"If You Write It, They Will Come": The Promises and Pitfalls of Electronic Newsletters for Non-Profit Organisations

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Abstract

This paper reports on the findings of a large-scale New-Zealand based study examining the use of e-newsletters as a strategic communication tool by non-profit organisations. Researchers interviewed the communication heads of thirty-eight of New Zealand's largest non-profits concerning their reasons for issuing e-newsletters, their beliefs about their readers and their preferences, and their desired outcomes. Researchers also surveyed e-newsletter recipients to investigate the accuracy of the organisations' beliefs concerning their readership.

Introduction

Non-profit organisations, usually operating on shoestring budgets, have generally embraced the opportunities offered by communication technologies. Non-profits have rushed to capitalise upon platforms like websites and Facebook pages, tools like YouTube and Twitter, and channels like the electronic newsletter, as a means of swift and wide dissemination of information, and minimal up-front costs (Boeder, 2002). However, the need to research and implement a coherent communication strategy for electronic communications has often been neglected; a naïve attitude "if we write it, they will come" often prevails.

This paper reports on the findings of a large-scale New-Zealand based study examining the use of e-newsletters as a strategic communication tool by non-profit organisations. Data was gathered from interviews with non-profit communication heads, as well as from surveys of e-newsletter recipients. The study aimed to shed light on organisations' goals and ambitions for the e-newsletter, as well as to analyse how well those goals were being met, and to produce recommendations enabling non-profits to make more effective use of this particular communication tool.

The non-profit sector in New Zealand is vigorous and large. It employs 9.6% of New Zealand's workforce, rendering the sector the seventh largest in the world, proportional to the economically active population (Sanders, O'Brien, Tennant, Sokolowski & Salamon, 2008). In New Zealand as in other countries, non-profit organisations must manage a large number of strategic goals, from the provision of services or advocacy to fundraising, as well as marketing and promoting their organisation and simultaneously fostering relationships with a wide array of governmental, organisational, and individual stakeholders. However, similarly globally evident is the paucity of resources available to the sector with which to achieve those varied objectives (Bachani & Vradelis, 2012; Levine & Zahradnik, 2012; Liu, 2012). New Zealand non-profits, in common with the rest of the world, must deploy "shoestring strategies" as they strive to meet their goals (Boyer & McCallum, 2012). Significant challenges for non-profit organisations include maintaining engagement with often geographically dispersed stakeholders, and regularly evaluating the communication strategies intended to maintain and cultivate those important relationships (Liu, 2012).

The increasing number of guides targeted to help non-profits make optimal use of communication technologies and specifically of social media (see, for example, Kinzey, 2013 & Mansfield, 2012) indicates both the promise of the new media and the eagerness of the sector to embrace it, but does not necessarily produce effective or optimal use of new technologies. While there is limited information regarding social media use by the non-profit sector in New Zealand, an unpublished 2012 study examining the communication tools employed by the country's fifty largest non-profit charitable organisations found that 100% of respondents used Facebook, 100% had a website, 77% maintained a Twitter feed, and 94% also produced e-mail newsletters (Dickerson, 2012).

Literature Review

Non-profit organisations need to establish the best tactical methods to promote their organisational strategies and engage the right audiences. Much scholarly attention in recent years has been directed at non-profit use of social media and social networking sites, including websites, Facebook, and YouTube (see for example Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Buchanan & Luck, 2006; Kenix, 2008; Kent, Taylor & White, 2003; Taylor, Kent and White, 2001; Waters et al, 2009; Williams & Brunner, 2010). Much of this critical literature has suggested that the non-profit sector presently lags well behind the corporate and private sectors in strategic use of social media (Burt and Taylor, 2008; Schneider & Foot, 2004; Waters et al, 2009). With regard to raising funds or recruiting volunteers, research suggests social media has demonstrated limited benefits for non-profits (Ganim-Barnes, 2011; Ogden & Starita, 2009). With regard to non-profits' social media use enhancing communication or connection, similarly tepid results have been found. Kenix (2008) has suggested that many non-profit organisations are using their websites largely for one-way dissemination of information. Similarly, a study by Bortree and Seltzer (2009) of the Facebook sites of 50 environmental agency groups discovered the majority produced only a static site with minimal interaction with visitors. Williams and Brunner (2010) investigated the websites of 129 non-profit organisations, finding that while this platform provides considerable opportunities for promoting two-way communication between organisation and stakeholders, overall engagement with stakeholders was low. Waters et al (2009) analysed almost 300 non-profits' Facebook sites, and found most failed to take advantage of the interactive possibilities of Facebook. Briones et al (2010), concluding an in-depth analysis of social media use by the American Red Cross, argue that the case for non-profit organisations to make strategic use of social media grows ever more pressing.

Research that has focussed on non-profit use of electronic newsletters is much sparser, perhaps because increasingly non-profits are turning first to interactive web-based platforms for their stakeholder communications, with "traditional tools… fast becoming the add-ons to the Internet" (Straubhaar, LaRose, & Davenport, 2014, p.297). Books offering communication advice to non-profits do tend to promote the use of electronic newsletters, but generally rather simplistically, from a cost-saving point of view: Mansfield, for example, declares "E-Mail is not dead. Not having an e-newsletter for your nonprofit is folly" (2012, p. 14). In another book, Kinzey (2013) notes that if non-profit organisations utilise e-newsletters efficiently, they have the potential to create a "Dragonfly Effect…to inspire action and spur change through email campaigns" via communication that is (ideally) "personal, informative, and direct" (p. 156). Focussed academic research into strategic and effective use of the e-newsletter tool is sorely needed, to extend the limited work already undertaken. Buchanan and Luck surveyed non-profit sporting organisations in Australia, finding the majority of clubs articulated the importance of keeping up to date with online technology for their communications, but most did not actively use e-newsletters (Buchanan & Luck, 2006, p.6). Gray and Hopkins (2013) undertook a small-scale study of New Zealand non-profits and discovered a distinct lack of strategy underpinning non-profit organisations' use of e-newsletters, as well as poorly articulated goals for their use.

A number of questions presently remain unanswered, in particular concerning what organisations perceive as the primary benefits of using the tool of the e-newsletter; the degree to which organisations have specific and articulated goals for the e-newsletter; how well organisations understand their e-newsletter readers and their preferences; and how effectively organisations are tailoring their e-newsletters to elicit desired responses.

This paper seeks to address the following questions:

- What are non-profit organisations' reasons for using e-newsletters?
- What goals/outcomes are desired by organisations, from their use of e-newsletters?
- What do organisations know about subscribers' reading practices and preferences (that is, what elements do organisations think are effective)?
- What are e-newsletter recipients' self-reported reading practices and preferences?

Method

Almost 40 New Zealand non-profit organisations agreed to participate in this project. In the first stage of the research, researchers interviewed the communication heads of 38 non-profits concerning their reasons for issuing e-newsletters, their beliefs about their readers and their preferences, and their desired outcomes. Phone interviews took place between April and June, 2014, and with the permission of the interviewees were recorded for transcription and analysis.

In the second stage, a smaller self-selected group of participating organisations emailed subscribers, on the researchers' behalf, an invitation to complete an online survey asking about that organisation's use of e-newsletters. The researchers invited each organisation to include questions particular to their own mission or strategy within the survey; most opted to take up this opportunity, and added one to three questions. The surveys thus all contained identical key questions but also contained slight variations. The survey was designed to be completed in about five minutes and was completely anonymised; no identifying information was captured about the respondent, which was particularly important to some of the participating non-profit organisations, especially those that work with disadvantaged groups or those who have experienced discrimination or abuse.

While we requested the organisations send out a separate invitation email to their subscribers, some of them chose instead to embed the explanation of the survey and the invitation to participate within an existing e-newsletter. This limited the number of responses received from those particular stakeholder groups, and had the further disadvantage of not capturing any feedback about e-newsletters from the recipients who choose not to open or read e-newsletters, a group the researchers had been particularly keen to hear from. Despite the limitations of the sample, we have received responses from over 10,000 recipients of non-profit organisations' e-newsletters.[i]

The survey questions asked subscribers what they thought were the organisation's reasons for sending electronic newsletters; about their own reading practices in terms of reading time and sharing with others; about their preferences regarding the channel, content, length, and frequency of the mailing; whether or not the e-newsletter helped them feel more connected to the organisation; and what (if any) action or attitudinal change was prompted by the e-newsletter.

Findings

Data from Organisations

Organisations gave a number of reasons for adopting electronic newsletters (see Figure 1 for the primary reasons suggested), but the leading reason (cited by 52.6% of interviewees) was that of cost efficiency: for the most part, electronic newsletters had supplanted hard copy newsletters, with associated savings in terms of printing and postage. Other reasons cited for adopting electronic newsletters included the broader reach made possible by an electronic communication (31.6%), the greater ability of an electronic communication to be sent out in rapid response to an emerging issue or need (23.7%), and the need to meet audience demand for electronic format or specifically, to appeal to a younger audience (23.7%). Interestingly, only four respondents (10.5%) cited as a reason for adopting the e-newsletter the ability provided by this digital channel to monitor or measure readership and reach. Not all organisations were able to articulate their reasons for adopting e-newsletters. One organisation referred to the fact that "everyone else is doing it [producing e-newsletters]… it's like if you don't have it, it's almost like a vehicle that you feel you need to have." Some organisations showed limited commitment to the e-newsletter, two describing it as "just another tool" in the communication toolbox, suggesting it possessed no particular strengths or even identifying features.
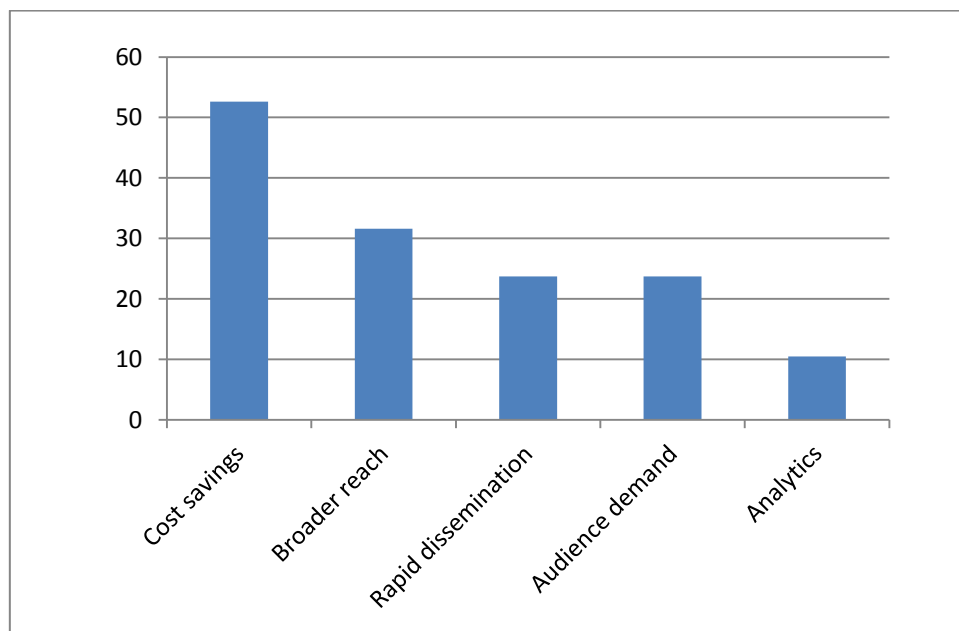

Figure 1: Primary reasons cited by non-profits for adopting e-newsletters

Organisations were questioned as to their specific goals or ambitions for the e-newsletter (see Figure 2). Almost all agreed that the main goals were "communicating with supporters" (92.1%) and "enhancing reputation or credibility" (92.1%). Almost two-thirds of respondents (65.8%) reported "promoting services of programmes" was a primary goal for their e-newsletter. More mixed responses were found regarding the goal of the e-newsletter in terms of advocacy/campaigning (50% responded yes it was a goal, 31.6% responded no, and 15.8% responded 'somewhat'); in part the mixed responses to this question may reflect the differing missions and activities of the non-profits interviewed. A relatively consistent message was received regarding fundraising: 68.4% organisations saw fundraising as a specific goal of the e-newsletter; 57.9% saw recruitment of

volunteers or supporters as a specific goal. Only 13.2% of the organisations interviewed considered "influencing public policy" to be a primary goal of their e-newsletter. Just one of the 38 organisations interviewed mentioned sustainability or environmental reasons for sending out news electronically. Again, not all organisations could articulate specific objectives for their e-newsletters. One organisation, for example, stated almost apologetically: "Currently, we're trying to set better objectives around it… so we will hopefully be meeting expectations in a few months because we will actually have clear goals and objectives."
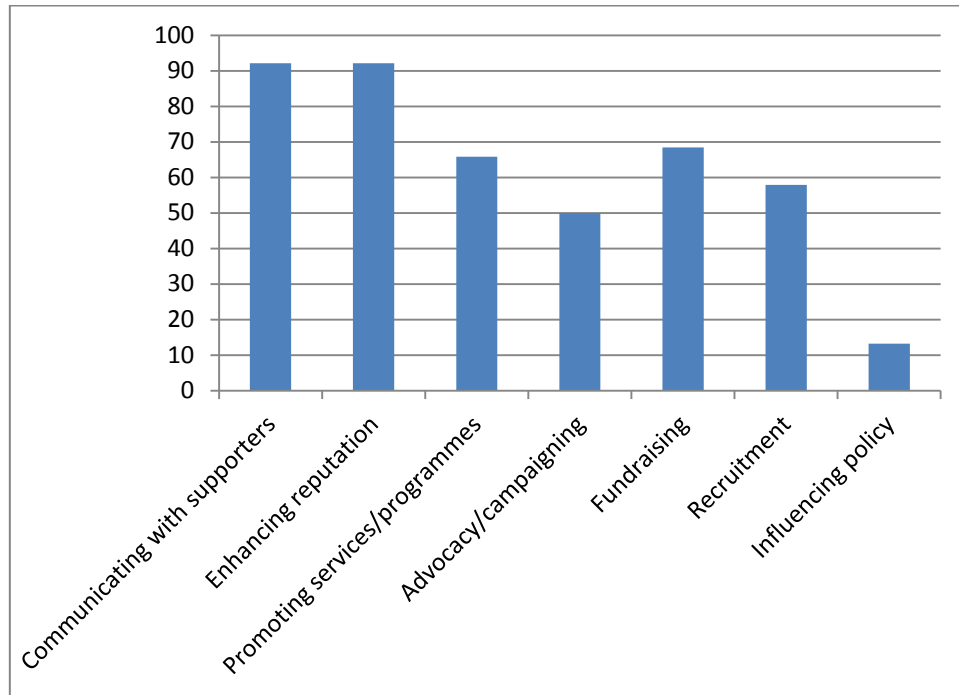

Figure 2: Specific goals for e-newsletters, identified by non-profits

When asked "what makes an e-newsletter effective?", organisations gave some interesting and varied answers (see Figure 3). Key themes that emerged included issues regarding content and format. Twenty interviewees (52.6%) commented on the need for interesting and relevant content; five (13.2%) commented specifically on the need for engaging *stories* to capture the reader ("it's got to be relevant, interesting, and also convincing with telling people stories… because it's kind of a one-way communication"). About 39.5% of interviewees identified brevity as a key component of an effective e-newsletter, and 10.5% specifically identified the subject line of the email as one of the most important elements of an effective e-newsletter. Twelve interviewees (31.6%) commented specifically on visual design issues, identifying the need for pictures, photographs, and user-enticing format: "the visual stuff is probably most important"; "[we] definitely need more visuals. I think it's great to have text and links and we've got that right, but I think what we also need to do is to provide more visuals." One organization specifically cited the need to meet audience demand for functional and attractive visual design: "People aren't willing to tolerate bad design visually and so we're quite conscious of that."
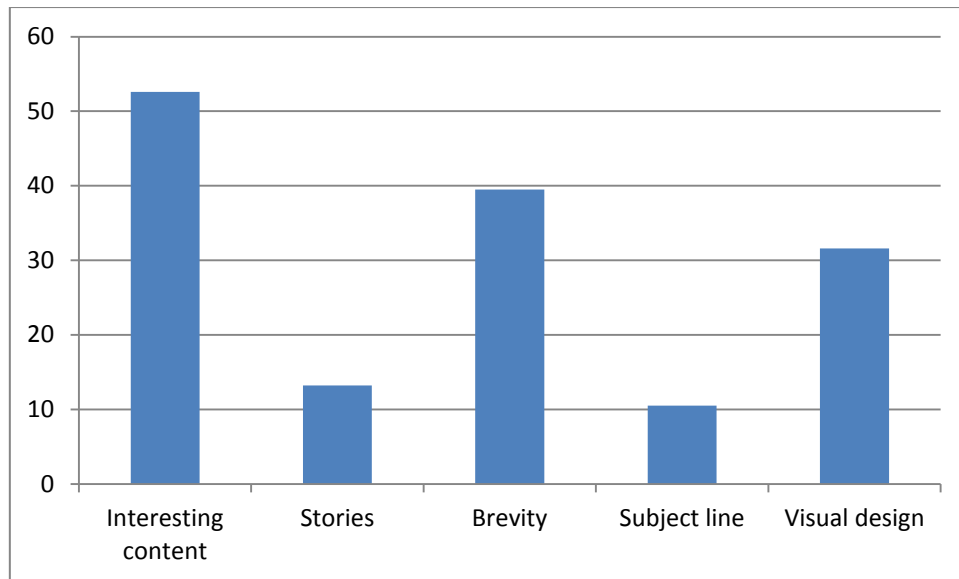
Figure 3: Key elements of e-newsletter effectiveness, identified by non-profits

When asked whether they measure readership or reading patterns in any way, for example by automated monitoring systems or deploying differing kinds of metrics, most organisations (63.2%) responded that they were monitoring readership patterns in an ad hoc and relatively informal way, most often by checking open and click-through rates. Two organisations knew and could cite their average open rates; two had used analytics in a more sophisticated fashion and had conducted tests involving identical messages with differing subject lines. One organisation reported very candidly, "we've never been able to figure out if our expectations have been met because we've never been able to measure them." Another, when asked if the organization used metrics or measurement tools of any kind, responded, "No. None of that tricky stuff. We basically work on feedback."

When asked to identify what the e-newsletter achieves for the organisation in terms of specifiable benefits, organisational interviewees most often cited non-quantifiable results in terms of "increased awareness," "maintaining contact," or "keeping our organisation top of mind." Cost-savings were also frequently mentioned by interviewees, which is in line with the most commonly cited reason for producing e-newsletters in the first place. In terms of fundraising, even though 68.4% of organisations identified fundraising as a key goal of the e-newsletter, only 18.4% stated that a noticeable increase in donations was linked to e-newsletters. This correlates with the findings of Ganim-Barnes (2011) and Ogden and Starita (2009), who observed that social media did not produce a significant improvement for non-profit organisations' fundraising efforts. The majority of interviewees stated the e-newsletter had no discernible impact on fundraising, with one organisation noting that while positive comments received in response to the e-newsletter were really pleasing, "they don't translate into donations or anything like that." Four organisations (10.5%) reported that e-newsletters had had a positive impact on volunteer numbers. Ten (26.3%) identified the timeliness of the e-newsletter as a significant benefit for the organisation, particularly with regard to urgent or breaking news and the need to spread news quickly and/or mobilise a quick response. Four mentioned the e-newsletter helped drive traffic to the website. Overall, there seemed to be a lack of urgency expressed in regard to seeing measurable impacts from the e-newsletter tool; one organizational representative said, "I suppose it gives us a bit better credibility. That's probably all."

One of the final questions in the interview was "Do you believe the e-newsletter makes people feel more connected to the organisation?" While responses were almost uniformly positive,

organisational interviewees tended frequently to use the phrases "I hope" and "I think" in response to this question, and only one organisation was able to point to any specific data (an increase in subscriber numbers) as evidence of improved connection. In the words of one interviewee, who believed that the e-newsletter does make recipients feel more connected to the organisation, connection is founded on "building that trust [and] understanding so that our community understands what we do." The regularity and frequency of contact made possible through electronic newsletters was mentioned as critical to growing a sense of connectedness by five interviewees. Interestingly, several interviewees quite explicitly described the e-newsletter as enabling a form of dialogic communication: "people will sometimes reply to an email [and] even the ones that are negative are actually really helpful"; "[e-newsletters provide] more opportunities to interact with us"; "one [good] thing has been being able to respond to feedback… So we're able to say to people, 'We're actually listening to you.'" Another interviewee who did not see the e-newsletter as a two-way communication tool nonetheless described email as "the most friendly form of contact outside a Facebook discussion", and another described the warm tone of a well-written email as the single most important element to build relationship: "that's about the tone… treating people with respect in terms of not overdoing it with information or hectoring or lecturing."

Data from E-Newsletter Recipients

With (at time of writing) well over 10,000 responses to the e-newsletter survey, the researchers have a wealth of data regarding e-newsletter readers' self-reported practices and preferences. Content analysis is on-going, but, from analysis of the first thirteen completed surveys, certain preliminary findings stand in interesting counterpoint to the conjectures of the non-profit communication heads.

Responses from e-newsletter recipients supported the often-expressed organisational view that brevity of communication is important. 81.9% of survey respondents reported spending five minutes or fewer reading an e-newsletter (with 18.1% reporting more than five minutes, n=6178[ii]).

When asked about their preferences for frequency of delivery, responses showed a great deal of variation between the individual non-profit organisations, in line with the widely divergent missions represented amongst the organisations. While no one delivery frequency stood out as most preferred, very few recipients wished to receive an e-newsletter more frequently than once a month: 45.4% preferred monthly delivery; 45.1% preferred quarterly; and only 5.5% expressed a wish for weekly e-newsletters (n=6612).

In response to the open-ended question, "What, if anything, would make you more likely to read [organisation]'s e-newsletter?" a very broad range of responses were received. Responses showed strong differentiation between readerships of individual organisations, reflecting, for example, a high percentage of requests for more photographs from organisations that deal with animals, in contrast to a large number of requests for diagnostic and how-to guides from organisations with a health focus. Overall, recipients articulated a stronger preference for visual elements than for written content– pictures and photos were most often mentioned as elements readers would like more of. Videos were rarely mentioned. A very wide range of comments were received regarding aspects of format and readability: readers mentioned (among many other points) the need for informative headings, bullet points, and the importance of formatting content appropriately for mobile devices. While this data set is still being analysed, it seems clear that the majority of format-related comments have to do with speed and ease of readability, and reflect the perspective of an interested but time-poor readership.

And finally, we sought to discover if e-newsletter recipients report that this tool makes them feel more connected to the organisation, given that organisations express hope but not certainty that it does. In response to the question, "Do you feel more or less connected to the organisation because

of the e-newsletter?", 76.6% of respondents said more connected; a mere 1.5% said less connected (21.9% said undecided/can't say; n=5094). And in response to the question, "Is the e-newsletter a useful relationship tool?" the feedback was even more positive: 85.7% of respondents replied yes, it is a useful relationship tool, a mere 3.6% saying no (n=5069).

Conclusions and Recommendations

It is abundantly clear that using electronic and online media to communicate with stakeholders offers non-profit organisations valuable opportunities to achieve significant impact for their communication efforts, at a minimal cost. While this truth has been generally recognised and embraced by non-profit organisations, the lack of relevant research or measurement of stakeholders' response has meant organisations often develop and send out e-newsletters in an act of blind faith, with no reasoned expectation of particular responsive action or attitudinal change. Our findings suggest that non-profit organisations may not realise the full potential and value of e-newsletters as a strategic communication tool.

The research revealed a high percentage of non-profits could articulate clear objectives for their e-newsletters, but few reported they were realising those objectives: an observable asynchronicity exists between the goals the organisations stated for their e-newsletter and the actual effects or benefits the e-newsletter achieved. For example, while a strong majority of organisations identified fundraising as a primary goal of the e-newsletter, only a small minority reported seeing a significant increase in donations or fundraising success as correlated to their e-newsletter. Organisations appear presently to pay relatively little attention to the fact that articulated communication goals remain unachieved, and perhaps even more significant is the lack of urgency articulated by the organisations in response to these unmet goals.

While most non-profit organisations reported keeping an informal eye on the opening rates of their e-newsletters, only a small percentage of non-profit organisations were systematically using analytics to gain an understanding of their readers' actual reading practices. Communication and public relations literature agrees it is essential to regularly and consistently assess the effectiveness of communication efforts and channels in order to meet the changing needs of the organisation's stakeholders, as well as to adapt to and keep pace with the dynamic nature of non-profits' missions. This means responsive analysis of existing tools and channels, as well as investigation of new and developing tools and channels. A number of assumptions were also voiced by organisations concerning subscribers' wishes concerning effective e-newsletters, which differed in a number of ways from the actual views of subscribers themselves. For example, while organisations' regularly articulated belief that readers valued brevity was generally supported by the evidence from readers themselves, the widely held assumption that all readers want graphic-heavy e-newsletters was definitely not true of a number of survey respondents, and stakeholder groups of individual non-profits show distinct characteristics and preferences in terms of the format and appearance of the e-newsletter.

Overall, a very high percentage of recipients indicate that the e-newsletters they receive do make them feel more connected to the non-profit organisation that sent it. Given the existing positive attitude towards the e-newsletter, we believe non-profits should be more proactive in seeking to maximise the benefits of this channel as a relationship-building tool. While on-going, the study has to date produced a number of preliminary recommendations for non-profit organisations to make more effective use of e-newsletters.

- Organisations must articulate more clearly a communication strategy to underpin e-newsletter use, and measure whether identifiable goals are or are not being met.
- Organisations should regularly and consistently use metrics, with many straight-forward measures readily available within common e-newsletter platforms such as MailChimp. For

example, assessing the click-through rates of particular stories can help organisations begin to know if their messages (and the subject lines and headlines) are or are not 'hitting the mark'.

- Organisations need to continue to be sensitive to the strongly expressed wish for brevity of messages, from e-newsletter recipients.
- Because of the diversity of mission represented in the organisational sample, it is difficult to produce across-the-board recommendations concerning such issues as optimal frequency of e-newsletter delivery. However, it would be straight-forward for individual organisations to poll subscribers as to their preferences.
- Organisations should not rely on untested assumptions as to what recipients actually want. Our findings suggest that reader preference cannot be generalised across the entire sector, and that preferences for content and format vary widely according to the nature of the individual organisation that a reader supports. Again, there is a strong case to be made for non-profits to survey their own stakeholders to ensure they have an accurate understanding of reader preferences.

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[i] This figure is correct as of July 28, 2014. Surveying is on-going and the respondent data-set thus continues to grow.

[ii] Figures for *n* in the discussion of the data vary as they reflect the sample population that answered each individual question.