Making the Most of Email Marketing

E-publishing is very "now" – whether it's a website, an e-book, an e-zine, or a blog, many of your customers probably expect that you will be communicating with them electronically.

Sending a newsletter by email is one of the easiest ways to keep in touch with your customers. An email newsletter (sometimes called an e-newsletter, ezine, or even email "blasts") allows you to highlight recent happenings related to your business, such as promotions, class schedules, product releases, and project ideas. E-newsletters can also help personify your business. According to the Nielsen Norman Group's "Email Newsletter Usability" Report, "newsletters feel personal because they arrive in users' inboxes, and users have an ongoing relationship with them. Newsletters also have a social aspect, as users often forward them to colleagues and friends." Bottom line -- Newsletters are a promotional tool that helps you keep your company in front of your customers, regularly reminding them that they want to do business with you.

Newsletter Formats

E-newsletters are typically sent out in one of three file formats: HTML (hypertext markup language), text, or PDF (portable document format). There are pros and cons for each format. Understanding them will help you decide which format you want to use for your newsletter.

HTML newsletters allow you the option of including graphics, fonts, and clickable links. Newsletters sent in this format are "prettier" – you can include product and project images, use bold and italic fonts, and splashes of color. They are often visually appealing. HTML newsletters sometimes have problems, however. They can get caught in spam filters or become unreadable by programs that don't read HTML.

Newsletters sent in text format are just plain text – no special formatting or graphics. Text newsletters don't look as appealing as HTML, but they communicate your news just as well.

You can also create your newsletters using MS Word or a desktop publishing program, save it as a PDF, and then email the PDF file to your list. PDF files maintain all the graphics and formatting of desktop publishing, so the newsletters arrive looking just as you expect. Problems can arise when email systems consider the attached file to be spam, or when list members don't have the software to view the PDF file.

My preference? I frequently suggest that businesses send newsletters in text format. That will avoid the spam filters, and ensure your message arrives as it should. You can still post an HTML version and/or the PDF file on your website, and link to it in your text newsletter.

Managing Your List

Once you decide what you want to send, you need to figure out how you're going to send it. Your primary concern is the software. Think ahead – you may start with a small handful of subscribers to your list, but plan for the expectation that you will be addressing hundreds. You don't want to start sending newsletters using a distribution list from your personal email program. It gets too cumbersome once you email more than fifty people. It's more efficient and effective to use a newsletter/list management service like Constant Contact or Get Response, a professional host that will manage your list database for you.

E-Newsletter Writing Tips

Keep these tips in mind when writing your newsletters.

- **Be timely**. Include information on events that will take place in the near future, or before you send your next newsletter.

- **Be informative**. Include project or technique how-to's, class descriptions and schedules, and store hours. Give list members the information they need to do business with you.

- **Write an attention-getting email subject line** in five to seven words. Include a benefit. Describe the main point of the newsletter, whether it's a upcoming sale, class registration deadline or new store hours.

- **Maximize your "From:" line**. Configure your email or newsletter software to list the name of your company or website, rather than just your email address. "People are far more likely to open an e-mail when they know who it's from.

- **Get to the point.**   People scan newsletters very quickly. Remember that emails are also often viewed on smaller screens, such as Outlook's preview pane, handheld PDA's and mobile phones. The sooner you communicate your main benefit, the better.

- **Don't over-promote**. "If you're currently sending out promotions regarding 10 or more different items, try cutting that down to just two or three," advises Gail Goodman, Entrepreneur.com's Email Marketing Coach and CEO of ConstantContact.com. "Include a link to your catalog so readers know what else you have to offer."

- **Publish on a predictable schedule**. Distribute something every week, every other week, monthly, or quarterly – the exact frequency doesn't matter, but being consistent does. Give customers something they know they can to look forward to.

Email Marketing Tips

- **Include email marketing in your "big picture" marketing campaign**. Send out an email blast/newsletter, then follow up with a print postcard mailer. Mention the same news points on in-store signage: "As seen in our newsletter!"

- **Include links to your store website/blog** in each of your newsletters. Emails "go viral" very easily. Make it easy for customers' friends to find you after they receive a forwarded email.

- **Offer an exclusive deal/promotion/coupon** available only in the e-newsletter. Encourage customers to sign up for the e-newsletter so they can get that deal.

- **End each section with a Call to Action** – tell them exactly what they need to do – what's "the next step". Never leave a question of HOW they should act.   Some examples of Calls to Action:
    o Call Now
    o Register Today
    o Visit Our Website
    o Email Me
    o Come in for your complimentary tip sheet
    o Bring this coupon

- **Include your contact information** in every communication. Don't make them search for it.

- **Include unsubscription information in every newsletter**. It's the law. (Many newsletter management hosts do this automatically.)

Email has become entrenched in our daily lives – most of your customers check theirs often. Chances are good that your competitors may already in your customers' inboxes. Will you be there too?

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Resources

Find print newsletter templates on the Microsoft Office website:
http://snipurl.com/newsletter_templates

Create PDF files from almost any printable document. Free for personal and commercial use, with no watermarks. http://www.cutepdf.com

Google's Docs & Spreadsheets also offers an option to Print to PDF:
http://docs.google.com

Newsletter management & distribution
- http://www.constantcontact.com
- http://www.getresponse.com/
- http://www.intellicontact.com
- http://www.mailworkspro.com/

How to grow your subscriber list

- When you receive a business card, specifically ask the person, "Would it be all right if I add you to my email newsletter list? It's a short weekly tip to improve your scrapbooking." If they agree, have them write on the back of their card, "Newsletter, please", or write it for them. If they don't want to be on your list, write, "No newsletter".

- On your own business card, offer a free "Special Report" via autoresponder. When people go to your site to request the report, make it clear that by doing so, they are also subscribing ("opting in") to your newsletter, which is jam-packed with information and valuable tips, just like the Special Report they are requesting.

- Include the newsletter subscription information on class handouts. When they go to the website to sign up, they "opt in", which protects you from accusations of spam.

- Include newsletter subscription information on door prize entry forms. Attendees can provide their name and email address to enter for the prize drawing. On the entry form, include a little check box, next to the text, "Please add me to your e-newsletter mailing list."