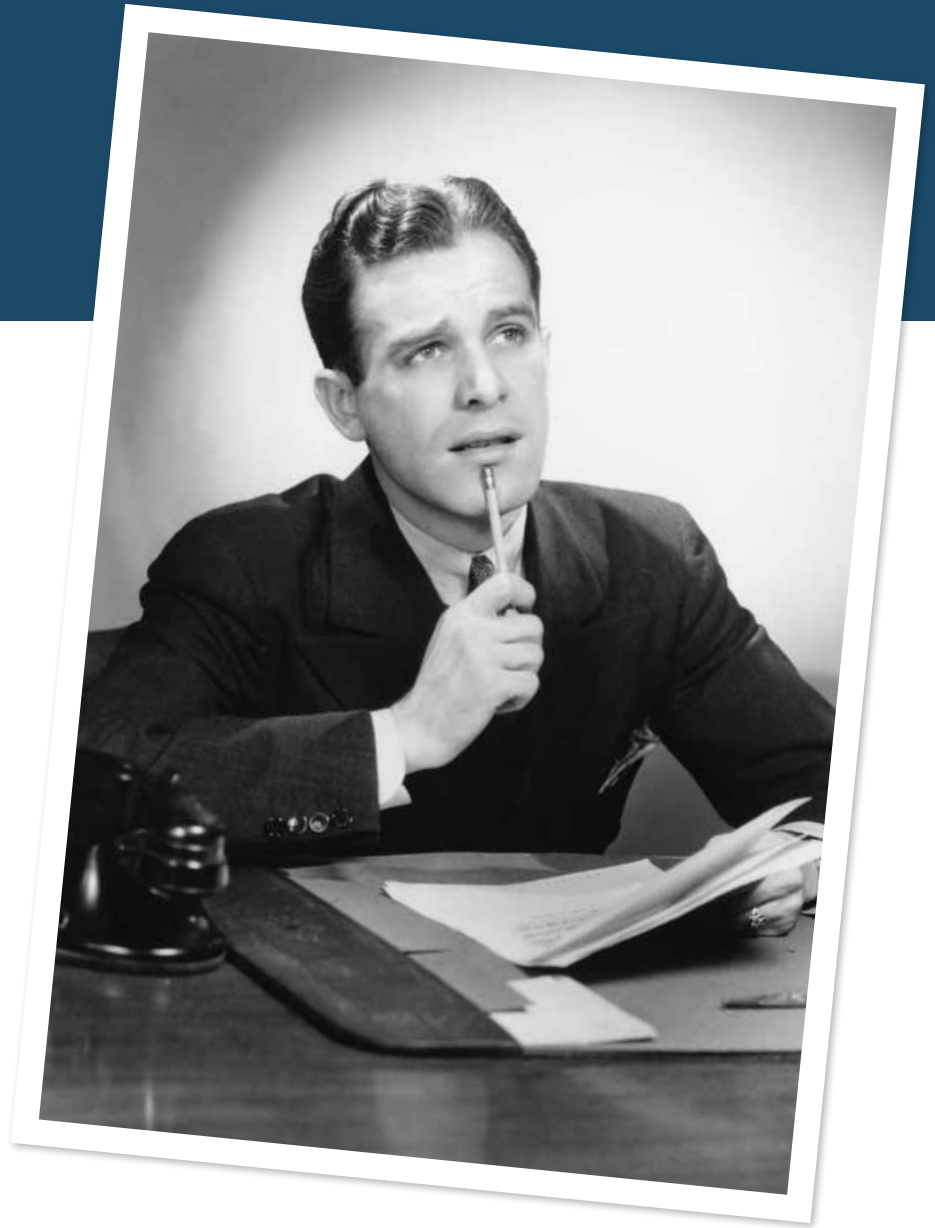


# Back to the Basics

*How to Harness the Power of Newsletters*



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# *Executive Summary*

**Unlike 140 characters on Twitter, a few sentences on Facebook or a daily blog entry, an attractive newsletter packed with valuable information remains a persuasive marketing tool to connect and influence.**

Like social media, newsletter content is easily shared. However, newsletters enjoy distinct advantages over social media channels because:

- Your message goes directly to your audience.
- Newsletters make it easy for readers to keep your organization top of mind.
- They can be retrieved and read by your subscribers at their convenience.

## **Word Travels Fast**

Newsletters are a powerful word-of-mouth marketing tool for businesses and nonprofits. When passed along to others, recipients consider the information a personal recommendation from someone they know and trust: your subscriber.

In our white paper, “How to Generate Leads and Attract Today’s Prospects: Building Trust through Content Marketing,” we discussed the increasing use of content marketing by companies that want to position themselves as experts in their field and strengthen trust with their target audiences.

According to the Custom Content Council’s “Characteristics Study: A Look at The Volume and Type of Content Marketing in America for 2010,”<sup>1</sup> 32% of overall marketing, advertising and communication budgets went to content marketing, compared to just 13% in 1999.

The same study indicates companies are increasing not only their online branded content, but also circulation of custom print publications. In 2009, average circulation per issue jumped to 48,162—a 145% increase over the previous decade.<sup>2</sup>

## **Launching a Winning Newsletter**

In this paper, we discuss how to develop a robust print or email newsletter strategy, create meaningful messages, and measure campaigns that build long-term relationships with customers, clients or donors.

We’ll also look at whether you should consider outsourcing your newsletter production and management or handle it in-house, as well as what to look for in an external marketing partner.



# *Understanding Your Audience*

**...the first—and most important—step in planning a newsletter campaign is understanding your target audience.**

The best newsletters focus less on what you want readers to know about your organization and more on what readers want to know to help them improve their lives, contribute to their professional growth, or boost their bottom line. Therefore, the first—and most important—step in planning a newsletter campaign is understanding your target audience.

## **Whom Are You Speaking To?**

**When defining your audience, you want to know:**

- What topics interest them.
- Why they might want information from your organization.
- The common links that bond readers within the audience.
- What actions you want them to take.

For example, donors supporting a local humane society expect to read about upcoming events and activities in the organization’s newsletter, but are also interested in topics associated with their universal “love of animals” viewpoint. Beauty salon customers, meanwhile, look forward to monthly specials that arrive with a shop’s e-newsletter, but also might want beauty tips or reviews of the latest styling products.

If you determine that your organization serves multiple audiences, you can segment your mailing list by audience interest and deliver custom tailored content to each group.

## **Taking Your Audience’s Pulse**

Client and donor surveys, conversations by and with followers on social media sites, and industry-related consumer studies uncover important, and sometimes unexpected, topics on which to build your newsletter content.

Whether conducted online or in-store, surveys also provide insight into their communication preferences, such as how do they want to receive your publication (*i.e.*, traditional mail or email) and how often do they want to hear from you.

# *Deciding on Frequency and Distribution*

**Once you define your newsletter's target audience, you need to determine how often to publish it and how to distribute it to subscribers.**

## **Determining the Right Publishing Frequency**

Realistically, how frequently you publish a newsletter is not only determined by your audience's preferences, but also by your available resources. Do you have sufficient in-house staff to create a high-quality newsletter or an adequate budget to outsource the design, research, copywriting and distribution for your desired frequency?

Monthly newsletters are typically limited to a couple of pages packed with concise, scannable information, while quarterly newsletters allow time to develop in-depth articles and greater design flexibility.

## **Deciding on Print or Email Distribution**

The decision on whether to print or email a newsletter largely depends on the demographics of a target audience, since different age groups prefer different communication channels.

For example, members of Generation Y (born from 1981 to 1991) and Generation X (born from 1965 to 1980), now make up more than half of today's pool of potential nonprofit donors, an important consideration if a charitable organization wants to cultivate a young base of supporters through a newsletter.

According to a survey conducted by Convio and Sea Change Strategies, people born before 1965 are most likely to keep up-to-date on their favorite nonprofit when information arrives through direct mail appeals; younger people respond to emails and information on an organization's website.<sup>3</sup>

Results of a separate survey conducted by the Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) Council and InfoPrint Solutions Company show most readers place more value on the relevance and personalization of a message than on delivery method. When given a choice, 51% preferred print and 44% preferred email.

According to the report, "Why Relevance Drives Response and Relationships: Using the Power of Precision Marketing to Better Engage Customers," of the 91% of consumers who opt out or unsubscribe to emails, 46% say they do so because the messages are not relevant to their interests.<sup>4</sup>

# *Print or Email: Which Is Better?*



**Research by the Nielsen Norman Group found that consumers prefer e-newsletters to other media—provided they are informative, convenient and timely. However, respondents also reported they only thoroughly read about 11% of the newsletters they receive.<sup>5</sup>**

**Both print and email newsletters offer specific advantages and disadvantages. However, these two distribution options are not mutually exclusive. Often, the best approach combines the two.**

## **Print Newsletters**

Traditional print newsletters provide organizations with some key advantages over email messages, such as:

- **Reliable delivery.** Physical newsletters are never blocked or caught in spam filters, subject to faulty connections, email authentication or quirky webmail services.
- **Greater perceived value.** Today, fewer companies are willing to invest the time and effort that goes into printing a newsletter, yet recipients understand the investments made to send them a great newsletter.
- **Stickiness.** Print newsletters have great “hang time” and are more likely to be passed around to other people. Pass-along readership can be as high as four-to-one.<sup>6</sup>
- **Convenience.** Arriving at a subscriber’s doorstep or office, printed newsletters come with the convenience and comfort of reading at one’s leisure, without the need to go online and with the ability to mark pages for reference or highlight interesting content.

## **Email Newsletters**

While technology makes it easier to communicate with clients more frequently via email, churning out weekly email newsletters can be risky and unnecessary. Without consistent, high-quality content, recipients will delete the message on arrival or open it long enough to find the unsubscribe link.

Still, email marketing continues to deliver convincing results, returning \$43.62 for every dollar spent in 2009.<sup>7</sup> According to the Direct Marketing Association, the effectiveness of the platform is simple: it is permission-based and relevant to the reader. Most importantly, it is inexpensive to produce.

In “The Power of Personalization: The Impact + Influence of Individualized Content Delivery,”<sup>8</sup> more than half (52%) of the executive marketers surveyed view email campaigns as the number one chance to personalize their customer interactions, and most (66.1%) use personalized emails in their marketing campaigns.

When tech resources are scarce, small businesses and nonprofits turn to ready-made templates from online newsletter services like Constant Contact and MailChimp that provide pre-designed templates, along with distribution and analytical tools.

## E-Newsletter Basics

**Federal regulations require that email newsletters include the CAN-SPAM Compliant Footer with the company's physical address and contact information, along with links to the sender's privacy policy and opt-out instructions.**

As a best practice, e-newsletters should arrive in the email body copy as either plain text or HTML, not as an attachment. Naturally, these emails should also have an enticing subject line that encourages recipients to open the message.

- Recent research by Jupiter Research shows that when an organization includes its name in the subject line, open rates increase by as much as 60% over non-branded subject lines.<sup>9</sup>
- The results also found that 70% of marketers personalize email campaigns by including the recipient's name in the body of the email (if the subscriber knows the company name or brand) to increase open rates and click-throughs.
- Adding a phrase like, "If you are having trouble viewing this email, please visit this link," improves email newsletter stats as well, especially for mobile subscribers since every mobile service provider handles HTML code differently.

Federal regulations require that email newsletters include the CAN-SPAM Compliant Footer with the company's physical address and contact information, along with links to the sender's privacy policy and opt-out instructions.

### Readers respond to e-newsletters that contain:

- A memorable subject line that speaks to their curiosity
- Smooth, easy-to-read fonts
- Short indexes, short articles and visual "anchors" for quick skimming
- Relevant, useful information
- A respect for their privacy

## Getting the Best of Both Worlds

Regardless of whether you choose print or email distribution of your newsletters, you can combine the benefits of both print and email.

Many organizations convert traditional printed newsletters into PDF files for website visitors to download. Others offer a shorter email digest as an extension of their larger print publication.

The email digest invites subscribers to view the latest newsletter through concise and informative headlines and brief, enticing introductions to articles in the message body. Readers who want more substantive information on one or more of the stories can click to view the full online version.

# *Building Your Mailing List*

**Many marketers choose the double opt-in method when building their email list as the extra confirmation step shows that the recipient is more committed to receiving their publications.**

**Building your mailing list can be an art form in itself. This section offers several ways you can build your list whether you use print or electronic distribution.**

Data gathered from current and prospective customers, donors or membership rosters make up subscriber mailing lists for print newsletters. You can gather information at the point of first contact, at the point of sale, or after the sale through customer surveys and feedback.

Recipients of email newsletters either sign up through a single or double opt-in method. Using the single opt-in, readers simply give their name and email address before pushing the “Subscribe” button on a web form.

Double opt-in requires the user to confirm his or her email address by clicking a link in an automatic reply message that is emailed to them once they hit the “Subscribe” button. If the recipient does not respond to the confirmation message, the address is not added to the mailing list.

Many marketers choose the double opt-in method when building their email list. The extra confirmation step shows that the recipient is more committed to receiving their publications.

## **Building Your List Through a Blog**

Thanks to the explosive growth of online publishing, more and more people rely on well-written, focused and frequently updated blogs to get information and news. Yet, regardless of how much an audience interacts with blog posts, those who post comments are not required to share much information with the author. Those who provide their email address are not giving the blogger explicit permission to send them unsolicited emails.

To turn blog readers into newsletter subscribers, use a newsletter sign-up plugin to give fans a way to opt-in to your mailing list.

Publishing bait pieces on your blog that encourage readers to subscribe to your newsletter can also be highly effective, as can archiving your past newsletters so prospective subscribers can see what they’ll be getting.



## More Tips for Building Your List

- Add a sign-up form on your website.
- Include opt-in links or forms on social media profile pages, splash pages or online advertisements.
- Collect customer information from sales data or prospective customer inquiries.
- Use only a few fields in sign-up forms to collect the most important information from readers, such as name, email address and city/town.
- Include a “Recommend to your friends” field to reach more subscribers.

## Segmenting Your List

You may determine that you have more than one audience for your message. For example, your organization may serve two vastly different markets.

Because your audience will identify with information that is most relevant to them, you may decide to build and maintain more than one mailing list or to segment a single list by whatever characterization applies to that audience.

### Segmenting your list is a decision best made early on because:

- It is likely to affect what information you want to collect when new subscribers sign up for your newsletter.
- It will also likely affect how you collect and store the information you gather. For example, you may need to use multiple sign-up forms or different auto-responder messages for each specific audience.
- Segmenting your list after it is already well developed can pose unexpected technical challenges.

**Segmenting your mailing list can be very beneficial when you want to reach just a subset of your audience with a special message or announcement that applies only to them.**

# Getting Down to Business: Content

**Regardless of publishing format, readers respond better to newsletters that offer content that is timely, trustworthy and relevant—not boring or blatantly self-promotional.**

**While custom content marketing now accounts for a third of promotional budgets, the biggest challenge for publishers is crafting the right message for the targeted audience.**

Each newsletter issue should include a core list of sections and categories with visual cues to help readers scan to find topics of special interest. Sections vary depending on the campaign goals; what works for one organization will not always work for another.

A spa customer, for example, anticipates receiving a new deal or rotating monthly specials to save and share with friends. Subscribers to a medical practice newsletter, on the other hand, prefer to receive health-related features they can forward to others on their contact list.

Regardless of publishing format, readers respond better to newsletters that offer content that is timely, trustworthy and relevant—not boring or blatantly self-promotional.

**According to Junta42 research,<sup>10</sup> the most memorable newsletter content:**

- Tells a story with a beginning, middle and end
- in a conversational tone that speaks to the audience from their perspective,
- engages them where they are, and
- delivers trusted information from a trusted source.

## Newsletter Content Basics

Printed newsletters typically include an inside cover “teaser” that gives readers a hint about what’s inside; a letter from the editor, publisher or chairperson; photos and graphics to break up copy; a limited number of long articles/features; and a call to action.

Most e-newsletters contain from three to five articles, each no longer than 300 words, presented in a simple design with few graphics or photo elements and a call to action link. Longer (and less frequent but more comprehensive) e-zines may also be published, as well as e-newsletters that contain a single article. Choices abound.

Readers—especially of print newsletters—also expect to find contact information for the newsletter editorial staff and the publishing organization.

**Map your newsletter calendar against the yearly calendar of holidays, season changes and other events, and around topics that coincide with your organization's annual schedule when planning the editorial copy.**

## Planning Content with a Purpose

Map your newsletter calendar against the yearly calendar of holidays, season changes and other events, and around topics that coincide with your organization's annual schedule when planning the editorial copy.

Keep a tickler file of story ideas, people to interview, and other information of interest to readers to help generate topics for standing sections, like "Monthly Tips," "Top Ten Lists" or "An Interview with..." Articles found on the Internet are typically not public domain and often require the author's permission to reprint all or a portion of the information.

Finally, add a newsletter archive section on your company's website to support your industry expertise, enhance search engine optimization, and encourage additional newsletter sign-ups.

## Keeping It Simple

Keeping a newsletter simple makes it easier to consume. Ways to keep things simple include the following:

- **Avoid jokes, cartoons or obscure facts.** If information is irrelevant to your newsletter's objective, leave it out. Instead, use empty space to summarize information in a previous issue or preview a topic planned for a future issue.
- **Give your readers breathing room.** Rather than cramming your publication with pages and pages of text, use charts, graphs, subtitles, bulleted sidebars, illustrations, or pictures with long articles.
- **Edit, edit and edit again.** Your readers will be the first to find grammatical errors or misspellings, and the costly mistakes can affect circulation rates and an organization's reputation. Thorough link testing is critical for email newsletters.

## Measuring Your Message

**Whether you distribute your newsletters online or in print, metrics are important in determining the effectiveness of your campaign and in developing information about the return on your investment.**

E-newsletter open rates and click-through statistics show what's working, what's not, and where to adjust subject lines, call-to-action links, and delivery dates and times. Likewise, opt-out rates and spam reports will tell you if your newsletter (or its list) is totally missing the mark.



Increased website visits and telephone or email inquiries provide good metrics for print newsletters. When subscribers respond to a publication by donating, taking advantage of special offers, or contacting a company for more information, messages are getting through to readers.

Survey audiences frequently, and gauge readership's satisfaction, engagement and overall experience with your publication. For electronic newsletters, you can include polls directly in your email, on your blog, or on your website to get valuable feedback. For printed publications, you can include an insert or a perforated page that allows readers to provide feedback by return mail. Pre-paid postage will increase your survey return rate.

## *When to Hire a Pro*

**As an extension of your organization's brand, reputation, mission and purpose, newsletters published without sufficient resources and sound objectives are not only a waste of time, but also have the potential to damage your organization's image.**

**In the end, regardless of the communication tool used to connect with existing and prospective clients and donors, message quality is paramount. Publishing a mediocre newsletter and sending it to an uninterested audience may yield short-term benefits, but not long-lasting and trusted relationships.**

As an extension of your organization's brand, reputation, mission and purpose, newsletters published without sufficient resources and sound objectives not only waste time and money, but may also damage your organization's image.

**Before you decide to publish a newsletter, consider these questions:**

- Who is going to manage and organize the newsletter?
- How much time will it take to create custom content in-house?
- What other tasks may be affected as a trade-off for producing a newsletter?
- What software or email service will you use to manage the subscriber list and its distribution?
- Who will write the articles? Will you buy content and artwork or pay freelancers?

For larger companies and nonprofits with marketing departments, publishing a newsletter in-house is often manageable. Smaller organizations where staff members wear many hats face the challenges of finding the time and resources to create a professional publication on a consistent basis.

## Choosing a Partner

If your organization lacks the in-house resources to produce a newsletter with quality content and attractive graphic design, look for a firm with:

- Access to high-quality writers
- Custom design capabilities
- Expertise in print and online production
- Experience in publishing newsletters that work
- Great service to keep your newsletter on schedule

## Conclusion

**When handled properly, newsletters can build long-term relationships with customers, clients or donors. By conveying meaningful messages that resonate with your subscribers, newsletter readers are likely to reward your efforts with word-of-mouth promotion and loyalty.**

When integrated into your overall marketing plan, a professionally produced newsletter—either in print or distributed via email—gives your audience value by sharing useful, relevant information that might not easily be found elsewhere.

With smart planning and a consistent publishing schedule, a newsletter can be an important part of a content marketing program and help establish your organization as a thought leader.

## *About the Author*



**Mistina Picciano** offers more than 15 years of experience in marketing and corporate communications. As president and founder of Market it Write, she leads an integrated copywriting agency that positions B2B clients as industry leaders.

In a former life, she managed one of “America’s Greatest Brands” as vice president of communications at Guardsmark. Mistina fueled the firm’s print-based content marketing campaign for nearly a decade before taking the entrepreneurial plunge in 2004.

As a public speaker, Mistina educates business owners on improving communications and creating integrated marketing systems. She is a former board member of New York Women in Communications (NYWICI), where she still maintains active membership. Other professional affiliations include the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), ASIS International and the Mystery Writers of America.

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