

# Give Your Nonprofit's Newsletter a Reason to Live

by Kivi Leroux Miller

Based on my experience and several surveys we've done at NonprofitMarketingGuide.com, nonprofits spend more time on their newsletters than on any other type of publication they produce. If it's a print production, the newsletter is likely an expensive item, too. In our 2013 Nonprofit Communications Trends Report, we asked nonprofit communicators which types of content take most of their time. E-newsletter articles received the most votes.

Should it be that way, or are nonprofits wasting too much time and money on newsletters? The answer for your nonprofit can be found within another question: Does your newsletter have a clear purpose...a motivating reason to live?

Newsletters do consume huge amounts of time and money, and if you don't know why you are producing the thing—really know why—then you are probably throwing that time and money into a bottomless pit. Better to kill the newsletter than to publish without good reason.

So what are legitimate reasons for a newsletter to continue to live within your organization's communications plan?

Some people know they are writing a newsletter for donors, and therefore make the content very donor-centric, even if they don't actually fundraise directly through the newsletter. They use the newsletter as a way to thank donors, to share successes, and to convey a sense of community. Others write donor-centric newsletters and DO use their newsletters to seek donations. These newsletters make donors feel so good about their previous contributions that they can't help but tuck a check inside the enclosed envelope and rush it back to the organization.

But there's another category of nonprofit newsletters that are less about fundraising and more about communicating information—news, in other words. Nonprofits that serve a professional community in some way often publish such newsletters. Some advocacy organizations produce newsletters that are heavy on educational content for the people they hope will be the messengers for their cause.

## Start with the ultimate goal

If you are having trouble figuring out what to include in your newsletter, start with the ultimate goal—the action that you want the reader to take. What do you want people to do with the information you are sharing?

- Do you want readers to simply learn more about the information in your newsletter? Do you want them to share it with a colleague? Discuss it with others? Make a change in their own behaviors?
- Or is your newsletter really aimed at convincing them to give again, or to volunteer, or to otherwise directly help your organization?

Once you know the answer, you can focus (or re-focus) the content, and you'll be well on your way to creating a newsletter that really is worth the time and money.

### At a glance

Newsletters, whether print or email, consume more time than any other type of publication a nonprofit produces. In this article, marketing communications expert Kivi Leroux Miller challenges you to consider whether your newsletter is serving a strategic goal, and if so, to be sure it is meeting that goal. She also provides some interesting stats from a recent survey of nonprofit communicators, including:

- The most popular length for a print newsletter is four pages.
- The most popular format for a nonprofit e-newsletter is one main article, with teaser summaries and links to other articles.
- Two-thirds of nonprofits participating in the survey send their email newsletters at least monthly.

## The state of newsletters

During the summer of 2012, we at NonprofitMarketingGuide.com surveyed 419 nonprofits about the state of their newsletters. Here's what we found:

### Print newsletters

- The most popular length for a print newsletter is four pages (33% of those publishing a print newsletter), followed by eight pages (23%).
- Nonprofit print newsletters are the same length or shorter today than they were in 2010, with only about 12% saying their print newsletter is now longer than it was in 2010.
- Quarterly distribution of print newsletters is most popular (40% of those publishing a print newsletter), followed by twice a year (33%).

### Email newsletters

The most popular format for a nonprofit e-newsletter is one main article, with teaser summaries and links to other articles (as reported by 38% of nonprofits who are publishing an email newsletter). After that the format varies quite a bit.

- The following formats are used by 11–12% of the nonprofits that responded to our survey:
  - Four or more complete articles.
  - Two main articles with teasers and links to others.
  - Three main articles with teaser and links to others.
  - Four or more articles with teasers and links to others.
- About half (49%) say this length is the same as it was in 2010, while an equal number (26%) say that length is either longer or shorter than in 2010.
- Of those participating in the survey, 66% of nonprofits that send email newsletters do so at least monthly (8% weekly, 11% twice a month, 47% monthly).
- Nearly half, 48%, say this is the same frequency as in 2010, while 42% said it was more frequent. Only 10% said they were sending email newsletters less frequently than in 2010.

The newsletter is a valuable communications tool for nonprofits. It always has been, and likely always will be. But don't let your habit of doing one get in the way of making strategic decisions about its role in your communications strategy. Like any other communications channel, it will perform better for you if you set clear goals for it, and give it a reason to live.



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