

PUBLIC RELATIONS

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WHAT IS A NEWSLETTER?

A newsletter is a printed report of information and ideas that is distributed on a regular basis (e.g., monthly or semi-annually) to a group of interested people. Newsletters are typically from two to eight pages in length. They vary considerably in cost, quality and content.

WHY SHOULD YOU CREATE A NEWSLETTER?

- To keep your members up to date about what's going on.
- To keep the public informed as well.
- To educate all readers about issues and ideas that concern your group.
- To build cohesion and a sense of pride among your members.
- To spark new interest in, and increase recognition of, your agency.
- To offer a format for information exchange that doesn't yet exist in the community.
- To reduce the amount of time spent on information sharing at your group meetings.
- To announce your regular meeting.
- To replace meeting minutes by creating a section in the newsletter devoted to meeting summaries.

WHEN SHOULD YOU CREATE A NEWSLETTER?

A newsletter may be started at any time during the life of a group or organization (although earlier is usually better!), and especially when:

- You need to get a lot of information to a lot of people on a regular basis.
- You want to educate or inform the community on important issues.
- You want to attract new members.
- You want to build a sense of common purpose, or motivation -- or both -- among members.
- You want to get feedback *from* your members.
- You want to increase recognition for your organization or belief in its cause.
- You want the public to view you as a credible and significant group.

These are all good reasons, but creating a good newsletter, and keeping it going, takes a lot of time and effort. You should also consider how often you'll publish. Newsletters are usually published monthly, bimonthly, or quarterly. Your choice here will depend on the size of your organization and its available resources. Are you ready to make this commitment? If you are, check out the "How to do it: starting questions" and "Next steps!" sections.

HOW DO YOU START A NEWSLETTER?

Your group is unique. Your newsletter will be, too. There are many ways to produce a good newsletter. Before you start, here are some basic questions to ask yourself. When you answer them, you'll be better able to create a newsletter best suits you and your group.

- What is the primary purpose of the newsletter?
- What are the other purposes?
- Who is the audience?
- How frequently do you want the newsletter to appear?
- How many copies do you want to produce for each issue?
- How much will this cost?
- How much can you afford?
- Who will design and edit the newsletter?
- Who will write the articles?
- How will you distribute the newsletter to its audience?

- How will you know if you have been successful?

WHAT ARE THE STEPS IN PRODUCING A NEWSLETTER?

After answering the questions in the last section, there are some important next steps to take.

Decide whether you will publish the newsletter yourself or use professionals. This will depend on the time, money, and skill you have available. You should also consider the impression your newsletter will make on your audience and the image you want to project when deciding whether or not to do it yourself. Outside help doesn't have to cost a lot. On the other hand, getting a newsletter out may require you do it yourself.

If you want to produce the newsletter yourself, make sure you have the necessary tools at your disposal:

- A typewriter and access to a copier;
- If you are using a computer, software that includes a capacity for word processing, page design, and graphics;
- A high quality printer;
- A sense of humor and a lot of patience!

If you want to have the newsletter done by a professional:

- Get your copy shop, professional printer, or graphic artist involved before going beyond the planning stage. Don't be afraid to talk to professionals; they may be willing to contribute their services or offer them at a reduced rate.
- You might use a copy shop if you are cutting and pasting from typewritten material.
- Computers that make layout and printing easier can be found there, too.
- Graphic artists can make layout and printing more attractive and interesting, and help convey information better.
- You can take camera-ready copy (everything is finished) to a professional for final printing.

- Confirm every aspect of the printing process at this time, including cost, time, what color is to be used, grade of paper, etc.

Steps for all newsletters

- Decide what will be in the issue and how much of each will be included -- for example, articles, features, news notes, and opinion pieces.
- Design the layout for the newsletter.
- Write the articles for the newsletter -- or have them written.
- Edit the articles -- for content, for style, and for space.
- Edit them again -- mistakes are very expensive, and they don't look good. Ask someone else to help you with proofreading. (On the other hand, one of the ways you will know people are reading your newsletter is when they call you about typos!)
- If you are having your newsletter professionally printed, take the final copy to the printer.
- Check the final copy one last time for any errors in printing or editing.
- Mail or otherwise distribute the newsletter.
- Get as much feedback as you can about the issue.
- Bask in the sun for awhile, and then take a deep breath, and repeat the process over again!

HOW DO YOU GET OTHERS TO CONTRIBUTE?

Remember, there is no need to be the Lone Ranger when it comes to writing articles or distributing information. Others can -- and should -- help you; it not only decreases your workload, but it also gives others in your group a sense of ownership and pride in the newsletter. Here are some tips for encouraging participation.

- Find other members to help plan the newsletter with you.
- Invite member articles, features, and columns; an occasional guest columnist can add luster.
- Pass around a sheet for written announcements and story ideas at your group meetings.

- Replace minutes with task force summaries in the newsletter.
- Reprint news coverage of the coalition.
- Borrow from other materials people send to you.

WHAT ELSE SHOULD YOU KNOW ABOUT NEWSLETTERS?

Now it's time to learn how to put the newsletter together to create an attractive and informational final product. The following offers more specific information about design and layout basics, cost saving tips, and production.

Words and graphics

The **masthead** is the title on the front page of every newsletter.

- Keep the name of your newsletter short and catchy.
- Consider using your organization's logo or symbol as part of the title.
- Consider having a professional design this part of the newsletter, even if the rest is done in-house. The masthead is the first thing that people will notice: make it memorable.

The **font** is the style of typeface you use.

- For the text of your articles, using **serif (or "hooked") fonts** instead of **sans serif fonts** make your text easier to read. Serifs are small strokes at the ends of the main strokes of a letter (examples that are appropriate for newsletters include Times New Roman, Bookman, and Palatino) are easier to read.
- The **sans serif** fonts -- those that don't have serifs -- (Arial, Helvetica, and Avant Garde, for example) are more appropriate for headlines.
- Whatever fonts you do decide to use, be consistent. The use of only two or three different fonts will give your newsletter a sleeker, more professional appearance. Using a bunch of different fonts might be really tempting, but it can make a page look really tacky. Exercise some restraint!
- Use *italics* sparingly -- words in italics are difficult to read.

- When you have two or more columns, justifying your type makes it more readable.

The **headline** is the short title or introduction summarizing the main ideas of an article.

- Print them in the same color as the article for easier reading.
- Set them like sentences without periods (i.e., capitalize only the first letter of each sentence).

The **articles** are the stories and text that explain the different events, issues and plans that are important to your group.

- Except for technical newsletters, articles should be written at approximately an eighth-grade reading level. (Some computerized grammar checkers can help with this.)
- Typically, font size in articles is at 10 to 12 points.
- Choose a topic that's interesting to you and that others might enjoy. Ask around; find out what others want to know about.
- Ask yourself these two questions before you start writing: 1) who is my audience? and 2) what main ideas do I want them to understand? Keeping the answers to these in mind should prove helpful to you in your writing.
- Organize your ideas before you begin; consider making an outline.
- Avoid complicated words and lengthy sentences.
- Using examples to back up your ideas helps others understand you better.
- Always proofread your article for spelling and grammar errors as well as overall understanding.
- Whenever possible, have another person look over it before you turn in your final draft.

Layout basics

- Use two to three columns per 8 1/2" x 11" page for easy reading.
- Limit each page to no more than three to four articles.

- Don't be afraid of white space! It gives the reader a place to rest his or her eyes. A page with very little white space is less readable than one that has a moderate amount. Keep white space at the edges of the page, not the center.
- Take a couple of steps back and look at each page. Does it look balanced? Generally, lighter items should be towards the top of the page and darker ones should be towards the bottom.
- Use graphics, clip art, or photographs to break up the text and give your newsletter a more polished appearance. Photographs will give your newsletter a professional look, if you can afford them.
- Consider keeping your newsletter at six pages or under (four is often ideal). This will keep costs down and make readers less likely to feel that there is too much to read.
- Consider using a consistent layout that will make your newsletter more familiar to your readers.

Production

Depending on your budget, you may choose to have your newsletter printed professionally. This may be as simple as saying "photocopy this" or may be more complex for a more professional look. A professional printer has the added advantages (and costs) of the use of a wider variety of colors and papers, as well as the ability to print photographs with clarity. If you have the resources, you should consider using professional services to produce the highest quality newsletter possible. When working with a professional printer, consider the following:

- Involve the printer from the very beginning. Talk to the printer about every detail of your goals, your dreams, your budget, and your timeline.
- When choosing paper, stick with neutral colors such as white, tan, or light gray that are not jarring to the eye. Paper that has been recycled or has a slightly "grainy" look is appropriate as well.

- Request a second "spot color" to add life to your newsletter without adding too much cost.
- Ask for the standard paper size that the print shop typically uses for other orders; it's usually the cheapest.
- Learn some of the vocabulary of printing so there will be no confusion when you speak with your printer.
- Listen carefully to the printer's advice; but remember, it's your newsletter, so it's up to you to make the final decisions.

Cost saving tips

- Consider selling "advertising" to help cover the cost of your newsletter. This can be as easy as photocopying someone's business card.
- Determine if you qualify for non-profit status to lower your postage rates. Check into bulk mailing and bar codes. Your post office can help here.
- Consider other means of distributing your newsletter besides using the mail. For example, place the newsletter where it might be picked up and read (in health clinics, in churches, in teen centers, hospitals, the grocery store, etc.) Be creative!
- Decide how often you really need the newsletter to go out. Does your organization have enough to say that you need to have a monthly letter; or will a semimonthly or even a quarterly newsletter do the job?
- Move through every step of the process of creating your newsletter carefully, and make sure to edit as you go along. Mistakes are expensive! Have another person take a final look with you.
- Ask your printer or other newsletter editors how your newsletter can be done for less.