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AUTHOR Adler, Ralph
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ABSTRACT

The newsletter, a publication printed on a regular basis that has a clearly defined, intriguing, and thoughtful content purpose for serving a specific audience, usually acts as a conceptual bridge between an organization and that group. A newsletter begun without good planning and without a clearly defined purpose, however, could end up being nothing more than a drain on resources: a regularly scheduled pain in the neck. A few components of a good newsletter include: (1) a series of smaller purposes that complement the main purpose and that provide variety for the reader; (2) a tone and voice that is consistent from issue to issue; and (3) a graphic style that is not only consistent from issue to issue, but also allows for some measure of visual variety to distinguish one issue from another. Once the conceptual aspects of the newsletter have been handled, the practical matters such as deciding on an editor and determining who will write the newsletter remain to be considered. It is useful to compare the undertaking of a newsletter to the gearing up of a small new business (within a larger organization) with its own staffing, budget, and procedures. (KM)

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The Definitive Newsletter

*by C. Ralph Adler
Research Associate*

*RMC Research Corporation
400 Lafayette Road
Hampton, New Hampshire 03842*

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The Definitive Newsletter

It may be your first instinct (it's almost *everyone's* first instinct). To promote a program, to make yourself known, publish a newsletter. Sounds even better than a brochure because a newsletter comes out regularly and provides a continual, symbolic reminder of the product or service. And once it gets going, it almost flies on its own.

In fact, a newsletter, properly conceived and produced, can do all of those things (except it *will never fly on its own*). But a newsletter begun without good planning and a clearly defined purpose will probably end up nothing more than a drain on resources, and a regularly scheduled pain in the neck.

Think of a newsletter as a young child. In the beginning, it's fun to feed and dress up. But soon it will need to be fed and dressed again...and then again...and then again. The excitement and newness of it wears off. But it still needs loving attention and care. If a newsletter is not conceived with a deeper meaning and purpose, it will soon become a burdensome chore.

Here are a few questions to ask yourself when the idea of a newsletter first comes up.

- *Do I have one message or many messages?*
(If you have one message, issues two, three, and four of your newsletter will have very little to say.)
- *Is the quality or significance of my messages worth giving people on a regular basis?*
(Most people are inundated with reading material. Can you make it worth their time to visit with you via newsletter every month or so? Or are you more more likely to contribute to the paper glut and reading overload that plagues all of us?)
- *Does everyone need to hear all of my messages?*
(If your information is really directed towards subgroups of your overall audience, a newsletter for everyone can be a burden on readers, not a help.)
- *Is there a better way to get my messages across?*
(A newsletter is often the very first thought when considering promotion efforts. Would a one-time brochure, an occasional letter, a finite series of purpose-specific publications, an inexpensive advertising campaign, or simple personal contact work better?)
- *Do I have the time and resources at my disposal to support a regular publication of a newsletter?*
- *Personally, do I have the energy to devote to the production of a regularly occurring publication?*

Defining the Definitive Newsletter

One dictionary defines "newsletter" this way: a printed periodical report devoted to news for a special interest group. (Periodical, by the way, is defined as a publication issued at regular intervals of more than one day.) Another dictionary defines newsletter as "a newspaper containing news or information of interest chiefly to a special group." Clearly, the key words are printed, regular, and special interest group. What isn't clear is content -- the vast range of possibilities suggested by the words "news" and "information."

If you can't clearly and quickly define the character of the regular content that will fill the newsletter shell each issue, there is probably good reason to reconsider newsletter publication.

A common example: a group, when asked to state why it wants to publish a newsletter, says "to maintain regular contact with our clients and constituents." They define the newsletter in terms of whom they want to reach, not what they want to reach them with. A newsletter differs from other types of publications because of its content more than because it comes out frequently. Careful attention must be given to the newsletter's "personality" (i.e., the tenor, tone, and purpose of its content) in order to assure its longevity and effectiveness. Otherwise, it may die on the vine.

And be forewarned: describing the character of a newsletter's content has to go beyond "news and information to keep our clients and constituents informed about our products and services." That, still, is vaguely defined. Consider the differences between these statements of content character and purpose for these different groups:

For a technical assistance center's newsletter:

"To keep clients informed about the center's services"

vs.

"To stimulate clients' thinking on central issues in evaluation and program improvement."

For an association of regional school districts:

"To promote cohesiveness and collegiality among school districts"

vs.

"To raise and examine key problems or solutions for educational problems that apply to schools in this region."

For a local parent-teacher organization:

"To alert members to organizational meetings and other important information"

vs.

"To discuss and present members' opinions on developments in the school system."

In each of these cases, the first purpose is somewhat limited to administrative or organizational concerns. They are somewhat self indulgent because they serve the organization more than the recipient. The second purpose is more challenging, more thoughtful of the recipient, and truer to the potential and purpose of a newsletter. The first purposes listed are important ones, and should be considered as by-products of the newsletter's function, but the second purposes give the newsletter its own meaning and life.

Our definition of a newsletter, then, might read something like this: a publication printed on a regular basis that has a clearly defined, intriguing, and thoughtful content purpose for serving a particular group or audience, usually serving as a conceptual bridge between an organization and that group.

Other details that complete the "picture" of a good newsletter include:

- a series of smaller purposes that complement the main purpose and provide variety and interest for the reader
- a tone and voice that is consistent from issue to issue
- a graphic style that is consistent from issue to issue, but that allows for some measure of visual variety to distinguish one issue from another

So you want to publish a newsletter...

Once you've hurdled the concept problem, there are practical matters waiting to be considered. These can largely be related to the tasks that must be managed to produce a newsletter:

- **Editorial.** Who will edit the newsletter? Editing means deciding on an issue's content; making writing assignments; monitoring schedules and deadlines; supervising design, typesetting, and mechanical production; and managing the printing process, among other things. (Of course, then there's the actual editing of the written material that comes in.) While some of these tasks can be handled by an editorial committee, we strongly suggest that one individual - an editor - be assigned to shepherd the newsletter through its various processes.
- **Writing.** Who will write the newsletter? You, staff members, associates, writing students, professional freelancers? Will they be paid? Can they be counted on to contribute on a regular basis to develop a sense of consistency in the tone of the newsletter? Are they deadline-dependable? Can they write well?
- **Design.** Who will design the newsletter? You, staff members, design students, a professional design firm? What budget is available? Who will decide upon the final "shell" design that your publication will live with for a long time? Will your designers be dependable? Are their costs reasonable? (A note of caution and comfort: even the most experienced publications professionals have trouble mastering the ins and outs of working with designers, especially in budgeting and billing. The best overall advice is to find someone with whom you are comfortable, whose billing process you understand, and whose design style you like. It's like shopping for a mechanic: find someone you can learn to trust and stay there.)
- **Production.** Who will provide production for the newsletter, such as typesetting and paste-up? Will your designer handle it? Is there someone on staff who is experienced? Does your printer offer a typesetting and paste-up service? Is desk top publishing available to save some typesetting costs?

- *Printing.* Who will print your newsletter? Should it be photo-copied in-house? What local printer offers the best cost, quality, and service? (Finding a trustworthy printer is even harder than finding a good mechanic...it's more like finding a good doctor. Much depends on the dependability of the customer representative, who can make or break a relationship with a printer. Again, the best bet is to screen them carefully, settle on one who seems professional and helpful, and test the relationship over a couple of issues.)

- *Distribution.* How will the newsletter be distributed? Who will receive it? How will you collect names and addresses for a mailing list? Are other mailing lists already available? What class postage will be used? What are the postal regulations regarding label placement, permit numbers, sorting and bagging, and delivery to the post office?

It becomes clear that the two biggest questions you have to ask about newsletters is, first, what (will be in it) and, second, who (will do it). Undertaking the publication of a newsletter is like gearing up a small new business within an organization, with its own staffing, budget, and procedures. Even small businesses demand a great deal of energy -- thinking through the potential problems, shaping and streamlining a meaningful statement of purpose, making the "go" or "no go" decision based on practical considerations, then stepping into production with a full understanding of the effort involved will give your newsletter a life of its own, and give your organization new life as well.

What bothers you about newsletters?

Almost everyone has a complaint with some of the common failings of newsletters. Here are a few of them:

- *An unprofessional look.* A lack of professionalism, especially in education-related pieces, unwittingly undermines the credibility of the organization and the people associated with the newsletter. Some typical problems: too many type styles, no overall sense of design, silly clip art, cute or overstated commentary. Once in print, these things take on a life of their own. The more professional your "team" (including designers and writers), the more successful you will be.
 - *Inside information.* We don't mean the latest, juiciest bit of news...we mean things like staff photos or family news that is of interest to a small segment of a much broader audience.
 - *Outside information.* Information that was old probably before it hit the press. When conferences and deadlines are announced and they have already gone by when the newsletter arrives in the mailbox, readers become irritated. Remember this when you're deciding whether to publish a newsletter or not...can you meet the deadlines that will keep your information fresh?
 - *Reprint syndrome.* Extensive reprints from other sources that the audience is likely to have seen already.
 - *Long-windedness syndrome.* Remember that readers' time is precious. They probably want a "quick read" in their newsletters. Keep articles to reasonable lengths.
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