



Getting Started with Your Newsletter

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Introduction

A lot of organizations get this fabulous idea that they should have a newsletter and then charge off in ten different directions at once without giving any thought to what they are getting themselves into. Before you launch your newsletter there is a lot to consider.

First, the good news: A newsletter is a great communications tool. What's more, they've never been more cost effective to produce and distribute. In addition, digital newsletters can offer up a wealth of data about who is reading your newsletter and when as well as other incredibly useful information.



Second, the bad news: They're not for everyone. If you can honestly answer the questions posed here, you should know whether or not a newsletter is right for your organization, whether or not a newsletter would be an appropriate communications tool for you and whether or not it will render a positive return on your investment of time, money and effort.



Before you start down that newsletter trail, there are several different scenarios that must be thought through. We've boiled them down to three basic areas.

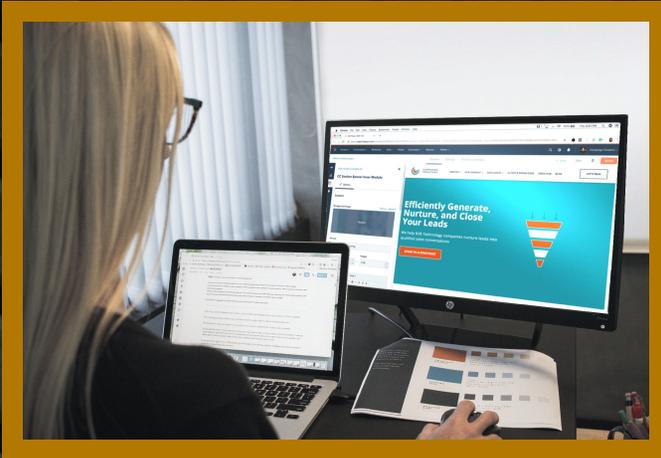
CHAPTER ONE: Content



“Do you have enough content, and do you have the right kind of content?” That may seem like an obvious question, but that’s not necessarily the case.

Can your content pass this simple test? Try planning out the first six issues. Identifying which stories will run and when they’ll run is a good indicator. (Many organizations have seasonal or holiday stories to tell which may help the process.) If you’re planning on say, four or five items per issue, can you fill up the first six issues?

Over and above that, it’s always a good idea to keep several “evergreen” topics on the shelf. These are stories that can run in any issue regardless of timing. You never know when you might come up short and have to pull something off the shelf.



Another thought: are there re-occurring themes which could be included in every newsletter? It could be "TechTips" or "Profit Builders" or "Product Spotlight." Some newsletters, especially for non-profit institutions, feature a calendar of events. In every edition of our monthly newsletter, JPTearsheet, we feature a "quote of the month" and a "question of the month."

If you do choose to include such a regular feature, it will help if you can include the first six (or however many) "TechTips" when building your inventory of story ideas.

Another consideration: to help ease your schedule, are there topics that are sufficiently substantial so that they could be broken down into more than one article? You can build reader interest with "The first of three installments."

In the end, does your content resonate with your audience(s)? Just as important, is your content appropriate? Does anyone really want to hear it? Does it pass the “so what” test? When someone sees your newsletter and what’s in it, do they say “so what.” If that’s their response, you might want to go back to the drawing board.

Remember – and this sometimes is the most difficult hurdle for some organizations to clear – is what you’re including in your newsletter important to you, or to them? At the end of the day, it’s all about **THEM**. Them the audience... whoever your audience is.



Tip:

Regarding your audience, determine upfront precisely who will be on your distribution list... or lists. And, always include yourself on your own distribution list. You want to make certain that your newsletter has, in fact, been delivered... and it arrives how you want it to.



CHAPTER TWO: The royal we vs the ultimate who

A newsletter may be a great idea, but who is going to do it? Are you adequately staffed to complete it – and complete it in a timely fashion?

A lot of companies think that they will simply solicit articles from staff. That may work but keep in mind that those staff members still have their regular duties to perform. They do have full-time jobs. When people are working full time, do they have the additional time necessary to research and write newsletter articles? You don't want your newsletter to be postponed – or cancelled – because some staffers "didn't have the time" to complete their articles.





And what about your overall project management? Who will plan the content, the editing, layout, production and distribution? Who will maintain your lists? Does your marketing staff or PR person have the time to assume a major, new commitment? Or will you have to outsource much of the work? And do you have the budget for that?



Tip:

As soon as you finish one edition, start working on the next one.

CHAPTER THREE: Commitment

We always hear a lot about commitment. Are you going to be committed to your newsletter?

This may be the most important concept of all – are you really committed to doing a newsletter? Plain and simple, a newsletter is a commitment. Of time. Of people. Of resources.

This raises the notion that plagues many newsletter novices, “how often should we produce our newsletter?” The poignant answer is, “As often as you have something relevant or important to say.” It could be quarterly, monthly, or weekly. There even are those who publish daily. Doing a good job on the first question (regarding relevant content), should strongly suggest how often you will publish.



Whatever schedule is right for you – stick to it! We know of someone who sends out a monthly newsletter on the first of every month. He's so regular that you can set your calendar by it. On the morning of the first of every month (even New Year's Day, January 1), there it is. Like clockwork.



▼ **Tip:**

If you're not sure about the timing, always opt for the less frequent. Your audience will be more impressed if you change to publishing more often, than having to cut back. Increasing your frequency means that you have a lot to say and that your audience(s) is consuming your content. But, if you have decrease your frequency, what you're saying that you don't enough to say, or you don't have the resources to stand by your commitment.

CONCLUSION

There are many more things to consider before embarking on your newsletter, but these are the three biggies. People have written entire books on the subject, but if you can successfully get past these issues, you'll be well on your way.

In the end, to be successful, a newsletter must:

- Be relevant. Your audience must be interested in what you have to say.
- Be regular. Monthly, quarterly, whenever. Can you meet that deadline?
- Be professional. A newsletter is a reflection of your organization. How do you want to be perceived?

Send us an email if you would like to receive The JPT Group's newsletter: JPTearsheet.

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FAQs

Should we produce our newsletter digitally or hard-copy print?

There's a lot that goes into this question making it a full topic for another day. Suffice it to say, while we're well into the technology-dominated 21st Century, one may be tempted to assume that printed newsletters are dinosaurs. While that may be true, depending on your audience, your industry and your market, print actually may be the better way to go. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. It all goes back to whatever is best for THEM – your audience and secondarily, for you.

What data can I expect from an electronic newsletter?

With today's technology, if you choose to produce an electronic newsletter, it's amazingly easy to track your newsletter's performance. You'll know who opened your newsletter, when they opened it and if they took any action because of it. Also, you can learn which email addresses are no longer valid.

Can I use articles and other content from outside sources?

The simple answer is yes. While it's always best to get explicit permission ahead of time, when that's not possible, be certain to provide full attribution for the information (byline if available, name of the publication and electronic links to sources whenever possible.)

Should our newsletter have a name?

Naming your newsletter can make it more memorable. Audiences may identify it by name. The "name" of your newsletter may take on a life of its own. "Here's an article for the next TechTopics."

What's the best way to distribute an electronic newsletter?

Fortunately you have many options. Better still, some services are totally free. Others are free only to a point. Some have sliding scales depending on a variety of factors such as size of distribution list, volume of visuals used, frequency of use, reporting data, A/B testing, personalization, etc.

Should I use my newsletter content on other platforms?

Absolutely. You can take news releases or tweets and use them in newsletters. White papers and testimonials can be feature articles. Videos can be a link in a newsletter and posted to YouTube. In fact, this "repurposing" as it's called, can be a cornerstone of your overall communications program. There is no reason why your newsletter can't be posted on your website.

Something Special

If your organization is considering a newsletter, we'd like to help. Contact the JPT Group (by phone or email) and use the magic word "THEM" and we'll schedule a half-hour free consult to help you get started.