Writing Effective Newsletters

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Abstract

A newsletter is a commonly used communication tool that gives readers helpful information about a company, an organization, or a department. A newsletter is defined as a small publication—leaflet or newspaper—containing news of interest chiefly to a certain group. This paper includes research on how to write effective newsletters as well as the procedures involved in teaching a group of business communication students to interview faculty members and write a newsletter with the communications teacher as the editor. The process involved teaching the students not only how to interview and write the articles, but also the process of editing, writing proofreading, and posting the newsletter online.

Introduction

The main purpose of a newsletter is to provide information of interest to subscribers, customers, or employees. Many businesses use newsletters as marketing and communication tools to complement their external marketing efforts and to strengthen their internal or external communications (Kenneth, 2000).

Newsletters can target a defined demographic of people in a specific line of work, a particular interest group within a community, and a national or international organization. In the case of a business newsletter, the target audience can be the people employed in any related field, such as accounting, finance, marketing, or administration.

The purpose of this paper is to teach business communication students at Lee University to research the topic of *Writing Effective Newsletters*. The process involved interviewing business faculty members, writing the articles, making revisions, proofreading, designing the newsletter, and posting it online. The newsletter, *The Bottomline*, targeted business students, alumni, faculty, and prospective students.

Advantages of Newsletters

The term *business communication* includes a plethora of technologies and methods, face-to-face interaction, email, newsletters, phone messages, instant messaging, presentations, meetings, and social networking via worldwide networks (Setyawati, 2006). Newsletters, however, tend to be overlooked by employers as far as their importance within an organization. Newsletters help keep employees and others associated with the particular organization up to date on current events. For businesses, a newsletter gives information regarding various product launchings, new business policies and

regulations, upcoming events, news about the achievements of the company and its employees and other things that could be deemed interesting and helpful to customers (Mesias, 2008).

In the business world, employees need to be kept informed about current events in the organization. These are the people who are trying to sell the company's product, and they should be able to answer any questions buyers may have. Newsletters are also important within an organization to keep it unified. In fact, company newsletters are so important that some companies hire the expertise of reputable newsletter printing companies to help them create noteworthy newsletters (Mesias, 2008). A company can actually lose business because of unprofessional looking newsletters.

Most colleges and universities rely on donations from alumni and other supporters in the community. A newsletter helps these stakeholders see the continued improvement of the school. Along with short articles of current events, newsletters typically include a message from the chair of the department or the editor of the newsletter. These messages allow people to receive communication directly from the individuals who have been a part of the success at the college or university.

Determining the General Purpose of a Newsletter

A newsletter is a regularly distributed publication generally about one main topic that is of interest to its readers. Writing a newsletter can be a beneficial project for any business. The role of a newsletter depends on the audience (Kenneth, 2000). Whether a company decides to produce an external marketing newsletter for clients or an internal employee communication newsletter depends on what the company is trying to accomplish by writing the newsletter. Each has different benefits.

While much of the information in an employee newsletter can be as easily conveyed in a memo, putting it in a newsletter is much more effective. This is because the way a newsletter is presented is much more attractive. For example, many newsletters include photos or artwork in order to illustrate a message, making the message more appealing to the eyes of the reader (Kenneth, 2000).

After identifying the target audience, the specific purpose of the newsletter must be determined. A newsletter is a communication tool; therefore, its overarching purpose is to serve the interest of management and to relay information, which, in the considered opinion of management, is relevant to the target audience. A business newsletter may be used to:

- Inform employees or clients of upcoming events and product specials,
- Announce employee achievement,
- Offer knowledge, insight, and advice from experts in a field of business,
- Strengthen internal communication, or
- Complement external marketing efforts (Kenneth, 2000).

An external marketing newsletter sells and serves its readers. A sharp image created by a well-designed newsletter can lead to better market positioning and an expanded client base; this is the sales aspect.

Also, content that will give the readers timely and helpful information, such as new surprising ways to use a product, makes them better-informed customers; this is the service aspect of an external marketing newsletter (Carter, 1998). External communications also serve to establish a brand, market products and services, advertise, and provide a public relations function (King, 2008).

The desire to produce an external newsletter or an internal publication depends on the purpose. Internal newsletters foster effective employee communication. While some businesses use newsletters externally to create enthusiasm among their clients and prospective clients, others have found they can create enthusiasm among employees by using newsletters inside the firm (Miller, 2002). Also, an employee publication can explain policies, programs, products, and profits. The employee publication would benefit a company on job performance, higher productivity, and a more unified work force. Internal newsletters can give management a way to foster a sense of company pride and ownership by communicating to employees what is expected from them and what they can expect in return.

The overall objectives of planning, organizing, and writing a newsletter include the following outcomes:

- Newsletters can serve as an effective marketing tool.
- They can enhance the reputation of a company and provide information deemed pertinent to the target audience.
- Newsletters can help both employees and clients understand the company's mission and goals.

Pre-Writing Preparation

The preparation for writing a newsletter is extensive. Choosing the writers carefully and creating a detailed production schedule will allow the making of the newsletter to go smoothly. Next, the writers must determine the purpose of the newsletter. They have to answer the question of why they are creating the newsletter. Then, they choose their article topics based on the purpose and target audience. Finally, they begin researching their topics. The Internet has revolutionized the way people do research, but writers need to determine which sources are reliable (Miller 2002).

Another important aspect of the information to include in a newsletter is the time it is released. Newsletters that are released over longer periods of time need to have articles of much more significance than newsletters that are released over short periods. Short-term newsletters must have a focus on current events and future changes while long-term newsletters need to focus on either the major events that have transpired since the previous publication or the major plans that will affect the reader. Short-term newsletters may need to include more entertaining articles to use space that is left from the lack of larger newsworthy articles. Long-term newsletters also face the challenge of staying relevant without letting information become outdated. Both types of newsletters are effective for different situations, and both are commonly used (Walton, 2008).

Similar to the focus of the newsletter is the approach. The approach of the newsletter is based on the target audience and the content to be included in the newsletter. A recent issue of *Good Newsletter* (a publication focusing on environmental issues) opened with a greeting statement that included a

reminder to all of its readers to stay diligent in their actions. The main article regarded an up-and-coming artist who was making a stand for Earth and all of her rights. The second and third pages included puzzles and entertaining articles regarding *Going Green.* The final page included a calendar to encourage readers to become involved and participate in Green Events. The Good Newsletter focused on a general public and tried to keep the same people involved (Walton, 2008).

Organizations also need to decide whether to produce the newsletter in-house. To do so, the company must assess capabilities and identify potential gaps. Producing a newsletter in-house has its advantages. The editor knows the organization and is known by others, so he or she may have easier access to information. However, if organizations do not have someone in-house with the skills to write and design a newsletter, they should hire freelance writers or outside consultants. Using untrained staff to produce newsletters may save money, but this technique also sacrifices quality.

Researching and Interviewing

Once the purpose of the newsletter and the topics that will be addressed are determined, research needs to be conducted. In business environments, researching the content of a newsletter is the most time-consuming aspect of a newsletter. Having a clear, concise subject choice will aid in the process of acquiring the most in-depth research.

Once a specific subject is chosen, many tools can assist in the process of researching. Perhaps the most common tool is the Internet. However, not all information that is acquired from the internet is completely reliable. One of the greatest challenges in finding reliable information is being able to differentiate between websites that provide scholarly information and websites that merely state opinions about the subject. According to Ober (2009), "the range of informational quality on the Net is enormous. Personal home pages and those sponsored by advocacy organizations should be evaluated especially carefully for accuracy, fairness, and coverage" (p. 301). Ober also stresses that many Internet users do not know how to differentiate between company-paid websites and independent Internet sites.

In addition to using the Internet during the research phase, information can be collected by conducting interviews. Planning includes determining the need or problem to be addressed in the interview, selecting the people to be interviewed, choosing the type of interview, and carefully preparing the questions to ask.

In the case of researching different associates to determine the writers, adequate justification for choosing a certain writer must be given. Researching associates means finding the right people for the job. Adequate justification is a way of justifying why a certain writer was chosen over another.

Once the type of interview is determined, an interview guide needs to be created. The interviewer should formulate questions that are open-ended (McNamara, 2008). In other words, the interviewer should ask questions that allow the interviewee to do most of the talking and avoid questions that can

be answered with a simple "yes" or "no" response. Finally, each question should cover only one subject so that the interviewer does not get confused (Lynch Associates, 1996).

While deciding which questions to ask seems like an obvious step in the preparation phase, here are some less obvious but simple steps to help ensure the interview is successful:

1. Choose a setting with few distractions to help the respondent feel comfortable.
2. Use a recording device to quote people accurately after the interview.
3. Give the interviewee as much information about the interview as possible before the actual meeting, including an explanation of the purpose and format of the interview and an indication of how long the interview will last.
4. Ask only one question at a time and provide transitions between major topics.
5. Do not allow the interviewee to stray from the topic. (McNamara, 2008)

The Creation of a Newsletter

After the preparation phase, the writer has the information needed to write excellent articles that will capture the attention of the targeted audience. Appropriate writing style and formatting are important for the success of the newsletter. A well-written article will reflect a news style of writing. The five W's and H (who, what, where, when, why, and how) should be included in an interesting opening statement. The remaining information should be answered in the subsequent paragraphs (Russell, 2005, p. 10.) The design and page layout of a newsletter help set the publication apart from newsletters of competitors. A good newsletter design creates interest and maintains readability through consistency and contrast.

The writer should keep articles concise, bright, clear, and simple. Using bullets, lists, short sentences, and giving readers the information they need in the fewest words are ways to keep it short. If the topic is complex, suggest additional sources or offer a contact for more information. In terms of simplicity, most articles should use everyday language, depending on the audience. For example, an academic article may use the academic vernacular of the audience, but a personal piece should be written in simple language (Winter, 2005). The bottom line is that the readership should set the tone of the publication.

The success of a newsletter also depends on its design. The following common mistakes should be avoided when formatting a newsletter. An attractive, easy-to-read newsletter encourages readers to pay attention to one's message. Cluttered, hard-to-read newsletters, however, discourage readership no matter how good the ideas are. Layout problems involve the placement and size of elements that remain the same from issue to issue. Another mistake is filling every space in the newsletter with text or graphics. Blank space should be balanced on the page for effect. Avoiding clutter in this way is one of the least expensive ways to add visual impact to a newsletter, separating it from the competition and making it easier to read. Additional mistakes include unnecessary graphic accents, such as borders, shaded backgrounds, and rules (Bear, 2009b).

The 12 parts of the newsletter design are the nameplate, the body, the table of contents, the headings or titles, the page numbers, the bylines, the continuation lines, the end signs, the pull quote, the photos or illustrations, and the mailing panel (Bear, 2009a). Arranging these parts appropriately and combining them in a consistent manner helps the reader remain focused and highly interested in the piece.

Good newsletter design relies on three important guidelines, also known as the 3'Cs: consistency, conservation (clutter-busting), and contrast. To be consistent, the writer should use grids for page- to-page consistency. In regard to conservation or clutter-busting, it is preferable to use three or fewer typefaces. Frames and boxes should be used sparingly, and no more than one or two pieces of clipart, photos, or graphic accents should be included on a single page. Blank space (extra wide gutters or margins) could also be used to counterbalance dense text (Bear, 2009b).

Software is available to make newsletter formatting easier. For example, a newsletter template can be created from scratch with the help of design software such as Adobe Frame-Make, Adobe InDesign, and Coral Ventura. The sleek, professional look that templates produce can be used by smaller companies that could not otherwise afford to hire a graphic designer or train their employees in desktop publishing applications (Adobe in Design, 2008).

A failure to attract the intended audience by the design and layout of the newsletter could amount to a lack of interest in reading the articles or the newsletter itself. The *Franklin Covey Style Guide for Business and Technical Communications* provides the following methods for enhancing the publication design and captivating the intended audience: the use of emphasis, page layout, graphics, and graphs. To implement emphasis in writing, use the following guides:

1. Control your readers' eyes by the position and appearance of your ideas.
2. Open with important ideas.
3. Subordinate minor ideas.
4. Repeat important ideas.
5. Use space and page design to highlight important ideas.
6. Use headings and lists to highlight important ideas.
7. Use graphics to emphasize important ideas.
8. Use single-sentence paragraphs to emphasize important ideas.
9. Use typographical features and color to emphasize words and ideas.

Publication

Before the widespread use of the Internet, businesses and organizations could publish only hard copies of newsletters, which can be expensive and time-consuming. Businesses can now post newsletters on a website or email them to their desired readers. The long-term success of the newsletter is determined by whether the company believes it is profitable to continue producing the newsletter.

Electronic Newsletters

Electronic newsletters often have a better response rate than comparable hardcopy newsletters. A typical company newsletter receives a 5% response when it offers a sales promotion. The same newsletter sent electronically gets a response rate of approximately 25%. Electronic newsletters also save the organization money. Printing fees and postage can add up quickly with printed newsletters, but electronic newsletters do not carry these costs.

Before posting a newsletter online, be aware that the format of the newsletter needs to match the website. First, consider the general theme of the website and how the newsletter might relate to that particular theme. Not only will the article not distract the reader or just appear loosely connected with the rest of the page, but it will help the website look professional.

One may choose to create a website that may be used to either post news articles or host archives of e-newsletters. Many reporters of online news today choose to use "blogs," a term derived from the words "web log." Design templates for online blogs can be made from scratch, purchased from graphic design artists, or downloaded free, depending on the terms specified by the original template's designer. Furthermore, if an e-newsletter manager decides that the blog route is not the best option, the manager can decide to have a web design professional build a site for them, use a pre-existing web site template, or design a web site for the e-newsletter.

Once the newsletter is hosted on a working website, encouraging readers to bookmark the site is extremely important. This increases the possibility that readers will become long-time subscribers to the e-newsletter (*Newsletter,* 2008).

Purpose, Procedures, and Objectives of Teaching Students to Write Newsletters

As part of the experiential learning program in the Department of Business at Lee University, in the spring 2009, seven students in one of the business communication classes were randomly assigned to research the topic of how to write an effective newsletter for the Department of Business. The students were reminded that the newsletter for the Department of Business would be read by alumni, faculty, students, and prospective students; therefore, the newsletter should contain information that would be relevant and informative to all audiences.

After the topics of the articles were assigned by the professor, the students interviewed faculty members in the department, analyzed their audience, wrote the articles, made editorial changes suggested by the professor (who served as editor), proofread the articles, designed the newsletter, and published it online. During the last week of the class, the seven students presented their research findings, along with a copy of the newsletter, to the entire business communication class.

In addition to placing the newsletter, *The Bottom Line*, as a link on the Department of Business website for students, the chair of the department sent an email, with the newsletter attached, to members of

the school's business advisory council, business alumni, business faculty—full-time and part-time— the dean, and the vice president for academic affairs.

Purpose

The purposes of teaching the students how to write a newsletter were:

1. To teach students the skills of researching, interviewing, writing, editing, proofreading, and publishing a newsletter online.

2. To enhance the reputation of the department and provide valuable information to students, alumni, members of the business advisory council, and administrators.

3. To provide a marketing tool for the department of business for recruiting purposes.

Procedures

The business communications professor met with the chair of the department to determine the topics to be covered in the newsletter. Early in the spring semester, students were assigned to interview specific business faculty members. Even though all the interviewees were faculty members in the department of business and had similar levels of experience and background knowledge, students were reminded that they should be prepared for various communication styles.

After the students completed their interviews, they wrote the first draft of their articles, which were edited by the professor and returned for further revision. Faculty members read the articles for clarity and accuracy. The chair of the department then read all of the articles and provided his suggestions and approval, then wrote his "Message from the Chair." The chair of the student newsletter committee, a computer information systems major, and the professor met and made final changes and inserted appropriate pictures and art work.

On the last day of the business communication class, the seven-student committee presented their research on "How to Write Effective Newsletters" and provided the class with copies of the newsletter.

Conclusions

When the newsletter was completed and the students were able to see their names in print as writers, they were pleased and proud of their product. The students gained considerable knowledge concerning the processes of interviewing, writing, rewriting, editing, and proofreading. Also, the students admitted that their learning was enhanced by interviewing business faculty members with different communication styles. Since the chair of the student committee and one other student member were computer information systems majors, their expertise was valuable when posting the newsletter online.

Even though this experiential learning took many hours of work for the students and the professor it was well worth the time spent. The feedback from administrators, faculty, students, business advisory council members, and alumni was encouraging—so much so that the process will be repeated in the spring of 2010.

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