Is *Your* NEWSLETTER DOOMED To *Fail?*

Not if you follow these three crucial steps.

BY LISA A. BEACH

Do you publish a newsletter for your volunteers, members, or donors? If not, you're missing the benefits of a powerful tool. An effective newsletter can help you motivate volunteers, recruit new members, recognize donors, communicate to board members, enhance your organization's image, and educate the community.

But just what does it take to produce an effective newsletter? In general, it's a combination of two major elements: interesting content and an eye-appealing design. However, an effective newsletter really starts in the planning stages.

In the Beginning . . .

Effective newsletters take shape before you produce that first issue. During this pre-production phase, you need to take the time to determine your newsletter's goals, objectives, and key audiences. (In fact, even if you already publish a newsletter, it's never too late to go back to the basics.) Without such a plan, your efforts will be scattered and unfocused. Remember, every planning decision you make affects your content and design, as well as your choices about printing and distribution.

Here are three steps to help you jumpstart (or re-visit) the planning stage and map out an effective newsletter strategy:

1. Establish clear-cut goals for your newsletter. Your goals will guide your content, design, and budget, so choose them carefully. Don't try to accomplish too much with one newsletter. Aim for two or three major goals. Any more than that and your newsletter will lack focus.

Examples of Newsletter Goals:

- To recruit new volunteers.
- To increase awareness of our organization in the community.
- To raise money from existing and potential donors.
- To motivate current volunteers, committees, and board members.
- To inform clients about existing and new programs and services.

2. Determine measurable objectives. Your objectives spell out the results you want your newsletter to yield for your organization and the benefits you want your readers to receive. Your objectives should be specific and measurable. Otherwise, you'll have no way to measure your newsletter's success or failure in meeting your goals.

Examples of Objectives:

- To increase our current volunteer base by 25%.
- To stimulate enough interest in our organization that we receive at least five new inquiries each week about our programs.
- To diversify our funding sources by adding at least one major donor to each of the following categories: capital campaign, special event sponsor, corporate partners.
- To increase the effectiveness of current volunteers, committees, and board members in ways that save both staff and volunteer time.
- To increase participation in our new programs and services by 15% by December 31.

3. Define your target audience. If you remember nothing else, remember this: *Keep your target audience in mind during every step of the newsletter production cycle.* Plan your content with your audience in mind. Write with your audience in mind. Choose appropriate graphics with your audience in mind. If you're producing a newsletter to please a committee or board rather than to meet your audience's needs, you're setting your newsletter up to fail. (You're also wasting your time and money!)

With this key point in mind, a crucial step in producing an effective newsletter lies in defining your target audience. Ask yourself these questions:

- Who, specifically, are we trying to reach with our newsletter? (You should know some basic information about these people, such as their age, income, education, and attitudes.)
- What do the members of our target audience already know about our organization?
- What information gaps do we need to fill in for them?
- How can we convey our messages to them in an interesting and credible way?

Find out as much as you can about your audience to get a crystal clear picture of whom you're writing for and what they want and need to know. Your messages, writing style, and design might be very different for each audience.

FIND OUT AS MUCH AS YOU CAN ABOUT YOUR AUDIENCE.

For example, if you're communicating to potential volunteers, are you appealing to high school students or senior citizens? Are the members of your target audience lower, middle, or upper class? Are they blue collar workers or white collar professionals? Have they graduated from high school? Do they have advanced educational degrees? Have they supported your organization in the past? Would they be able to make a donation to your organization?

Don't try to appeal to too many audiences. Although you have many audiences with whom you need to communicate (such as staff, community leaders, government agencies, local businesses, religious groups, board members, and so on), you can find other ways to reach most of them. In your newsletter, aim for one or two key audiences, such as volunteers and donors. A one-size-fits-all newsletter won't work.

Time to Get Started...

Once you've tackled these planning basics, you'll be prepared to plunge into the actual production of your newsletter. Only then will you be on the right path to an effective newsletter. ■

Lisa Beach is the editor of Non-Profit Nuts & Bolts, *a monthly, quick-read newsletter for nonprofit executives. This digest-format newsletter helps nonprofit executives better manage their organizations and covers fundraising, public relations, volunteer management, special events, board relations, team building, meetings, committees, media relations, staff management, leadership, technology, and more. For a free sample copy, please contact Laurel Design Group (publisher), 100 Lower Park Rd., Mt. Laurel, NJ 08054, phone 609-778-4667, fax 609-222-0496.*

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