

How to create an effective, eye-catching Internet newsletter

Because of their low cost, attractive full-color designs and quick production turnaround time, online Internet and Intranet newsletters have quickly become one of the fastest growing segments of company newsletter publishing.

Whether you're planning on publishing an Internet newsletter to attract new customers or an Intranet newsletter to keep employees up to date on company happenings, online newsletters can be a very effective tool for your business - if done properly.

Here are some tips to make sure your online newsletter is successful:

Use a multi-column layout. Lines of text that stretch from one edge of the screen to the other are not only boring to look at, they're more difficult to read.

Shorter text lines make it easier for readers to keep their place when following text from the end of one line to the start of the next line. That's why newspapers and magazines, in both their printed and online versions, always break up a page's text into multiple columns.

Follow the lead of the professionals and do the same with your online newsletter.

In the online newsletters that my company produces, we prefer to use a design that breaks a Web page into two columns - just like this Web page that you are now viewing.

The first column is on the left side and takes about one-third the width of the newsletter. The second column, on the right side of the screen, is wider and takes up the remaining two-thirds of the publication.

The narrower left column is an ideal place to run your newsletter's table of contents, including links to all your articles. For added impact, you can tint this left column with a background color.

The right column is then used mainly for headlines, photos and articles.

Use graphics, but don't overdo them. Photos, artwork and other graphics will make your newsletter more eye-catching. However, these graphics are a double-edged sword because the more you use, the longer it'll take for your pages to load on your readers' browsers.

If a Web page takes too long to load, viewers will get impatient and move on without reading your pages. Here are some ideas for using graphics effectively:

When deciding whether to run a graphic large or small, go for the smaller size - unless there's important detail in the graphic that will be lost when it's reduced to a smaller size.

Minimize the download time of your graphics by limiting the resolution to 72 DPI (dots per inch). Most computer monitors can't display any higher than 72 DPI, so there is no need to make Web page graphics with a resolution that is any higher. A 300 DPI graphic won't look any better on a computer monitor - it'll just have a much greater file size and take much longer to load on a browser.

Instead of over-using graphics, use fancier text elements to dress up your pages. Colored drop caps (the large first letter of an article, like at the beginning of this story), pull quotes (for example, see the gray box with purple lettering farther down in this article) and reverses (the "OUR SERVICES" box in the left column is a sample) can all be done without adding independent graphics to your Web page. These fancier text elements can all be programmed into your Web page without adding significantly to the file size.

Before putting your completed newsletter online, be sure to view it in multiple browsers and monitors. Unfortunately, a Web page will look different depending on the kind of browser used. That's why it's a good idea to proof your newsletter in multiple browsers.

Most Internet surfers use either Netscape Navigator or Microsoft Explorer. These browsers can be downloaded free from their company's respective Web sites, so be sure to get a copy of each. Then, proof your newsletter separately in each browser.

Your Web pages may also appear differently depending on the user's computer monitor settings (VGA vs. SVGA, 256 color vs. true color, etc.). The current standard is an SVGA monitor operating in true color.

However, if you're creating an online employee newsletter and you know that many people in your company have the older, smaller VGA monitors that operate in 256-color mode, you better proof your online newsletter with one of those monitors, too. Chances are, the newsletter will look drastically different.

Increase readership by submitting the Web address of each newsletter issue to the major search engines for indexing.

If your goal is to use your online newsletter to promote your company's products and services, be sure to submit each new issue of your publication to the major search engines. These search engines have the potential to send a lot of viewers to your online newsletter.

Send an e-mail to your subscribers to announce each new issue.

One drawback of an online newsletter is that readers forget to check for new issues. It's not like a printed newsletter, which is more visible to readers because they see each new issue when it arrives in their mailbox.

That's why it's important to maintain a database of your subscribers' e-mail addresses. Then when each new issue is available online, send your subscribers an e-mail telling them the Internet address where they can find the new issue, as well as a brief description of the articles that are featured.

Don't have any subscribers? You can build a list of subscribers by putting a message in your online newsletter saying, "Don't miss future issues! Send us your e-mail address and we'll notify you when each new issue comes out."

Archive your back issues and add search features to your Web site.

Don't replace the previous issue of your newsletter with the newest version. Instead, make an online archive of your newsletter's back issues. Your newsletter archive would not only be a great resource for your readers, it would also make your Web site deeper in content. And the more useful content your Web site has, the more traffic that will be sent to your online newsletter from the search engines.

Once you have about a half dozen issues in your archive, make it a searchable archive. Internal search engines allow users to search your Web site internally, for specific words and terms. This makes it easy for your regular readers to search back issues for specific information.

Monitor the readership of your online newsletter with a Web statistics program.

If your Webmaster installs a statistics program on your online newsletter's server, you can get invaluable feedback about your publication and its readers.

For instance, typical Web statistics programs let you see how many people have viewed your newsletter; which Web pages within your newsletter are most popular; how much time the average viewer spends on each page; and which external Web sites and search engines referred viewers to your newsletter (in other words, which Web sites have links to your newsletter).

A good Web statistics program is the next best thing to a readership survey.

See our Online Newsletter Service...