

Getting the Word Out: Writing Newsletters that Rock

By Julie Belding

Newsletters need no explanation. We all receive them, read them, and discard them. Someone has defined a newsletter as “a written communication intended to promote a cause, to advance the objectives of an organisation, or just to maintain communication among family and friends.” If your task is to produce a newsletter, you probably do all three – you have a cause to promote, a voluntary organisation to publicise, and a raft of friends you want to keep in touch with.

Traditionally newsletters were printed documents, but today email newsletters have become increasingly common. Notice I didn’t say increasingly “popular.” There are many people, including computer users, who would still far rather read a piece of paper than get their information off a screen. Perhaps you are one of those people. But let’s face it – digital media have huge advantages over the traditional kind, and they’re here to stay. In this age of cost-cutting and economising, what communicator could resist using an electronic broadsheet that costs practically nothing to send out, which can be emailed to hundreds of people at the same time (or simply posted to a website) and which reaches the recipients within seconds?

Today when nearly everyone has a computer, you might wonder why anyone would still want to send out a printed document. But I suspect paper newsletters will be around for a few years yet, especially those that target older readers.

Whether we print our newsletters or dispatch them online, however, we must realize we have plenty of competition out there. What can we do to make ours stand out from the rest? If our printed newsletter is lying on a coffee table or desk along with half a dozen others, what could make a potential reader want to pick it up first? Or if we send out a digital newsletter, how can we ensure recipients regard it differently from the spam that’s already clogging their Inbox?

Obviously our newsletter has to *look good*, and so a few design skills are needed. Most of you are good at using graphics, but if you’re a little weak in this area, do all you can to improve your competency. Get a computer guru to teach you if necessary. Read a book on the subject. With a little help you can soon learn to create a document that *looks* attractive even from a distance.

We’re agreed appearance is important. But it’s even more important to create compelling copy. It is not enough to pull information together and send it out. Our newsletter has to be riveting enough that readers will stay with us from the first word to the last (not something we can always take for granted.) Will each of our newsletters be that good? Probably not. But it’s a goal. Good writing is an art we can learn, and as long as we’re breathing there’s room for improvement.

Every article in our newsletter should answer the question: *What’s In It For the Reader?* (WIIFR) With every story we should ask ourselves, why would a reader want to keep reading? As we write we need to keep our “typical reader” firmly in mind. What is their age group, their

demographic, and their likely interests? Write every article with that person in mind. Meet a need! Everyone's busy, and nobody is going to read our newsletter simply because they have a spare hour and nothing better to do. Most people (except possibly our mother) will not read our newsletter out of duty or blind loyalty. They will read it because it has something to offer them that they actually want or need. This could be as simple as a desire for information, or a need for encouragement. Supplying information that people can *use* is also the best way to build trust with those who may eventually want to become more involved in our organisation. *Useful, brief, encouraging and entertaining* content is what keeps busy people subscribing.

So let's get down to the nitty gritty. What are some do's and in regard to writing a newsletter? Below are ten guidelines to help you become more successful at it. I'm assuming you're all email communicators by now, but most of these guidelines apply to printed documents as well. The following points will be amplified in our workshop and in those two hours we'll include some tips on good writing (which we don't have room to include here), we'll discuss five sure-fire ways to annoy people with our email newsletter, and we'll tackle some practical exercises.

How to Produce a Brilliant Newsletter

First, keep it *brief and concise*. Have you noticed how precious time has become these days? No one likes a newsletter that drivels on and on. A bright, breezy two-page letter, with plenty of white space and a few bold graphics, which arrives punctually in the Inbox every month, is a joy to receive. It won't get relegated to the ever-growing "To Read Later" folder (which – let's be honest – most people never get around to revisiting.) Better a two-pager, once a month, than five pages four times a year. It keeps you in the frame, without making yourself a nuisance.

But, you protest, there's so much going on! I couldn't get it all into two pages and still include the graphics and the white space. *Yes you can!* Especially if you use bullet points and sub-headings. These devices also make your letter easy to *scan*, which is a bonus. (Most people don't read online – they scan.) You can always provide links to your website for extra information.

Second, keep it *new*. Your readers won't waste time reading something they already know, so make it "news they can use."

Third, keep it *personal*: Some database programs enable you to send out a bulk email that looks as if each email is personally addressed to an individual. So each letter starts off "Dear John" or "Dear Maria." That's the ideal set-up. But for most of us, our systems are not that sophisticated. We might use the "blind cc" feature (and we should) but our newsletters will still look like bulk emails. There are ways, however, to make them *sound* more like letters from friend to friend. Let your personality shine through. Always include a bit of *you* in the newsletter, whether it's humour, personal details, personal anecdotes, or personal views.

Fourth, *know your readers*. We've already talked about doing a profile of your target readership. If your newsletter goes out to a youth group, you probably already have a good idea

of what makes them tick, or you wouldn't be in the job. Write to them as if you were chatting with them in the street. By all means tell them what God's been doing in your own life, but never preach!

Fifth, *Subject is Headline*: The subject line of an email newsletter is like a front-page headline in a newspaper. You need to draw the reader in, so make it engaging and relevant (maybe promise a benefit) but no more than 25 characters so your reader can see it all before opening the email.

Sixth, *open well*. Lead in with a personal story, one that will keep your subscribers riveted to your letter while the rest of their mail goes unread. An arresting opening paragraph is vital.

Seventh, write *strong, intriguing headlines and subheadings*. It's best to save the headline writing for last. The headline should pull the reader into the article.

Eighth, *make it easy to unsubscribe*: It may seem paradoxical, but if your UNSUBSCRIBE is obvious, your readers will feel safe and can then appreciate the content. To many people, the ease of unsubscribing is an indicator of the integrity of your organisation.

Ninth, before you send, give it the once-over in terms of *appearance*. Have you included a few photos and/or some clip art? At the same time, have you included enough *white space*? If your page is too busy, you'll lose your readers. One expert recommends that you give them a chance to absorb valuable information by dedicating about 30% of your screen to white space.

And tenth, *polish it*. Proofread, proofread, proofread. There's no excuse for avoidable errors in spelling and punctuation, or missed-out words. Ask someone else to go over it with a toothcomb before you send it out. It's amazing the mistakes a second pair of eyes can spot. Check for conciseness. Delete all your *very's*, most of your *that's* and every other superfluous word.

Where to Get Ideas for your Newsletter

It's the last day of the month, your mind's a blank, and you need to send out your regular two-page newsletter by 5pm tomorrow. Panic not! Here are five tips to get you going.

1. Think timely. Is there something going on in the world that you could comment on, and somehow tie in with your main purpose? Remember: WIIFR. (See above).
2. Answer Reader Questions. If you get lots of questions from readers this can make for a great article. (Or just invent some! It's a creative way to get information across.)
3. Invite a "guest writer." In a two-page newsletter there won't be room for long articles, and besides, you need it by tomorrow lunchtime. Most intelligent people, even if they're busy, can get 200-300 words to you within twenty-four hours. In fact, invite two people, in case one can't deliver. If both do, you've got a ready-made article for *next* month. Ask for a photo as well.
4. Interview an expert, over the phone. Ask them to email you a personal photo, and hey! You've just filled half a page or more!

5. Offer five top tips on a certain subject. That's easier than writing a real article.
6. Review a book you've read recently.
7. When all else fails, borrow an article from the Internet.

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Julie Belding is a free-lance editor and writer, and formerly editor of *The NZ Baptist* newspaper and *DayStar* magazine. She currently edits *LIFT*, the quarterly magazine of her church. A co-director of DayStar Books (a new publishing company) and a vice-president of the Australasian Religious Press Association, she is also currently serving as president of the Baptist Women's Union of the South West Pacific. Julie lives with her husband Russell in Auckland, New Zealand. They have two adult children and four young grandchildren.