

Does your company newsletter 'do the business' or put your readers to sleep?

Wakey wakey...

"Our financial results were as expected. Here's the MD shaking hands with..... We've improved the Hokey Cokey 2000 model, which now has three green buttons instead of two. Here's the MD shaking hands with..... Oh, and Cheryl in Accounts is having a baby."

Sad, isn't it? Yet too many otherwise competent, successful, exciting organisations think that their staff, suppliers, shareholders and customers are impressed by drivel. On the contrary, it brands them as dull, mundane, mediocre and out-of-touch. Make no mistake; a poor newsletter can actually damage your business!

We all know that open, regular communication can foster teamwork, co-operation, efficiency, customer satisfaction and profit - but a lack of vision or priority will doom any newsletter to failure. Here are some ideas to improve your chances of success:

1. Set objectives. Who do you want to read your newsletter? What could they do as a result of reading it? What do you want them to do as a result of reading it? What are your target readers' concerns and motivations? Who else might read it? Why?
2. Fix a firm timetable to create copy, collect photos, print and distribute each issue. Don't be over-ambitious: start off half-yearly and move to quarterly - or quarterly and move to monthly. If you lose frequency or quality you communicate failure.
3. Create a personality for your newsletter. Start with the name - make sure it's catchy, positive and relevant to your audiences. Decide who will be responsible for the writing and editing, and check that they have a lively, fun, accessible style - compatible with the new business objectives you have defined for your bulletin. If there's no such person on your payroll, then buy them in or sub-contract the job to specialists.

4. Don't skimp on design. Sure, full colour helps but is not essential. Dense columns of small text, however, are a big turn-off. Remember, white space will often emphasise a message better than bold, capital letters or repetition.

DTP packages are fine providing you can use them properly, but good visual content blended with decent graphic design has the power to transform even the driest copy. Most readers can spot 'DIY' a mile off and will usually react accordingly, so it's always a pity to sell yourself short.

5. Email or print? Whilst on-line distribution is almost instant and incredibly cheap, we are so bombarded with email these days that it's getting harder to win attention for email newsletters. Litho comes into its own at several hundred copies but don't forget

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that new digital technology (as used by your local copy-shop) makes colour reproduction viable for very small print runs as well.

Unless you really are walking a financial tightrope, these days a small budget does not necessarily mean you must restrict your output to one or two colours. On the contrary, after print runs of a couple of thousand and more, the

marginal cost of printing an extra few hundreds or thousands of units is usually very small. So, ask yourself, are there any audiences who might do (more) business with your company if they were a cost-effective part of your newsletter circulation too?

6. Anticipate the distribution logistics. If you're printing your newsletter and handling everything in-house, check that you have enough envelopes, address labels, stamps or franking machine credits, as well as sufficient staff cued-up for the job. Better still, ask your printer to help - or else employ a competent mailing house. Be warned that large mailings are TEDIOUS and you may find that, second or third time around, your bored envelope-stuffing staff de-stabilise your newsletter project by branding it 'low priority'. It is not.

Wakey...

7. Turning to editorial content, it is essential to mix and lighten-up your subjects. Remember that good news breeds optimism, so praise where praise is due. But be aware that blatant sales pitches and incessant 'messages from the management' soon go unread while, internally, criticism and lectures must be handled sensitively in order to create a desired change instead of resentment.

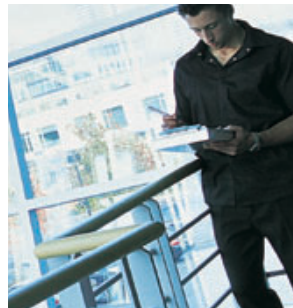
Profiles of key people are most interesting when they offer a glimpse of life outside work, and writing personal interviews as dialogue can make a refreshing change to narrative. Invite guest columnists and run occasional competitions. Always look for human interest and try to create regular slots or features, perhaps building a theme from issue to issue. Most importantly, encourage reader dialogue by asking questions and always invite and publish 'letters to the editor'.

Successful newsletters are always interactive and your audience must feel part of the party.

8. Finally, ASK for feedback. Not just with your first issue but, at least annually, you should state that this is a pilot or test whose future direction will depend on its readers' comments. What do they like, dislike or want to see in future editions? Try a fax-back response sheet or the traditional pre-paid envelope.

Far too many newsletters are boring, unfocussed, badly designed and poorly written: they deserve to be binned as junk mail. But 'newsletter' or 'snoozeletter', the choice is yours and the more care you take, the more it can do for your business. It's worth spending proper time and money to get it right.

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