

Designing and Producing Your Newsletter

Newsletter Definition

According to *Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, a newsletter is "A printed sheet, pamphlet, or small newspaper containing news or information of interest chiefly to a special group."

Newsletter Traits

- Fast read—skimming common
- Specific information on a narrow topic
- Usually 8.5 x 11 inches
- Portable
- Relatively short articles
- Four to twelve pages
- Regular publishing schedule: weekly, monthly, quarterly
- A "perfect" newsletter does not exist: finding what works best for your audience is the goal

Conduct a Pre-Publication Analysis

- Goal analysis: write down your answers to the following questions. If you don't know the answers, find out. If you can't find out, consider whether you should be producing a newsletter in the first place.
 - I. What is the purpose of the newsletter?
 - Publisher's viewpoint:
 - Why is the publisher producing it?
 - What is the primary message?
 - What are the secondary messages?
 - What does the publisher hope to gain from producing this newsletter?
 - Reader's viewpoint:
 - Why would the reader read it?
 - How will the reader benefit from this newsletter?
 - II. Who is the reader?
 - What are the readership demographics?

age	geographic area	profession/occupation
education level	income	religion
ethnic background	political viewpoint	socioeconomic class
gender	others...	
 - Are there any special conditions or situations under which the reader would use this information?
 - Where will the reader most likely read this newsletter—at work, at home, somewhere else?
 - Is the reader reading for fun, profit, self-improvement, or something else?
 - What other competing publications does the reader read?
 - What other general interest publications does the reader read?
- Budget analysis: what are the budgets for the following?
 - initial design
 - editorial (in-house and contractors)
 - desktop publishing production (in-house and contractors)
 - photo/illustrations (custom and stock)
 - printing (prepress, printing, collating, binding, shipping)
 - distribution (mailing lists, collating and mailing, postage)

Define Your Editorial Content

- Write down your answers to these questions:
 - What kind of information will you publish?
 - What kind of information *won't* you publish? For example, if you want your newsletter to have substance and you don't want it to be an "announcement sheet," you should set a policy up-front that you will not publish announcements like job changes, promotions, etc.

- Who/what will be your sources of information?
- Will you have regular departments and columns?
- What will be the typical number and length of stories for each issue? Will the stories be short and chatty or longer and in-depth?
- Summarize all of this in a statement of purpose—if you can't tell what it's all about in a short, concise statement, you have an unworkable product. Examples of statements of purpose follow:
 - *Insurance Focus* is a quarterly publication covering miscellaneous community association insurance news and information.
 - *Government Relations Report* is a bimonthly publication covering federal and state legislative and regulatory news.
- Remember that even though design is important, the content is even more important. Further, the content will drive your design.

Choose a Format

- Determine the page size: most newsletters are 8.5 x 11 inches.
- Decide how many pages the newsletter will be; multiples of four are most efficient.
- Determine the number of columns on each page: one, two, or three columns are the most common. Any more than three columns on a 8.5 x 11 sheet of paper can look crowded and won't leave enough "white space," or open areas on the page.
- Determine the grid: a grid is an arrangement of guides that provide an underlying structure for columns and page elements. The grid lines do not print out on the final product. The grid can be from one to seven columns, and the number of columns in the grid doesn't have to equal the number of columns in the layout. You can use a five-column grid to produce a two-column newsletter; one column of the grid (the farthest left or the farthest right) is left open and is used as white space or for photos, pull quotes, or anything else that would stick out to grab readers' attention.
- Determine the width of the columns, the width of the margins, and the space between margins.
- Determine if your text will be justified or ragged right.
- Decide how you will indicate the beginning of a new paragraph: by a space before it or by indenting it (but not both).
- Consider the use of color. Will your publication be full color (four-color, using the four process colors: cyan, magenta, yellow, and black) or will it be one-, two-, or three-color, using spot colors (color applied to certain elements of a page: usually specified as a Pantone color, or PMS color)?
- Remember the inside of the newsletter: the pages will be facing each other, so the layout must work on both the left and right pages. You can design left and right pages, or you can use one basic layout for both.
- Decide what the headers and folios (page numbers) will look like, and remember that these can be design elements.
- Consider if and how you will use the following in your format: photos; rules; screens; bleeds; white space; reversed type; a table of contents (not needed in general); and graphic elements, such as clip art and dingbats.

Design Your Nameplate

- The nameplate is the area on the front cover that includes any or all of the following:
 - name of the newsletter
 - tagline (a line that summarizes the publication or mentions the publisher or audience)
 - date
 - volume
 - issue number
 - organizational logo
- When designing the nameplate, consider the following suggestions:
 - emphasize the most important word in the title
 - pick an alignment (left, centered, or right) for the title and add the other elements around that
 - separate items logically, i.e., group the date, volume, and issue number together
 - choose an appropriate typeface (see below)

- consider the use of color
- consider the use of contrast by reversing out the text (print the text in white over a darker background)

Choose a Typeface

- Generally speaking, use a serif typeface (one that has short lines at the end of letter strokes, like the Times Roman used here) for the body and a sans serif typeface (one without serifs, like the Arial used here) for the headlines and subheads. Serifs guide the readers' eyes, making it easier to read.
- A 10 point typeface is usually good for body text, and a 20–30 point typeface is good for headlines.
- The leading (the space between lines of type, pronounced “leading”) should be at least two points larger than the body type. A typical newsletter body type is Times Roman 10/12 (the first number, 10, represents the point size, and the second number, 12, represents the leading). The leading for the headline will vary, depending on the typeface and the desired look.
- A good rule of thumb is to pick one basic type family for the body and one basic type family for the heads and subheads and stick with them—be consistent throughout your newsletter.
- Consider your audience when you're choosing your typeface. For instance, older readers will need a larger body type than younger readers.
- Also consider what you're trying to convey—each typeface has its own personality.

Create a Style Sheet

- A style sheet is a collection of style and formatting commands that are applied to paragraphs by choosing a name from a menu. Below are the common items found on style sheets—your publication may not have all of these features, or it may have even more.
 - Body text
 - Bulleted lists
 - Bylines
 - Captions
 - Column headlines
 - Credit blocks
 - Department headlines
 - First paragraph drops caps
 - Headlines
 - Jump lines
 - Pull quotes
 - Subheads

Design Your Masthead

- The masthead, not to be confused with the nameplate, is the block of text identifying the publication, staff, address, etc.
- All mastheads should have the publication name, statement of purpose, address, phone number, fax number, email address, internet address, and the name of at least one person for readers to contact. Beyond that, it's up to you to determine what is appropriate for your publication. You could include the date, volume, issue number, and a disclaimer of your own choosing.

Create a Prototype

- Once you have a general idea of the layout and all the details that go into it, it's a good idea to create a prototype issue, using fake photos and art and dummy text that marks every 25th word with the word count.
- Play “what if” at this stage. “What if” we used one big photo on the front to draw the reader in? Will this detract from the copy or will it enhance it? “What if” we have a list of short items that need to be grouped together? Where will that fit? This experimental version of your newsletter will help you find and solve design problems before you're under a time deadline with the “real thing.”

Do an Issue

- Compile all of your stories, photos, and art.
- Sketch out the issue on paper. You'll know how many words will fit where from your prototype, where your word count is indicated.
- Open up the computer file and start laying it out. Sometimes where you start is dictated by the material you already have; otherwise, you can start where you like.
- Pay attention to typesetting details: use only one space after a period, use em dashes (— instead of two dashes) and en dashes (– to separate numbers), use smart quotes (“ ” instead of " "), etc.
- Proofread and edit your publication yourself, and have at least one other person do the same.
- Prepare the computer file and dummy (a mock-up of the printed piece showing colors and folds) for the printer.

Work With Your Printer From the Beginning

- Know what printer you'll be using and have a conversation with the printer's rep at the beginning of the process. If you don't have an established relationship with a printer, shop around and get bids for your print job. You'll need to know most of the details of your publication, such as the page size, the number of colors, the quantity, folds, etc., before you get bids, but pick a printer as early in the process as possible.
- You'll need to resolve the following issues up-front:
 - Who will be scanning the photos and line art: you or the printer?
 - How will the printer take your work: on a disk or as camera-ready art?
 - How many days will the printer need to print the job?

Establish a Readership Survey Schedule

- As with any publication, a newsletter must remain interesting and relevant in order for it to be successful. Plan periodic surveys of your readership, either within the publication itself or via a separate mailing, to all or a random sample of your database.
- The survey should be mainly multiple choice, to make it easy for the readers to fill out. When providing a scale, such as from “very dissatisfied” to “very satisfied,” only give an even number of choices, so that readers must make a judgment one way or the other. Include a few open-ended questions for those who wish to provide more detail.

Revise and Improve Your Newsletter

- Remember that a “perfect” newsletter does not exist—the trick is to figure out what works best for your audience. Each edition of your newsletter will get better, and you'll be providing an improved product for your readers each issue.

© Shannon R. GaNun 1998