



HOW TO...

WRITE A BETTER NEWSLETTER

Introduction

The history of the newsletter is a long and illustrious one. The earliest newsletters in English appeared in the 17th century. Correspondents at different shipping ports would report back to their editor on the cargo of ships that entered and left port. The editor would take the information and write a newsletter to his subscribers (merchants and investors) advising them on what to sell or prepare to buy so they could keep a step ahead of the competition.

Since those times, newsletters have become a common tool of communication for many organisations, businesses, clubs, schools, groups, and charities. Indeed, it is rare to come across one of the above that does not produce a newsletter of some kind.

However, as with all things, there are good and bad examples of the craft. It is no good producing a newsletter if no one actually reads it and this 'How To' guide is intended to assist all newsletter writers and editors with some practical advice and ideas to make your newsletter as compelling and engaging as possible.

Why a newsletter at all?

The first question you need to ask yourself is why do you need a newsletter at all. What is the purpose of your newsletter, and is this the best method for achieving that purpose?

It is useful to summarise the purpose of your newsletter in one sentence, and to list its three or four primary objectives.

It is also worth defining the role of your newsletter.

For example:

- You want to feedback to your donors or members on how their gifts have been used
- You want to build a sense of community and shared engagement amongst your audience
- You want to share current or new information about your organisation
- You want to showcase your service or programme delivery
- You want to show gratitude or appreciation
- You want to provide information that helps your audience in some way
- You want to build awareness of specific issues and activities
- You want to notify your audience about meetings, elections, educational programmes, conferences, seminars, etc.
- You want to keep your members informed about information on current medications and treatments

It is important to remember that newsletters rarely sell directly. They are strongest (and best) at creating ongoing relationships. Just like any other relationship, that means building friendship and trust and being willing to invest in a two-way rapport with your audience.

Audience

Knowing your audience is crucial to the success or otherwise of your newsletter.

Ask yourself, "Who exactly is my audience?"

What are their demographics? Are they male or female, young or old? What is their income? Are they religious? Do they have children or grandchildren? Where do they work? Are they students, businesswomen or men, entrepreneurs?

Once you've answered that question, you can then consider the most important issue in writing a newsletter: What does your audience want to know? If you write your newsletter with your audience in mind, you will avoid a major pitfall: filling the newsletter with stories of importance only to you or your organisation. You might find that interesting, but your audience will not.

Planning A Newsletter

Above all, keep it new!

Newsletters work only if readers value the information or features you deliver. You must offer articles or news that they can't find as easily anywhere else. The newsletter should make them feel like an insider.

You're asking your audience for time and attention, so you had better make it worth their while. This means being honest and realistic about the amount of high quality content you can consistently produce. There is no point trying to produce something too often - where you are struggling to fill the space you have.

Pay attention to the appearance of the newsletter. Give it a title - something eye-catching and memorable.

Lead with strong items that have broad appeal as people decide within seconds whether or not to read. Any editorial or Chief Executive's message should have a regular spot after the lead items. In-house or more regional news should have a spot much further in. This gives you the best chance of competing for attention, while those familiar with your newsletter know where to find what they want.

Add variety to newsletters by having different items such as:

- Opinion columns
- Guest writer column
- Interviews or 'Day in the Life' pieces
- Letters
- Humorous pieces or cartoons
- Regional round-up
- Internal news

Plan what articles are to be written several months ahead. You can start collecting ideas and data long before you put pen to paper (or fingers to keyboard). This way you can start to mentally write your article as you drive down the road or talk with programme staff. With

practice, you will find you are automatically listening out for, and formulating, that just right headline or lead story.

When considering the use of colour in your newsletter remember that the most readable combination is black ink on white paper. If you use colour in the newsletter consider highlighting the artwork, headlines, or other graphics or symbols, but not the body of type.

Adding articles written by others (with permission) can add to the credibility of your newsletter. When dealing with writers, negotiate topic, length, treatment and deadline before assigning an article. Include important sources and the key questions, which the story will address.

Be aware of copyright infringements - give credit where due and quote your sources.

Commissioning, writing and editing

Some golden rules:

- Write a punchy headline.
- Use a summary sentence in articles or features.
- Write a lead paragraph of the key information.
- Write news stories in descending order of importance.
- Make sure the story flows between paragraphs.
- Use quotations and examples to change the pace and add variety.
- Use lots of short items to make the newsletter interesting.
- Avoid long articles. If you have to use them, break them up.
- Use cartoons, photos and graphics to break up the page.

- Rewrite contributions that are boring or too long.

Good writing and good editing require direction and hard work. Your copy should sing rather than drone. It should ring when tapped. Write compact copy using active verbs (that means minimizing sentences that use "is, are, was, were", and substituting vivid, active verbs that sparkle and snap).

Cut adverbs: actually, in fact, on the whole—most adverbs are merely padding.

Use the newspaper's inverted pyramid format as much as possible in articles. That's where the main point of the article is made in the first paragraph. The paragraphs that follow then support the main point in decreasing order of importance. This format ensures the reader gets the gist of the article even if they don't read it all. And it makes it easy to trim some inches off the story if you run out of column space.

Define acronyms the first time you use them ("The Department for International Development (DfID) have made a grant of £300,000...").

Vary the length and structure of the sentences you use. Changing sentence length and structure moves the writing along with the reader firmly attached.

Edit for clarity, conciseness, jargon, length, and accuracy.

Your font should be easy to read (Serif type faces have a more traditional appeal) and not distract from the message you are trying to impart. A font that is easy to read meets three conditions:

- The reader's eye moves smoothly along the individual lines of type.
- The readers' eye must be able to move easily from line to line.
- Individual letters and words must be easy to recognize.

Space between lines is called leading. Too much space between lines of type makes it difficult for a reader to move smoothly from line to line, too little and the type runs together. The best leading is about two leads more than the type size.

Capital letters and italic type should never be over used but used instead to emphasize certain words or phrases.

The body copy of your newsletter is best set in a type size of 10, 11, or 12 point type.

Read it out loud. If you read it out loud and the sentences flow easily, it will be easy to read. If you find yourself tripping over your words, the reader will probably stumble as well.

Publishing

Develop a publication structure, an editorial calendar and, if appropriate, written writers guidelines.

Professionals publish on a regular basis. Make that your goal!

And remember, deadlines are sacred. If you plan your newsletter every quarter, then stick to it. Don't publish erratically. You will lose readers or they may forget they subscribed to your newsletter because of your irregular publishing schedule.

Proofreading is very critical to the publishing process. Take the time to correct any spelling or grammar errors. This will improve the quality of your publication. Go over the text yourself looking for errors and then get someone else to read it. Pick someone who knows more than your readers about your topic. Find the person in your office (or home) that returns the newsletter with notes all over it. This is the one you want to proof your writing.

Be aware of postal regulations, such as bulk mailing regulations, penalty mail requirements if appropriate, sorting, packing and sealing.

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