How to create a newsletter

Why?

Creating a newsletter is a valuable way of communicating with a specific audience group. However, its production does take time, energy and resources so it’s important to be clear about who you’re communicating to, what you want to achieve and the reason for your reader to read it.

A good starting point is to write a paragraph on your mission for the newsletter. Answering the questions below will help you.

Publisher’s point of view:
• What am I trying to achieve with the newsletter?
• What is the primary/secondary message?

Reader’s point of view:
• What information do they want to see?
• How will they benefit from this newsletter?

Key decisions

Establishing consistency in terms of the frequency of publication, methods of acquiring it and the format, layout and type of content will help your newsletter be seen as a trusted source of information.

Before beginning production you’ll need to identify:
• the budget
• how often you can produce it
• who is going to write it
• who is going to design it
• how it is going to be distributed.

Budget

The first thing to work out is how much you can afford to spend on your newsletter because this will affect every other decision. The good thing about newsletters is that an effective one can still be produced with a very small budget.

Frequency

It should be regular but the frequency will depend on resources—both budget and staff to produce it. Monthly or every two months would be ideal and having it ready for either the very start or the very end of the month gives readers an idea of when to expect it.

Content

There will need to be an editor for the newsletter—someone who takes overall responsibility. However, it can be a lot for one person to write. Try to get contributions from several people; enrol colleagues, volunteers, members of the community and
local businesses to help write articles. Be specific about what you want from them, give them plenty of time but also give a clear deadline. Make sure their contributions are then edited to ensure they are consistent with the overarching message of the newsletter.

**Design**

Will you be doing this in-house? In this case you’ll need someone with an eye for design and access to a relevant software package. Microsoft publisher offers a good range of newsletter templates.

If you decide you have the budget to use a designer (note that printers often have in-house designers that are very good but tend to be cheaper than agencies), then factor in extra time to sign off a design template for the first newsletter, which can be used for all that follow.

For more information see ‘Professional publications: introducing the design and print production process’ in this series.

**Distribution**

There are two main formats by which your audience could receive your newsletter:
- electronic ‘soft’ copy (emailed pdf)
- paper ‘hard’ copy (printed copy, either printed professionally or on a deskjet depending on quantity).

**Sending a soft copy**

If you’ve chosen to distribute the newsletter via email you’ll need to create a mailing list in Outlook with the email addresses for everyone who will receive it. Keep your mailing list in good shape and work on expanding it. Ideally readers should ‘opt in’ to say they’d like to receive your newsletter, but there absolutely must be a method of ‘opting out’ included in each email you send.

N.B. when emailing make sure all the addresses are blind copied (in the bcc section).

**Sending hard copies**

Will you be posting the newsletter (this is likely to depend on budget)? If so carefully construct a mailing list. Using Excel or Access makes it much easier to manipulate the data than a list of addresses saved in a Word document. Keep your mailing list in good shape and work on expanding it. Consider printing enough copies to make them more widely available as well; it’s possible to distribute them around the community – in places such as town halls, sports centres and libraries – for nothing more than the cost of the print.

Once you’ve made these fundamental decisions about your newsletter you can get down to the detail of producing your first issue.
Production schedule

Create a production schedule to help you deliver the newsletter on time. To create a schedule it’s normally easiest to work backwards – so, for example, if you know when you want your newsletter to be published, working out how long it will take to print gives you your deadline for sign off. Allow plenty of time to produce your first edition as this always takes longer, but it does becomes much quicker and easier the more issues you produce. An example schedule follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Deadline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Source stories/ approach contributors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Send an email round advising of the copy deadline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy deadline for contributors</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy edited and final ready to be formatted</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deadline for any photos (gain necessary permissions)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Copy formatted into the template</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter proofread</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amends returned to designer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final proofread</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newsletter to print</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Publication date</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Choosing a structure/ format

Aim for varied content that includes different types of articles to keep your reader’s attention. Sections that encourage a reader response – such as a reader question page or competition – tend to increase popularity.

For example, your newsletter could include:

- editor’s introduction
- articles from community figures
- the big issues facing the community
- features on events held
- campaign updates
- dates for the diary
- successes
- requests for help (i.e. volunteers)
- useful information – local contacts/ local groups
- Q&A
- letters to the editor
- sources for more information.

Four pages is a fairly standard length for a newsletter. It can help to sketch out a page plan to help you visualise what content could go where, and how all your different sections best fit together.
Developing content

Things to consider when developing the content:
• Select a title that helps to communicate the purpose of the newsletter.
• Remember what you are trying to achieve and make sure each article works towards achieving this.
• Think about the tone of the newsletter. An editor’s letter will help set this. One tip is to have an individual in your head that represents your target audience and write as if you were talking to that one person.
• Only run items that won’t be out of date in a month (or however long it takes to produce the newsletter).
• Bear your word count in mind from the outset (this is dictated by the template to a large degree).

Top writing tips:
• refer to house style guidelines
• keep it short and to the point
• always give articles a heading
• always give pictures a caption
• find a local angle for your readers
• provide a list of URLs where readers can find out more
• always get someone else to proofread the content
• encourage a reader response.

Using photos:
• Take a camera along to any event – images and photographs always make a newsletter more appealing to the reader.
• Always seek permission from individuals before publishing their photo.

Designing the template

Design, in visual terms, is to do with making your information as engaging, distinct and as accessible for your audience as possible.

Top layout tips:
• Decide on a size, and how many articles can comfortably fit on a side.
• Allow room for photographs and other visuals.
• Use headers/ sub-headers/ pull-out quotes from the body of the text to provide different levels of information to different people.
• Make images quite big (ideally across two columns) so that they stand out.
• Align columns to the left. The ragged line on the right makes it easier for the eye to read.
Design a striking header that will be used on every issue.

Always use a catchy headline.

Include a footer with the newsletter title, publication month and issue.

Boxing off sections like the contents makes it easier to read.

Always give pictures a caption.

Use sub-headers for different articles.

Include contact details and website. Also add registration details.

An exciting headline

Grapevine

THE CITIZEN'S STAFF NEWSLETTER

Contents

Umbra Caesar

Choose a 2 or 3 column grid.