



Newsletters – To Print or Not to Print That is the Question

(excerpt)

by Elaine Fogel

Of the many marketing communications vehicles available, few have been embraced more than the newsletter. For decades, recipients could bank on receiving a quarterly printed information piece in the mail—very often in two-color and understated, to make it look as if the organization or company hadn't invested too heavily in production. Many small businesses or nonprofits didn't want to look rich, and even some larger companies downplayed the look of newsletters to appear "down-to-earth" or frugal.

Today, many companies and nonprofits have jumped on the e-newsletter bandwagon with much enthusiasm, adopting it as their communication vehicle of choice. It's true that e-newsletters are more cost-effective to produce. For small businesses and nonprofits, there are no printing costs, stamps, or envelopes to stuff, and for larger companies, no mail houses to involve. Plus, it can be delivered instantly, making email a timely communication channel.

However, those who choose to use one channel exclusively over the other may not be making the best marketing decision. Let's first look at the printed newsletter from its inception, and examine objectives and content before its production and distribution.

Strategy First

Even though your organization may have been producing a newsletter forever, "because you've always done it that way" is not an excuse to avoid strategizing; it's worth taking the time to sit down and talk strategy. What is the purpose of your newsletter? Who is your audience? What do you hope to gain as your return on investment (ROI) from this communication piece?

In an ideal world, your organization or company should have a bona fide marketing plan and subsequent communications plan. For those with substantial budgets or marketing and communications staff, this is an important part of annual, pre-budget planning. Yet, in smaller organizations and businesses with limited or no marketing staff, developing a marketing or communications plan may seem impractical. Often, just keeping up with daily activities is enough to keep staff busy year-round.

So how to deal with your newsletter needs? Ask for professional help. It's wise not to make the attempt on your own, unless you have the internal marketing or communications staff to manage it. Many small-to-midsized businesses and nonprofits that assign this task to a clerical staff person typically wind up with unprofessional results that diminish the credibility of their brands.

Small-to-midsized businesses: If you don't currently outsource your marketing requirements, ask colleagues for referrals of local consultants or agencies. It will be beneficial to hand your newsletter production over to someone with the experience to provide it all—copywriting, design, layout, and project management—taking the burden off you and your staff and allowing you to continue doing your work.

Nonprofits: If you don't outsource your marketing requirements, ask your marketing and communications committee, if you have one, for assistance. Otherwise, ask your volunteers or board members to recommend professionals or agencies in your community who may consider volunteering their time. Local community colleges or university communications students often need to develop projects or take on internships for credit. It's also important for them to have an impressive portfolio in order to get entry-level jobs after graduation.

Do some market research. Whether your staff or an outsourced consultant tackles this, create a written survey or call a random group from your database to find out how people prefer their communication, what they want to know about your organization, and what they like and don't like about your current publications. There's nothing more valuable than asking your constituencies.

Next, identify your various audiences. Who are your market segments? Customers, clients, donors, volunteers, members, etc.? If you can develop a solid segmentation strategy, you can tailor your messaging and content to accommodate needs, wants, and interests. From there, you can break it down even further if you have the resources. For example, businesses that communicate with customers can sub-segment into smaller groups by product line or service. Nonprofits that communicate with donors can sub-segment into major donors, monthly donors, planned giving prospects, and funders—government, corporate or foundation, for example.

I've heard of cases of medium-sized or larger organizations, with several market segments and adequate budgets, moving from a variety of segmented newsletters to an "all-in-one" communication piece. In my opinion, that is a grave error. The basic principle of marketing is to target the message to your audience. It would be difficult to create one piece of communication that can engage them all. If you have the budget to segment, you'll see better results. If not, try to develop a feature in each issue that targets each of your segments.

Determining your overall strategic objectives will help you develop the criteria for evaluation. Here are a few examples:

- Show accountability to stakeholders/shareholders.
- Market existing or new products, services, programs, events, fundraising, or membership activities.
- Raise your profile/build your brand.
- Convey your strengths to assess needs or serve as a solutions partner.
- Businesses should promote what differentiates them in the marketplace.; nonprofits should promote their case for support and need for more revenue.
- Stay top-of-mind with your market segments.
- Play a role in your marketing mix, complementing other marketing communications vehicles.

This excerpt was provided by the author with permission. To obtain a copy of the entire e-book, visit http://www.solutionsmc.net/index_files/newsletter_ebook_offer.htm.

Elaine Fogel is president and CMO of Solutions Marketing & Consulting LLC (www.solutionsmc.net), a senior contributor to MarketingProfes.com, and a writer for the MarketingProfes Daily Fix (blog.marketingprofes.com). You can reach Elaine at elaine@solutionsmc.net.