

## E-Newsworthy

Putting together great content for your e-newsletter

By John Bidwell

You want people to read your e-newsletter, right? Engage your audience. This article is not about the technical aspects of building a successful e-newsletter. It focuses on the content: how to come up with ideas, and how to present it.

### Write for Scanning

People like to scan information before deciding to delve further, so make it easy for them.

- Keep the e-newsletter short. Use a brief opening paragraph on the first page, with a link to read more if needed.
- Spend time writing good headlines and subheads. Be clever, but not so clever that the reader is confused.
- Use visuals.
- Add captions to images.
- Keep paragraphs short (no more than 100 words) and vary their length.
- Use bulleted or numbered lists—of how-tos, for example.

### The Shorter, the Better

People spend an average of 51 seconds on a newsletter according to the Nielsen Norman Group, study “Email Newsletter Usability.” If you have something to say, you better get to it.

Keeping it short and sweet means offering one to three main ideas with each issue. Too much content, and the whole e-newsletter is likely to be ignored. The benefit for you the writer is that there will be less to write.

Write shorter sentences than you would on paper. Use clear language and simple words.

Eschew—I mean, avoid—GRE words, acronyms, and jargon. Jargon need not be technical. It can be any word or phrase that may have daily use for you, but not for your reader.

### Put the Reader in the Front Seat

Never forget to put yourself in the shoes of the people reading your writing. Far too often, we see companies and organizations generate copy driven by what they want to say, rather than by what readers want to read. The e-newsletter may be about the company, but the content had better put the reader first.

If you are unsure about what to write, ask for opinions. Give a draft to somebody representing your audience and ask for comments. Do this with several people if possible. This is not a vote, but is a means of collecting valuable feedback. Feedback is especially important when you first start; after a while you will get the hang of it.

Different people access information differently. That is why it is good to have a variety of “points of entry.” These can be tips, questions, surveys, polls, images, or requests for specific feedback. Appropriate, engaging content increases your chances of creating dedicated readers.

Keep selling to a minimum. News will be read as more trustworthy than “marketing,” and you want your e-newsletter to be credible.

Consider embedding links to drive interactivity, but use these only if it makes sense for your reader. You may want your readers to spend all their time with you, but you can’t force the issue. The moment that they feel pressured, they will probably split.

### Fresh Is Best

Make sure your content is current and relevant. Here are tips for finding something to write about.

- Get into a story-hunting mindset. It may be a chore at first, but it will get easier.
- Google for ideas. Think about how the articles relate to what you or your customers are doing.
- Ask coworkers, friends, family for ideas. Hand out your business cards and tell people you are always interested in ideas.
- Read about your industry and find connections to what you are doing.
- Dig even deeper. Some less-than-obvious sources of inspiration might include:
  - ❑ stories that offer the unexpected: a visit to the ER can turn into an article about quick response
  - ❑ follow-up on previous e-newsletter stories
  - ❑ anniversaries, events
  - ❑ other e-newsletters you like and follow
  - ❑ issues of interest to readers, to which you might find a unique connection
  - ❑ your personal interests

### Be Consistent

Create stylistic consistency. Editing is not always black and white. Do you spell it “theater” or “theatre”? Do you use serial commas? Create a list of rules and refer to a style authority such as the *Chicago Manual of Style Online* ([www.chicagomanualofstyle.org](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org)).

### Proofread

Always have somebody else proofread your work. A set of fresh eyes is required, preferably those of a professional. For more about proofing and writing, see Bidwell ID’s article “Copywriting, Copyediting, and Proofreading—Nitpicking or Necessity?”

### Copyright It

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