

Guide to internal newsletters
by Paul Nero MIPR
Director, Plain Text

> Be timely

Internal newsletters are never the fastest form of communication. But just as you wouldn't want to read last week's newspaper, you shouldn't expect employees to want to read old news in their newsletters.

Think: is a newsletter the right format for your communication at all? If you want employees to be aware of issues before they read them in the press or hear about it in the canteen, the weekly or monthly newsletter isn't the place to present it. They may, however, provide a useful environment for a considered summary of issues.

Newsletter content should be newsworthy. That means topical and timely.

> Be credible

Employ journalistic techniques. Newsletters must contain news, not just announcements. News, by definition, is new and, famously, something someone, somewhere doesn't want others to know. All the rest is advertising.

The dilemma for corporate editors is that publications usually exist to advertise business initiatives. Employees understand that the company newsletter inevitably takes the company line. And, to an extent, that's okay.

However, by challenging the corporate position – asking tough questions, then reporting the 'who, what, when, where, why and how' honestly and in plain language - you can at least take a middle, more credible position (although probably never an entirely independent one).

> Cut the corporate jargon

You want your newsletter to be read, so make it interesting. External audiences don't read jargon-laden corporate gobbledegook – don't expect employees to wade through it either.

> Understand your audience

You are writing for the readership, not the management. Communications sent doesn't equal communications received: just because your message is out there, doesn't mean anyone will read or understand it. Talk in the language of your audience; neither up nor down, but appropriately.

Understanding your audience doesn't necessitate regular reader-surveys (although you may want to survey them from time-to-time). Newsletter production is a creative process, as well as a business one, and you should aim to surprise readers by introducing them to something new in every edition. Surprises, though, should be pleasant ones. And you will only deliver these if you understand your readership intuitively.

> Vary the flow

Length doesn't equate to importance.

Mix the length of your stories to provide variety. 'News in brief' columns can increase the number of topics covered and can be written quickly.

Writing stories to the right length means using only as much space as it takes to tell it well. So if you have a set, unchanging design template, you may well find yourself padding stories to fit or, conversely, withholding important messages.

Remember also to balance the tone by mixing business messages with stories about real people. For every serious item, include something that is more light-hearted.

> Choose an attractive format

What does your audience find most palatable? Sixteen A4 pages or eight A3 pages? What's easiest for distribution? (Perhaps it's irrelevant if you're not going to display copies.) Are you publishing on the web? If so, what constitutes a page? How many links can one story manage?

Great publications develop over time, but you won't be able to make substantial design changes every time you publish. Get it right first time, as much as you can.

And remember: lengthy publications, or ones that are published too frequently, can be hard to fill.

> A picture tells a thousand words

Like all clichés, this one contains an element of truth.

So use photos, cartoons, graphs to support the words. Invest in a digital camera and encourage employees to use it for pictures to illustrate their stories.

> Make it personal

"What does it mean for me?" is the inevitable question resulting from some corporate announcements. A new business unit can mean a reorganisation that can affect jobs. Does a profits warning foretell

redundancies? Perhaps beating forecasts raises hopes of big pay rises?

Address these concerns by challenging the corporate line.

For example, when discussing the complexities of a share save scheme, you could interview someone who benefited last time. Their new double-glazing may be a more compelling reason to invest than a dull comment from the finance director.

> The true test of (relative) independence is found in the letters column

If you have a correspondence column where employees feel comfortable tackling sensitive issues, you're doing very well indeed.

It's often hard to start a lively letters page but, as with local and national newspapers, they are generally well read. Never be tempted to invent correspondence. If an employee submits a story that you don't think is quite strong enough for the news or features columns, suggest he or she pen a short letter.

> The best newsletters are edited, not just published

Editorship requires a philosophy. What exactly are you trying to achieve with your publication? Is it a tool for disseminating corporate information or an enjoyable read that engenders community?

Under the leadership of an editor, you may wish to establish an editorial panel, consisting of people at all levels from all areas of the business. The people closest to readers can provide great ideas for angles.

> Finally, use appropriate language

As always, plain, simple English is best. Even in internal publications, use acronyms and jargon sparingly. There's no guarantee everyone in the organisation will be as acquainted with the terminology as the managers who sign off copy.