

Communicating Through Newsletters



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■ The Big Idea

Many businesses use Newsletters to target their audience, raise their profile and communicate their products and services. Charities use them to help, inform and fundraise. But what makes a successful newsletter? Good lively content is essential.

This book looks at how to open articles, make them flow and use good closing paragraphs, how to use case studies, where to find experts, how to interview them and write it up and how to design and layout Newsletters.

Newsletters can be anything from a black and white single-paper sent to customers or club members through to a

glossy full-color production with photographs and advertising.

Whether you're a freelance writer or working for a small business, a charity or are a committee member of a society, you're likely to work on a newsletter, a web site or an article at some point. This book will show you how to write effective web copy and articles and how to produce newsletters that add value to your organization.

Why You Need This Book

This book will show you how to produce Newsletters and write articles that people want to read and thus generate interest for your company.

THE BASICS

Whether you're writing a newsletter, an article or copy for a web site, you are communicating something to your audience. Your audience has chosen to read your words – either because they want to learn something or because they want to be entertained – so you need to live up to their expectation. That means communicating well.

Here are some points to remember:

Good communication is relevant, focused, timely and readable.

Identify your target audience: consumer press, trade press, professional journals or specialist press for articles; internal, trade or special interest newsletters; paying or 'free' audience for web sites. Look at their age, gender, socio-economic group and lifestyle factors.

Look at what your audience wants – news, information or entertainment.

Use the five Ws and an H to focus your work – what (subject), who (audience, case study and expert), where (tone and angle), when (topical, up to date), why (what's in it for the audience), how (your approach).

Your language (tone and vocabulary) needs to be consistent with that of the publication where it appears.

Keep it simple and relevant.

Avoid bias and stereotypes.

Check your spelling and grammar.

Remember that editors, publications and web sites change – widen your fields of interest to avoid becoming too reliant on particular publications by finding new angles on regular topics and finding new topics that interest you.

GETTING AN ARTICLE COMMISSIONED

Unless you're an acknowledged expert in your field, you'll need to contact the editor for the first time. Look at what sort of article you want to write, the sort of subjects you can write about, which publications cover that sort of topic and whether they use freelancers.

Look at your target publication's style – length, use of case studies and experts, layout, length of paragraphs and sentences, tone and vocabulary. Identify the topics that haven't been covered (and remember how far in advance the publication works!)

Ring the features department to find out if they accept freelance contributions and, if so, who to send your ideas to, how much detail they want, whether they'd prefer email or post, which issue they're planning next, which categories they want to cover (broad terms).

Prepare your submissions package – a covering letter, your CV (contact details and list of articles published), cuttings, ideas, (brief paragraph or longer outlines) and SAE (or, for email, a truncated CV and a couple of web site article URLs).

If you haven't heard within a month, assume a rejection – send in more ideas and don't pester. If an editor asks you to write something, stick to the deadline and discuss any problems straightaway – it's OK to refuse a commission but come up with an alternative!

The commissioning form will tell you your brief, fee, payment details, appearance date and deadline. Don't take rejection personally – the topic's either not right at that point or may have been covered by someone else (remember lead time!). Try the idea elsewhere and come up with new ones for the editor who rejected you.

Recycle topics by changing your angle or combining elements from several articles.

WRITING ARTICLES

Here are some important tips to take note of in writing effective articles:

- The angle depends on the audience and the point you want to make.
- Tell the audience something they don't already know.
- Opening paragraphs hook the reader, grab attention, are short and to the point. Start with a statement, a question, a startling fact, a quote, an anecdote or scene-setting – but be specific rather than generalize.
- Check your facts.
- Use the latest information.
- Attribute quotes correctly.
- The closing paragraph ties up with the beginning – don't repeat the introduction but bring in new information (your second-best piece). Aim for impact.

CASE STUDIES AND EXPERTS

A case study is a formal article on someone whose experience illustrates the point you're making in the article; good sources include special-interest groups, professional organizations, clubs, support or self help groups and PR companies.

Experts are useful at illustrating points you've made and giving new information. Good sources include special-interest groups, professional organizations, support or self-help groups, PR companies, university in PR offices and PR organizations.

Interviews can be in person, by phone or by email. Be on time and avoid interruptions. The interview will need to know who you are, the subject of your article, the angle you're taking (and why you want to talk to them), and when and where the article is due to appear.

Go through your list of questions or talk through the main points in a logical way. Listen for points that need expanding and note follow-up questions. Ask for more detail if you need it or if you don't understand something.

Keep a contacts database and keep it up to date!

PRODUCING NEWSLETTERS

A newsletter contains information that's not easily available elsewhere and helps its readers feel part of a larger community; its format varies from a single black and white sheet to a glossy publication. Look at your newsletter's aims, audience, content, frequency and distribution to see where it fits in and whether there's a need for it.

The aims may include giving information, passing on important news, establishing a community, a marketing aid or increasing business. Consider your audience's age, gender, lifestyle and what they expect from your newsletter; this will determine your format, content, tone and vocabulary.

Put the most important material on the front, back or centre pages; the next most important goes in the first half, and information that's only important to some of your readers goes in the second half. Develop a house style to tell contributors about your preferred format – this helps keep the newsletter consistent.

WRITING AND EDITING NEWSLETTERS

The editor makes the articles fit the space available and thinks about what to include, what to leave out, the order of articles and how the articles are written. Your newsletter needs a consistent structure and frequency.

When planning the newsletter, set a realistic schedule allowing enough time for all stages from writing to printing and distribution. If you don't want to write it all yourself, think about paying a freelance, asking readers to contribute, asking other members of the committee/club/staff to write an article.

Offer people a title and/or token payment. Or try an advert in your newsletter asking for contributions (be specific and make sure everyone knows your contact details and deadline date).

Your contributor needs to know the target audience, the topic, the deadline, the number of words, where and how to send it and the fee (if any), plus a copy of your house style sheet.

When editing contributions, check the targeting, logic, accuracy, consistency, balance and legality, plus whether it fits the space.

Headlines and crossheads need to be written with your audience in mind – they need to be short, relevant and make an impact.

Keep your articles accurate, brief and clear – use short sentences, understandable paragraphs and structured outlines.

Get feedback via a letters page, a competition, a questionnaire or a survey.

WEB SITES AND EZINES

It takes around 25% longer to read text on the screen than it does on a page so use lots of white space with short paragraphs. Your readers are more likely to skim-read so be concise and make sure illustrations are quick to download.

Your readers won't bother to download pages that might not be of interest so make sure they're relevant and clearly signposted. Stick to the objective and audience of the site.

Use minimal text and graphics on the home page and include blurbs. Make your site easy to navigate with a logical structure, links sorted into easy groups, and be consistent.

Make it easy to read physically – stick to black text on a light background and use bold rather than italic for emphasis. Don't have too much on a page.

Web articles need to be specific, accurate, easy to understand and relevant. Headings are important – grab attention by asking questions and using inverted commas or initial capitals.

Stick to one topic per article with breakout links for more detail. Use one idea per paragraph; use bulleted or numbered lists. Begin with the title, summarize the main points, expand on the points then give a strong conclusion.

Keep language informal and personal. Keep text short and to the point. Make each link focus on one topic. If you're asking for comments, make it clear if and when the reader can expect a reply.

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