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How to Plan an Effective Newsletter

Looking for a communication powerhouse to help you reach your target audience on a consistent basis? Consider publishing a newsletter. It provides the perfect outlet for regular communication, whether you're trying to reach external audiences (like prospects and customers) or internal audiences (like employees). A newsletter helps you establish yourself as a valuable, credible source of information.

But what does it take to produce an effective newsletter? In a nutshell, it's a combination of two major elements: interesting content and an eye-appealing design. However, effective newsletters *really* begin in the planning stages. Before you write that first newsletter article or whip up a fancy design on your desktop publishing program, you need to spend time *planning* your newsletter. (To help you do this, we've included a newsletter planning worksheet on the next page.) Without such a plan, your efforts will be scattered and unfocused. Every planning decision you make directly affects your content and design, as well as your choices about printing and distribution.

To map out an effective newsletter strategy, you need to follow these four planning steps.

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 one or two major goals. Any more than that and your newsletter will lack focus. For example, do you want your newsletter to generate leads, increase sales, enhance your public image in the community or inform existing customers about new products and services?
2. **Determine measurable objectives.** Your objectives will outline the results your newsletter should yield for your company. The best objectives are specific and measurable because they enable you to measure your newsletter's success or failure in achieving your goals. For example, your objective could be to increase your current client base by 10% within six months, or to double the number of customers enrolled in your frequent buyer program 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 au-

dience in mind. Write with your audience in mind. Choose appropriate graphics with your audience in mind. If you're producing a newsletter to please your investors or a board of directors rather than to meet the needs of your audience, you're setting your newsletter up to fail. With this key point in mind, a crucial step in producing an effective newsletter lies in defining your target audience. Ask yourself these helpful questions: Who are we specifically trying to reach with our newsletter? What do the members of our target audience already know about our company? What information gaps do we need to fill in for them? How can we convey our messages to them in an interesting and credible manner?

For example, if you're communicating to potential customers, are you appealing to high school students or senior citizens? Are the members of your target audience lower, middle or upper class? Have they graduated from high school? Do they own their own business or work for someone else? Are they blue-collar workers or white-collar professionals?

Don't try to appeal to too many audiences. Aim for one or two key audiences, such as customers and prospects. Although you might have many audiences with whom you need to communicate, they each have very different information needs. A one-size-fits-all newsletter usually doesn't work.

4. **Outline your marketing plan.** A great newsletter (whether print or electronic) will flounder if you don't take the time to promote it and get it into the right hands. Of course, if you're distributing newsletters to an internal audience, this won't be much of an issue. But if you're targeting external audiences, consider a variety of methods to help publicize your newsletter. For example, include a "free subscription" form in your newsletter to garner new names once you begin publishing. Include a subscription sign-up form on your website. Send a free issue to prospects, with an invitation to join your mailing list. Get creative!

Now that you better understand what goes into an effective newsletter, you can begin to plan your own publication. Use the newsletter planning worksheet on the next page to help guide you in the process.

Newsletter Planning Worksheet

Use this form to help you plan every aspect of your newsletter, from content and design to printing and distribution.

Name: *(Newsletter name should build on its content, publisher or audience.)*

Subtitle: *(Make newsletter's goal, audience and/or publisher more clear.)*

Goals: *(Limit your newsletter's major goals to one or two.)*

Objectives: *(Make objectives specific and measurable.)*

Key Audiences: *(Limit key audiences to one or two to keep newsletter focused.)*

Outline Content: _____

Distribution: *(How will you deliver the newsletter to your readers?)* First class U.S. mail Bulk rate
 Fax Hand-deliver E-mail Other: _____

Quantity: *(How many newsletters will you distribute?)*

Frequency: *(How often will you produce the newsletter?)* Weekly Bi-Weekly Monthly
 Bi-Monthly Quarterly Other: _____

Length: *(How many pages will the newsletter be?)*

2 4 8 12 Other: _____

Printing: *(How will you produce the newsletter for distribution?)* Photocopy Professionally print
 Electronically create Other: _____

Additional Design Considerations:

Ink Color(s): _____

Paper Color: _____

Paper Weight: _____

Paper size: _____

Folding required: _____

Binding required: _____

For print newsletters, will they be self-mailers or will they be inserted in envelopes? _____

Other: _____

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