



How to Write an Effective Newsletter

Words - so innocent and powerless as they are, as standing in a dictionary, how potent for good and evil they become in the hands of one who knows how to combine them.

~ Nathaniel Hawthorne

A newsletter is a popular and effective way to keep in touch with customers, members, and employees. It helps create top of mind awareness – having your company come to mind whenever a customer needs your product or service. It provides a way to talk about the benefits of new services, products, or equipment. It allows you to showcase your expertise and become a source of useful information or valuable advice. And it definitely can help you find new customers or members.

To be truly effective, a newsletter must be:

- published regularly, whether monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly;
- well designed, eye catching, content-rich; and
- written to keep the audience's interest.

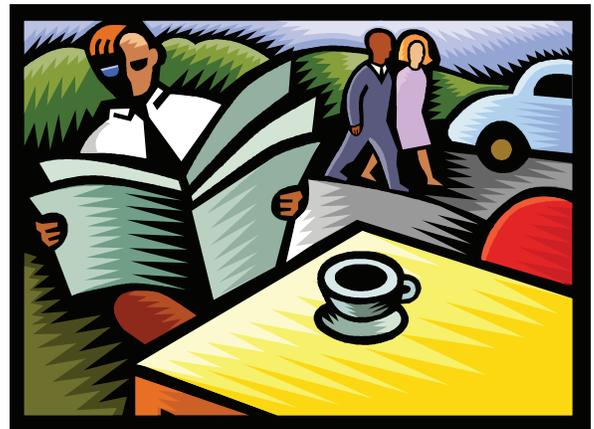
Each of these elements – regular publication, good design, and good writing – contributes equally to the effectiveness of a newsletter. Previously we've provided tips for good design, so in this issue we'll discuss writing.

The Objective: Engaged Readers

It has been said that there are only two kinds of newsletters – those that are read and those that aren't. Since your objective is to be the former, imagine that you are a member of the audience for the newsletter. What are you interested in? What would you like to read about? What do you want to learn? How much time can you devote to reading the newsletter? What will catch your attention?

Begin at the Beginning... Naming Your Newsletter

Take some time to develop an attention-getting name for your newsletter. That's what we did with the name of this newsletter which tells you exactly what we're about –



information that will help you create the printed materials for your company. It also asserts that we have the necessary expertise to be providing this information.

Make a Good First Impression... The Nameplate

The nameplate, or banner, contains the name of your newsletter and may also include a subtitle, a brief slogan or mission statement, and the issue information. A nameplate does three things; it introduces the publication, it sets up the reader's expectation, and it establishes brand identity. Think of it as the way you greet your readers.

Because the nameplate has exceptional influence on your readers, good design is critical. Avoid cluttering the nameplate with unnecessary words like *the* or with competing graphic images (logos, decorative borders, odd typographic effects). Design the nameplate to be a distinctive, recognizable element that will attract your readers.

Writing Style... Use the Fog Index

Writing style is a comprehensive term that encompasses word choice, grammar, punctuation, the way sentences are constructed, and the flow of paragraphs. For consistency, it

is important to develop a writing style for your newsletter that fits well with your readers.

There is a very useful tool that analyzes written material for ease of comprehension: the Fog Index. An ideal Fog Index for most writing is 7 or 8; a level above 12 indicates that the writing is too hard for most people to read.

Here is how to compute the Fog Index level of your writing. For best effect, select a sample that contains at least 100 words.

1. Count the number of words in the sample.
2. Count the number of sentences.
3. Count the number of big words (i.e., those with more than three syllables).
4. Calculate the average sentence length (number of sentences divided by number of words).
5. Calculate the percentage of big words (divide the number of words into the number of big words).
6. Add the average sentence length to the percentage of big words.
7. Multiply the result by 0.4 to yield the Fog Index.

One way to signal your readers about the content of a specific newsletter article is by using a different writing style for each type of article. For example, an inverted pyramid style (most important information, followed by important details, ending with general background information) signals a news story, while a narrative approach with a beginning, middle, and end signals a feature story.

If you find that the Fog Index in your writing sample is above the desired mark of 7 or 8, here are some ways you can improve the writing style:

- **Write in short sentences.** Look for punctuation like commas and semi-colons to indicate where long sentences can be broken into shorter ones.
- **Use active voice.** “The wind blew down the tree” is active voice. “The tree was blown down by the wind” is passive voice. Active voice is considered more lively writing.
- **Eliminate unnecessary words.** “Consensus of opinion” is wordy; “consensus” says the same thing. Avoid clichés, qualifiers (“very”, “often”, “hopefully”), redundancies (“more unique”, “hopes and dreams”), and phrases that can be replaced by a single word (“in the event that” for “if”; “in reference to” for “about”).
- **Use strong verbs.** To be and to have are weak verbs. Using a strong verb that has a specific meaning will liven your writing style.

- **Avoid beginning sentences with there is or there are.** Active writing tells who is performing an action.
- **Keep language simple.** “Use” is a simple word that is a wonderful substitute for “utilize”; “many” says the same thing as “numerous”.
- **Explain acronyms.** As a courtesy to your readers, spell out acronyms or abbreviations the first time you use them.

Kick it Off With Catchy Headlines

Catchy headlines will establish a professional style for your newsletter. Well-written headlines succinctly make the point of the article with strong, active verbs and short, simple words. A good headline gets the reader’s attention, summarizes the article, and draws the reader into the article.

The rules for good headline writing are similar to those for good copywriting: use active voice and present tense; short, punchy words; and strong verbs. Headline writing is a learned skill you may need to study and practice to attain proficiency.

Proofread to Perfection

Typographical errors and mistakes in grammar and punctuation undermine the professionalism of your newsletter. A useful technique for proofreading is to use a two-person team. One person reads aloud, while the other views the written copy. Reading aloud also helps identify sections that may need editing or rewriting.

Let us help

We strongly believe that for most small businesses and community organizations, the best way to sell products and services or to solicit memberships and donations is to publish a newsletter regularly – monthly, if budget allows, and quarterly, if not. A newsletter reminds customers and members why they selected your business or organization to be affiliated with and introduces new products and services. For prospects, a newsletter creates name recognition and provides an alternative to the present service provider or product supplier. Another benefit of a newsletter is that it can be tailored to any budget – literally. Naturally, we prefer a newsletter budget that is large enough to allow us to keep you on schedule, by taking over all publication tasks, from design and layout to print and mail. But if your budget is modest, don’t deny your company or organization the benefits of regularly publishing a newsletter.

Contact us with this information; the quantity of newsletters you’d like to distribute, how often you’d like to publish, and the amount that has been budgeted. We’ll back into specifications to keep the newsletter within that amount.

a vocabulary of the graphic arts

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Banner: the name of the newsletter. Also called nameplate.

Captions or cut-lines: descriptive text placed under, over, or to the side of a photograph. Used to emphasize the story behind the photograph.

Fog Index: a method of analyzing written material to determine how easy it is to read and understand. A Fog Index of 7 or 8 is considered ideal for the average reader.

Kicker: a line running in smaller type above a headline. Used for regular features such as editorials and technical tips. May also identify the intended audience for the article.

Inside box: a table of contents that appears on the newsletter front page. Used to direct readers to information on continuation pages of the newsletter. In company newsletters, may be used as a routing list.

Jump line: explanatory text indicating that an article is continued to or continued from another page.

Masthead: the section that contains the publishing information (name of publisher, staff names, contributors) and publication information (subscription rates, advertising information, contact information for publisher)

Nameplate: the name of the newsletter. May also contain a subtitle, a brief slogan or a mission statement, organization, and date.

Standing head: a headline for a regularly-appearing column or story. Helps readers identify topics of interest.

Subheads: a subordinate headline used to divide a long article into its important points. Helps break up long columns of type.

Top of mind awareness (TOMA): a marketing term that describes the association in the mind of a customer for a specific business to fill the need for a particular service or product.

T H E i d e a

Organize by Categories

To help hold the interest of your readers, consider organizing the contents of your newsletter into specific categories that repeat each time the newsletter is published. You may even want to keep some categories in the same location in each issue of the newsletter.

Here is a list of possible categories:

- **Current events or industry news:** tie current events to your industry or company by showing what effect the events might have. An example is an accounting firm that explains how changes in the tax code affect its customers.
- **Product or service feature story:** provide a detailed write-up of a specific product or service offered by your company. You could also use a feature story to explain a new or unusual use for your product or service.

- **Profile:** write a profile of one of your company's employees or customers. Profiling an employee allows your customers to learn more than would come up in regular business transactions and also personalizes your employees. A customer profile can be structured as a testimonial or a case study.
- **Columns:** a common column is a message from the president or chief executive of the company. But also consider a column written by others who have specific areas of expertise – the service manager or quality control supervisor.
- **Letters to the editor:** publishing feedback received from readers demonstrates your commitment to your readers and gives wide circulation to positive remarks.

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Word Count & Subscription Service Tips

Knowing how many words it takes to fill a newsletter will help you make writing assignments and avoid having too little or too much copy. It takes between 400 and 600 words to fill an 8 1/2 x 11 page – the more photographs, graphics, and formatting you include, the smaller the required word count. If you are assigning a writing task to another person, be aware that most adults can compose 150-300 words per hour.

There are subscription services that provide copy for newsletters and writers who can be commissioned. Here are some sources for newsletter copy:

- Pages Editorial Service provides articles, art, stories, and cartoons for newsletters. <http://www.pagesmag.com>
- JURN.org is a database of almost 5000 free articles. Browse the database and when you find a free article you like, download it in text or HTML format. <http://www.jurn.org>
- Writer Access offers a newsletter content writing service. Use their advanced search capabilities to find writers that match your needs. Then review samples, performance, and customer reviews to make your choice. <http://www.writeraccess.com>.



As my company's newsletter editor, what do I need to know about copyright?



Copyright – the legal exclusive right of the author of a creative work to control the copying of that work – most affects newsletter editors who want to reprint copyrighted articles that have previously been published. The only way to legally reprint is to get permission from the copyright holder (which may be the publication in which the article first appeared). Contrary to popular belief, giving credit to the original source of the article is not sufficient to avoid violating copyright – you must also have permission.

Establishing a copyright to protect your publication doesn't require you to do anything – as soon as the publication is

printed, it is considered copyrighted to your company. It is no longer necessary to register the publication with the U.S. Copyright Office or to use the copyright symbol to establish copyright protection.

Be aware that the copyright owner may request payment as a condition of granting permission. In general, the amount of the payment is a function of the size of your audience and whether it is a commercial or educational use. Finally, get the permission in writing. An oral agreement for copyright permission is as vulnerable to misunderstanding or misinterpretation as any other oral agreement.

questions and answers