AIMS Tech Notes

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E-mail made simple

With the dramatic proliferation of e-mail, we are sending and receiving more and more files as e-mail attachments. What follows is a detailed explanation of e-mail. It's not as scary as some make it out to be, but you have to take some responsibility to learn how to use your e-mail program.

First, you need to know what e-mail program you are using. There are hundreds of e-mail programs; some common ones are Outlook and Eudora. There are also service providers that have their own e-mail systems, most notably America Online (AOL). Some World Wide Web browsers provide a built-in e-mail program — best example, Netscape. And there are free services like Hotmail and Juno.

If you're not sure what program you're using, any Windows program will tell you the name of the software by clicking on Help, then About. This also will tell you the version of the software, which can be important.

Working with attached files is the hardest part of working with e-mail programs, although, once you figure it out, it's actually very easy. I hate to use the "riding a bicycle" cliché, but in this case it's true.

Let's start with the basics of an e-mail, then get into attachments.

E-mail basics

When you create a message, you need to address it to a recipient using their e-mail address. Let's use my e-mail address as an example: scottj@angus.org. For the sake of this article, I've underlined the actual e-mail address. You will sometimes see an e-mail address printed like this: <scottj@angus.org>.

In a nutshell, an e-mail address has two parts. I don't know the official terms, but I think of the first part (before the @ sign) simply as the name of the person. Sometimes it's a little cryptic, such as in the case of AOL or Hotmail accounts. Other times it's literally the person's name — mine easily could be scottjohnson if I wanted.

The second part, after the @ symbol, is the domain name. The domain is an Internet address that is a specific reference to one Internet location. No one else in the world can be registered as angus.org; they can be angus.com and a bunch of other similar words, but never angus.org. That keeps scottj@angus.org separate from scottj@angus.com (which I don't know exists, and it doesn't matter; it won't get to me anyway).

The next part of an e-mail message will generally be your "reply to" address. Typically,

you set this up once and never need to deal with it again; it becomes an automatic part of a new message. But be sure it's correct.

As you probably have learned, all you need to do to reply to an e-mail is click a button and it automatically copies the "reply to" field of the incoming message to the recipient field of your new outgoing message. Be sure it is accurate; there are few things more frustrating than trying to reply to an e-mail, only to get a response that it is undeliverable due to a bad address. It's like leaving a voice message on an answering machine and giving the wrong phone number.

Next will generally be the subject line, an often overlooked field. Use it! For people who get a lot of e-mail (I get about 10-30 messages a day) the subject becomes an important part of a filing system or in determining the importance of the message.

There may also be a place for "cc," which stands for *carbon copy*. Here's a classic throwback to a paper system that isn't accurate in electronics. When was the last time you actually used carbon paper? But we use the term anyway.

Most e-mail programs also will have a "bcc" field, which is *blind carbon copy*. This means you're sending it to a third party, but you don't want the main recipient to know a copy went anywhere.

Next is the main body of the e-mail — your "letter." Always use this for some type of message, even if it's a quick message to us that says "Here are the weaning weights for XYZ Ranch. Sincerely, Bob." Take it a step further, and be sure to include your full name (not just Bob — I know lots of Bobs), as well as your phone number and Association member code. There is a way to include a "signature block" automatically at the end of your e-mail message, which I'll let you look for in your e-mail program.

Attachments

Now we're finally ready to discuss attachments.

Sending an attachment to us is pretty easy. I mainly work with Eudora, and I'll also describe what I know about Outlook.

Attaching files with Eudora. Be sure you're in your new message. You will not be able to simply type in the path and filename into the Attachment field even though it may look like the recipient, subject, etc. You need to go to the Message command, then Attach File. You can also use an icon that has a paper clip on it, or press Ctrl-H to start the process. With any of these methods, you will be presented a typical Windows screen to either type in the path and filename, or you can navigate to it.

Attaching files with Outlook. Again, get everything else ready in your message, then go to Insert, File Attach. (Remember this Insert command for later. It's the source of problems and confusion when we get to receiving attachments.) As with Eudora, you'll need to navigate to the file you want to attach (insert).

When you're done filling in all the appropriate fields, you're ready to send the message. Nearly all files you send to us are relatively small, so you shouldn't have any problems with attachments. However, some Internet service providers (ISPs) limit the size and/or number of attachments. For example, AOL apparently will only send one file at a time, so you will need to create a new message for each file you send. If you are sending large files to us — such as a backup of your herd — your ISP may limit the size, perhaps to 1 MB. In this case, you'll probably have to send the file on disk.

We will acknowledge receipt of files you send to us, so if you don't receive a reply within a day or so, call us. Do not re-send the file unless we're expecting it — duplicate files cause even more problems.

Receiving attached files

If you've had e-mail for more than a day, you've probably received messages already. If nothing else, you probably got one from your ISP welcoming you to their service. You also may have received one with an attachment — maybe a picture of your grandkids or a joke from a friend (remember the early days of fax machines?).

The trick is what to do with the attachment. In the case of pictures, you can often double-click on the icon representing the attachment, the appropriate program starts, and everything is fine. That won't work with files we send. Even if they could start AIMS, it wouldn't know what type of import to run — EPDs, Performance, Additional Animals, etc. So we need a way to control, or at least determine, where the file is saved. This is where it gets tricky (as if you aren't worried already).

The problem is that some programs embed the attached file "inside" the main message vs. leaving it as a separate file. What do I mean by "inside"? Let's use a food metaphor. Imagine the e-mail message is a peach. Some programs send you the seed "inside" the peach, and you have to separate it from the fruit (the seed is the attachment in our case). Other programs send the peach separately from the seed — you get the seed, but you don't have to pull it out of the peach.

The second issue is that when you separate the seed from the peach, you need to know where they are on your computer.

So back to our two typical programs, Eudora and Outlook, which represent both methods.

Receiving attachments with Eudora. You get the peach separate from the seed. When an attached file is received, it is saved

to a specified folder without any special handling to extract it from the message. This is one reason I still like Eudora, even though it's not considered the "industry standard" e-mail program (Outlook is considered the industry standard). All e-mail programs save attachments somewhere, either as the file is received — like Eudora — or when you "extract" it — like Outlook.

Eudora saves the attached files to a folder that you have designated. If you haven't set up the correct folder, it goes to a default (something like c:\eudora\downloads). To check it, go to Tools, Options, Attachments and note or change the Attachments

Directory. This will be the folder you navigate to in AIMS when you are importing the file.

If you're still not sure where the file is saved, you can use Windows' Find utility; go to Start, Find, Files or Folders. Where it says Named, put in the name of the attachment, which Eudora should tell you in the body of the e-mail message. Be sure the Look In field says c: (the main hard drive) or My Computer, then click the Find Now button.

(You would benefit a lot to learn how to use the Find utility. It's useful when working with many Windows programs).

Receiving attachments with Outlook. The seed (attachment) is embedded in the

peach (e-mail message). Once you have received the e-mail message, you should see an icon for the attachment. However, unlike Eudora, if you tried to Find the file right away, it wouldn't be there. The easiest way to extract the file is to right-mouse-click on the attachment icon and use the Save As option on the pop-up menu. Once you have clicked on Save As, you will receive a familiar Windows screen to navigate to a folder, then finish with the Save button. In this case, you may as well navigate to c:\aims20\files, which is the default location that AIMS looks in when importing files.

You also can highlight (select) the attachment icon, go to File, Save Attachment command, then navigate to the c:\aims20\files folder.

Miscellaneous topics related to e-mail

Duplicate filenames. The e-mail programs I've seen, and certainly in the case of Eudora and Outlook, will not automatically overwrite files if an incoming attachment has the same name as an existing file of the same name. Even if it tries to overwrite a file, you will be asked first.

Eudora automatically changes the name; for example, if you already have a performance update file on your computer as P0123456.exp, the new incoming file would be slightly changed to P01234561.exp. Notice the extra 1 after the 6. AIMS will have a problem with this new file since it is nine characters and AIMS is expecting eight (the period and extension are not a factor in this case).

To change the filename to something AIMS will recognize, I would suggest using Windows Explorer (note that I'm not talking about Internet Explorer). There are several ways to start Windows Explorer, but my most common is Start, Programs, Windows Explorer. Then find the correct folder in the left window, and the file should appear in the right window. Right-click on the file and change it to an appropriate name. Of course, this won't work if there is still a file with the intended name already in this folder; you may need to change that file first.

As an alternative to changing the filename, it is possible to get AIMS to see the extra-length filename. When browsing for the import file, the default type is p???????.exp. Alternately, you can enter p*.exp in the Filename field and see files of different lengths.

Previously received files. You can delete "old" files, but I would suggest using Windows Explorer to archive them; then you have a way to go back and reimport a file if necessary. For example, you could change a previous performance update file from P0123456.exp to P0123456.2_7_00.exp to indicate this file was received on Feb. 7, 2000. I would further suggest moving the file to a different folder such as c:\aims20\files\previous — which means you need to make a new folder in c:\aims20\files. This new folder can be made with Windows Explorer.

Windows Explorer has many more uses and is even more valuable than the Find utility. I would highly recommend learning more about Windows Explorer. I'll plan to write about it in a future "Tech Notes."

Preview. With the release of AIMS 2.0c, you have the ability to preview the data in a file before you import it. Simply go through the initial steps of the import (File, Data, Import; operation changed to Performance), but instead of clicking on the Import button, use the Preview button in the bottom left corner of the Import screen. The preview screen includes the relevant fields for that type of import, especially fields that will help you identify the animals and key data.

Exporting files. Two quick thoughts here.
1. Don't change the name of files when you export them. We base our processing on the name of the file — it tells us what type of file it is and who sent it.
2. If you need to resubmit a couple of weights from a larger pen, don't resubmit the whole pen. Either make a pen of the problem animals, or better yet, call the AHIR department to do it by phone or to receive special instructions.

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