsletters area on PUB II. Eventually the full contents of these issues will also be listed in the Articles page of our website.

5 Years Ago

The November 1997 issue of *Ottawa PC News* (Vol. 14, No. 9) had on its front page an article by Chris Taylor on “Technical support: Microsoft Knowledge Base.” The article started: “Do you get the feeling software is being released buggier and buggier every day.” I’d have to say that not much has changed since then — either with regard to most software, or Chris providing lots of tips and tidbits on using the latest version of Windows. This issue also announced that CorelDRAW Version 8.0, just shipping at that time, would be shown at the November ‘97 meeting. There was also an Annual Swap Meet held in the Train Hall of the Museum that November, and the Desktop Publishing and Paradox SIGs were active. The issue also included two product reviews by Jerry Gault: the Video Blaster WebCam and NHL ‘98.

10 Years Ago

Leading off the November 1992 issue of *Ottawa PC News* was a review of the October ‘92 meeting by Jackson Hibler. This included three products: WindowPhone, Professional Draw and FrameMaker that were shown by Computique, Manotick. Jackson reported that Gold Disk’s Professional Draw “looks like CorelDRAW and Aldus Framemaker rolled into one.” With an introductory price of \$150 for OPCUG members, it sounds like a bargain!! How many of our readers took advantage of this offer? The regular November meeting was replaced by annual Swap Meet, held in the cafeteria of Sir Robert Borden High School. Software Librarian Norman Dafoe was promoting a software sale at the Swap Meet, to clear stocks of older 5 1/4" diskettes. Current diskettes were in both 5 1/4 and 3 1/2" formats. Another feature of this issue was an article by Robert Parkinson on a new BBS in the area: The National Capital Freenet — “it’s arguably going to be the most powerful BBS in the region.”



15 Years Ago

In November 1987, the *Ottawa IBM-PC Users Group newsletter* featured a cover story by Jackson M. Hibler entitled “Flushing the Buffer,” which follows the October ‘87 presentation by Microsoft Canada of OS/2. The big question of the day was how many would do the hardware and software upgrades needed to “enter Microsoft’s new world of OS/2 computing.” Back then, the Swap Meet was called the “Computer Exchange Market” The new Disk of the Month (#46) featured a print formatting program, “some nice BASIC debugging tools,” and “Snipper, a memory-resident program that allows selected portions of the screen to be dumped to a printer, a file, or into another program.” One of the new disks from the Specialty Library was the latest offering of PC-File+. Chris Taylor, then Software Librarian, had an article outlining some of ways programs are crippled in demo disks, and a Tidbits column that covered the new 3 1/2” ‘ disk standard, allocating disk space and copy protection. The group’s Bulk Purchasing co-ordinator, Terance P. Mahoney, had an article on Clones, Copies and Facsimiles of the original IBM AT computer. A full page of the issue was devoted, in both official languages, to Errata that originated from conversion of files between program used in the previous issue. The November 1987 issue was produced with GEM Desktop Publisher.



A professor of computer science at York University contacted us about his current research project on the history of Canadian micro- computing industry. He is trying to get in touch with people associated with a computer hobbyist club in Ottawa during the mid 1970s. Perhaps you know someone who was a member of that club or have some ideas how to find such people? If you do have any hints on how to start the search, please pass them along, either to me (bob.gowan@opcug.ca) or to the professor, at the address below. We would be most grateful for your help.

Zbigniew Stachniak, Department of Computer Science
York University Toronto, On. M3J 1P3

SpamAssassin Pro by Chris Taylor

Last month I looked at SpamNet, which uses the collective knowledge of thousands of Internet users to determine what is and isn't spam. This month, I look at SpamAssassin Pro from Deersoft. At version 1.6 as I write this review, SpamAssassin Pro has its roots in the wildly popular open source program SpamAssassin, which runs on UNIX and Linux systems. It uses a set of built-in rules to determine if an e-mail is likely to be spam. As one might expect, given its open source roots, it lays bare how the rules operate for all to see and modify.

You might be concerned that opening the rule set for all to examine would give spammers the information they need to bypass SpamAssassin Pro. As it turns out, this is not quite so easy. Spammers rely on certain things in order to be successful. They obfuscate data in the headers to avoid detection. They use certain terms and styles to try to make their messages stand out and be noticed. A spam is obviously not going to be very effective if it is boring and nobody looking at it gives it a second glance. They try to convince you that their e-mail is not spam, that you actually requested it, or that this is a one-time thing and that they are truly sorry if you received it in error. There are lots of indicators that point to a message being spam.

SpamAssassin Pro has over 400 rules it applies to each and every inbound e-mail looking for spam-like characteristics. Every time there is a match with a rule, a score is assigned to the match. As the score increases, it is more likely the e-mail is a spam. Once a certain threshold is reached, SpamAssassin considers the e-mail to be spam.

Some rule examples;

- Does the subject line contain an exclamation mark? If so, 0.094 is added to the score. If three or more exclamation marks are in the subject line, 0.763 is added to the score.

- Is the message addressed to "undisclosed-recipient"? This is common in spam where an e-mail is being sent to hundreds or thousands of recipients and the spammer puts all the destination addresses as blind-carbon-copies. Not wanting to leave the "to" blank, the recipient mail system enters "undisclosed-recipient". This adds a score of 4.034.
- Does the message include the phrase "one time mailing"? When is the last time you received a message from a friend indicating it was a one-time mailing? Spammers use this to stop you from complaining to their ISP. If this phrase is found, 2.464 is added to the score.
- Does the message contain the phrase "instant access"? This appears in a lot of spam promising you "instant access" to porn sites. I've been told this is not true. The appearance of this phrase adds 2.996 to the score.
- Does the message contain a PGP signature? Since not many spammers will digitally sign their e-mails, the presence of a PGP signature subtracts 3.135 from the score.

I hear the sceptics already saying that there is a flaw here. The fact that a message includes the phrase "instant access" does not mean it's a spam! Sharp thinking. And of course, you are right. But there is no one rule that will cause an e-mail to be treated as spam.

The authors of SpamAssassin Pro did extensive examination of 210,220 non-spam e-mails and 43,288 spams. The average score for spam was 14.3. The average score for non-spam was -2.2. The average score for false positives (non-spam being treated as spam) was 7.0 and the average score for false negatives (not catching real spam) was 2.6.

With their weighting, considering over 250,000 messages, SpamAssassin Pro correctly identified spam 92.45% of the time, which means 7.55% of spam made it past their filters. 99.93% of the time, non-spam e-mails were correctly treated as such, leaving only 0.07% of non-spam e-mails being treated as spam.

I like the honesty of SpamAssassin Pro. I don't believe any anti-spam program that says it has no false positives and catches all spam. SpamAssassin Pro states the odds and plays by them.

The user interface for SpamAssassin Pro is clean, easy to understand and easy to use. It differs from SpamAssassin in that, to survive in the world of a Windows GUI, you can't expect users to manually modify cryptic, text-based, configuration files. So it sports a nice clean toolbar in Outlook. There are six buttons available.

Settings: This button brings up the main configuration dialog box. The main options:

- Choose to add a word or phrase to the subject line of spam
- Move spam to a designated folder

- Mark spam as read
- Edit the whitelist
- Edit the blacklist
- Choose languages that should be treated as spam

Scan Folder: This button allows you to scan the current folder looking for spam. The is great to use after you first install the program to clean out old junk. While you get a warning that it may take some time, there is no cancel button, no progress bar, and you are not informed when the process finishes. Worse, when I run this on my Inbox (which resides on an Exchange Server and has over 2,300 messages) it never seems to process more than a couple of hundred messages.

Allow Sender: This will add the address of the sender of the currently selected message to the whitelist. In the future, e-mails from this address will be not caught as spam. Use this button if you discover that e-mails from a particular address are accidentally being treated as spam. If you have SpamAssassin Pro set to move spam to a folder, this button will move the message back to your Inbox.

Block Sender: If SpamAssassin Pro fails to detect an e-mail as spam and you want to treat all messages from this address as spam in the future, click this button. It will add the address to the Blacklist and move the message to the spam folder (if the program is configured to move spam to a folder.)

Allow Recipient: This is most useful when using mailing lists. Messages on mailing lists are typically from a great number of people, but are generally addressed to the name of the

list. So, the normal action of whitelisting the sender is not appropriate. By using this button, you add the to address to the whitelist and all future messages addressed to that address will not be treated as spam.

Block Recipient: This adds the to address to the blacklist. I have not personally found this to be very useful, but if you see spam coming in frequently addressed to a specific address, and it is not yours, you can use this option to block it in the future.

Overall, I found SpamAssassin Pro to be very effective. I found it had its biggest problem was with false positives on the many mass-mailed newsletters I am subscribed to. Fortunately, it is pretty fast and easy to whitelist these.

Because of the number of mailing lists I am on, I found that the option Allow Recipient was extremely handy. All anti-spam programs should offer this.

A few of entries needed a manual tweak after whitelisting. For example, The Daily Dilbert comes from `dailycomic#xxx@umsan1.unitedmedia.com`, where xxx is a random string of about 20 numbers and characters. I manually edited the whitelist so this reads `dailycomic*@umsan1.unitedmedia.com` and the Daily Dilbert is no longer treated as spam.

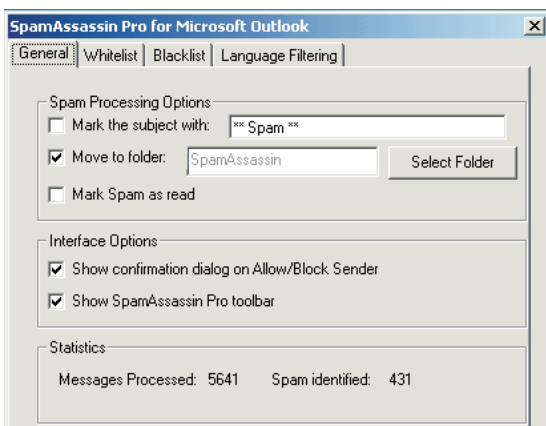
Deersoft has made it more difficult to modify the way SpamAssassin Pro works than it needs to be. The UNIX roots show in the plain text .CF files where rules are defined and where many of the configuration options are set. But not all configuration options are set in the .CF files. Some are in the registry. There are even some registry settings that are also listed in the .CF files. When I asked about modifying the .CF files to change the behaviour of the program, I was cautioned that it will work, but is unsupported by Deersoft. If you want to play with the .CF files, I strongly suggest you visit spamassassin.org for more information on the open source version — SpamAssassin.

I look forward to future versions that will allow the end user to more easily modify the way the program operates. Even a simple thing like the addition of a slider to allow the user to choose the trigger score for spam would be a great thing.

While SpamAssassin Pro has a few rough edges, I think it is great technology for dealing with spam. I really like that I can see the rules and how they apply. If I want to roll up my sleeves, I can get right in there and modify the rule set. I can change weightings on individual rules if I don't think they suit the e-mail and spam I receive.

SpamAssassin Pro costs US\$30 and requires Outlook 2000 or Outlook XP. It runs on Windows 98 through Windows XP and supports POP3 accounts as well as Exchange Server. There are versions in the works for other mail programs and you can sign up at the Deersoft web site to be informed as they become available.

You can get more info and download a 14-day trial of SpamAssassin Pro from www.deersoft.com.



OTTAWA PC NEWS



Ottawa PC News is the newsletter of the Ottawa PC Users' Group (OPCUG), and is published monthly except in July and August. The opinions expressed in this newsletter may not necessarily represent the views of the club or its members.

Member participation is encouraged! If you would like to contribute an article to *Ottawa PC News*, please submit it to the newsletter editor (contact info below). Deadline for submissions is three Saturdays before the next General Meeting.

Group Meetings

OPCUG meets on the second Wednesday in the month, except July and August, at the Canada Science and Technology Museum, 1867 St. Laurent Blvd, Ottawa. Meetings are 7:30–9:00 p.m. and Special Interest Groups go until 10 p.m.

Fees

OPCUG annual membership: \$25 per year.

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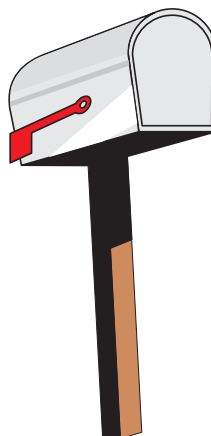
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to get the plain text version. Or;

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And, if you decide you do not need the printed version sent to you anymore, simply let Mark Cayer (membership chairman) know. He can be reached at general meetings, as well as by e-mail at Mark.Cayer@opcug.ca.

You might want to wait until you have successfully received at least one issue electronically before opting out from the printed version.



To subscribe to the Announcements List, e-mail listserv@opcug.ca. Leave the subject blank. In the body of the message put “subscribe announcements” (without the quotes). Within a couple of minutes you will receive a confirmation message from the listserver.

“Announcements” is a low volume list that the Board of Directors can use to get in touch with the membership. Subscribers can expect at least one message per month – the meeting reminder that goes out a few days in advance of the general meeting. Other than that, the only time it is used is when the Board feels there is some important news that should be brought to the attention of all members.

