

## Newsletter Production: The Writing Process

When writing the library newsletter, you might notice the following phenomenon: Although you have always enjoyed writing, excelled in it at school, and looked forward to regular writing when you first envisioned publishing a library newsletter, you now face each issue with a sense of dread. Maybe your writing style vanishes when you write for a broad audience, or the newsletter has become just another of a never-ending series of tasks. Perhaps as each new issue looms before you, you sweep your eyes around the resource center and despair of ever having a reasonable subject for an article.

Luckily, as a librarian you have the organizational skills that cure newsletter angst. With proper planning, newsletter production will be more enjoyable and effective. By taking the time to craft a workable article mix and brainstorm a selection of winning article ideas, newsletter writing can become a simple, enjoyable, and powerful component of your public relations plan.

The library newsletter deserves its place among the most valuable public relations instruments. In Volume 5, *Marketing Treasures* published the cover story "Tips for Producing an Outstanding Newsletter," which focused on successful design and layout. In this issue, we will cover the substance of the newsletter. We'll help you plan the proper mix of article types, identify appropriate subjects, and introduce a few tricks to make your newsletter easier to write and read.

### Planning the Great American Newsletter: Article Mix

Proper newsletter planning begins with a determination of the mix of types of articles that will make up your newsletter. Each issue will have roughly the same mix. This repetition of regular features builds readership by creating expectations in readers who, in time, look for their favorites in every issue. Having regular features also makes material gathering easier. When something happens at the library, you'll immediately have an idea of where it will belong in the newsletter. If you seize on material that isn't appropriate for any upcoming issue but is suitable for a particular space in the regular mix, you'll have a jump-start for next

year's brainstorming.

The right article mix begins with a skeleton of article types which will be filled out with the subject matter of each issue. To find the right mix of article types for your publication, determine what you've already found useful and what you admire in other publications. Expand your search beyond library newsletters to journals, magazines, and newspapers. Aim for a mix of long and short articles, include "how-to" and "what's new" articles, articles that answer questions, and, of course, articles that boast. A liberal dose of humor, quotes, and trivia rounds out the mix.

When choosing the elements for your mix, don't worry about finding article ideas. For now, just select the mix of article categories. These might include:

- Feature Article
- Calendar of Events
- News You Can Use
- Library Quiz or Trivia
- Reviews
- Ask the Librarian (write-in column)
- Spotlight on Services
- On-Ramps to the Information Highway (developments in information technology)

After you choose your mix, construct a grid of the next year's issues to see where you should turn your efforts to find appropriate subjects. For much of the space, such as the reviews, the trivia column, and the calendar of events, the subjects will come easily. With the article mix predetermined, instead of staring down an entire blank issue, you're now only looking to fill in a handful of columns and articles.

When selecting subjects for articles, do you brainstorm each issue as writing time approaches, stopping as soon as you have enough material for the current issue? You may be cutting off idea flow just as you hit your stride. To avoid a waste of inspiration, brainstorm a year's worth of article topics at once. Not only will you come up with more and better ideas, you'll also bring continuity to your newsletter. Instead of resembling a series of loosely connected short stories, each volume will have the coherence of a novel,

## Pearls of Wisdom

Brevity might be the soul of wit, but wit is often the soul of readability. Draw readers to your newsletters by including a dash of wit—in the form of cartoons. *Marketing Treasures* has discovered a source for cartoons drawn especially for newsletters. They can be purchased individually, and the artist will even personalize the cartoon by substituting names of people in your organization in the captions. To preview the next batch of cartoons, write Newsletter Cartoons, 3906 Tecoma Drive, Crystal Lake, IL 60012.

Do terms like “fee-based” and “cost recovery” come up more and more at meetings? If you’re considering charging for library services, you’ll want to consider subscribing to the newsletter *Fee for Service*. The charter issue included articles such as “Fee-Based Information Services and Information Brokers: A Case Study in Collaboration,” “Establishing Long-Term Relationships with Your Fee-Based Clientele,” and “User Fees: Breach of Faith?” For more information, write to Fee for Service, C/O Whitnell & Associates, P.O. Box 213, R.R. No. 1, Huntsville, Ontario Canada P0A 1K0. Telephone: 416/978-1924.

Another worthwhile newsletter of particular interest to librarians is *Disability Resources Monthly*. Still in its first year, this newsletter covers “the wide variety of resources that help people with disabilities lead independent, productive, happy, successful lives.” For information, write to Disability Resources, Four Glatter Lane, Centereach, NY 11720-1032 or telephone 516/585-0290.

The ALA’s Graphics Catalog is crammed with exciting posters, bookmarks, t-shirts, keychains and postcards. An all-star cast hawks the cause of reading, featuring cele-

brated bookworms like Oprah Winfrey, Bette Middler, Marlee Matlin, Spike Lee, Harrison Ford, Jimmy Smits, Kristi Yamaguchi, Bo Jackson, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, the Simpsons, and Elvis. For a free copy of the catalog, send a postcard to ALA Graphics, 50 E. Huron Street, Chicago, IL 60611. Telephone: 800/545-2433.

Have you produced a natty newsletter, a brilliant brochure, or picture-perfect poster? If so, get them ready to submit to this year’s SLA Swap & Shop ‘cause this year the awards will include cash! Yes, you read it here first. Entries will be judged against a set of design and writing criteria (this means materials will not be judged against each other but against a set of standards) and winners will receive cash awards, courtesy of Mead Data Central. Among the judges is our very own Chris Olson, winner of numerous design awards herself. In addition to the judging, the Swap & Shop session will be expanded over two days so everyone has a chance of reviewing all the entries, and a session which reviews the winning entries will be offered. Of course, all attendees will receive a bag of samples to take home. If you would like to receive additional information send a fax to the *Marketing Treasures*’ office at 410/647-0415 or contact: Corilee Christou or Kathy Kramer at 513/865-7762. Materials must be received by Friday, April 1

National Library Week Alert: April 17-23 this year. Frank Houdek, in the December, 1993 issue of the AALL newsletter, published a list of successful law libraries activities from 1993 law library celebrations. Popular activities included raffles, awards, giveaways (food and vendor-provided items), seminars, lectures, workshops, quizzes, and book displays. More unusual activities included a scavenger hunt, firmwide e-mail messages from the library, overdue coupons reducing book fines, and readings from books that changed readers’ lives.

Maybe it’s not easy being green, but Simpson Paper Company makes it quite attractive. Their collection of recycled papers includes Quest, billed as “America’s first 100% post-consumer, nondeinked premium paper,” and Evergreen, offered in “nature-inspired colors and finishes.” Send for their paper sample kit. Write: Simpson Paper Company, One Post Street, San Francisco, California 94104.

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Annual subscription price (6 issues) \$54.00 U.S., \$59.00 Canada, \$66.00 Overseas. Subscription must be prepaid in U.S. dollars, payable to Chris Olson & Associates.

Back Issues and samples are available at \$9.00 for U.S. and Canada. Overseas orders add \$1.50. Additional binders are available at \$4.50 each.

Missing issues must be reported within 3 months of issue date. Missing issues requested after this time will be supplied at the regular back-issue price.

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building your readership and granting you greater control over the message you send out.

Long-range planning not only optimizes the overall coherence of the newsletter, it also adds depth and focus to articles. They'll have time to take their proper shape during the months you spend vaguely contemplating the topics as you go about your work. Keep your staff apprised of the articles scheduled for each issue. When encouraged to contribute, staff can anecdotes and insights to newsletter articles.

### **Ideas All Around Us: Inspiration in the Library**

Perhaps the most obvious source for feature article ideas in a public relations piece is library events. The gala fundraiser you sponsored has the makings of a front-page article. If you hosted a blood bank, a write-up is required. When the library offers a workshop or seminar, coverage should extend beyond the event itself to a summary of the key points taught or discovered. This makes interesting reading, provides helpful information, and whets appetites for the next event.

As you stare at the blank articles grid, remember that beyond the obvious public relations events, the inspiration for unlimited article ideas is right in your library. You just have to understand how the sign on your door posting your hours, or the stack of library user surveys piled up in front of you, can be turned into an article.

The sign on your door, for example, might inspire a feature article describing "A Day in the Life of the Library," which points out all the services performed within a day, and gives users a clearer picture of how and when they might use your services. The article might include a sidebar explaining when particular services are best accessed. This will not only complement the idea of time that inspired the story and provided its outline, it also might add to the operational efficiency of your library. As for the library user surveys, these can be turned into "The Library at Work," an analysis examining how the library helps its clients.

Examine your library's information sheet, orientation guide, and brochure. Much of the information in these publications can be turned into articles that will both educate clients and spotlight the library. A staff directory becomes a series of profiles introducing each staff member in turn. A list of library services leads to a series of articles focusing on each service offered.

Alert the staff that your summer issue features an article on the reference desk, and ask them to take notes on their far-flung searches. The lengths your staff goes to in order to answer reference questions makes entertaining reading and reminds staff that their hard work will not go unnoticed. When an article about online searches is slated for the fall issue, they'll enjoy noting unusual information they uncover in searches they perform now.

### **It Was a Dark and Stormy Night: Writing the Newsletter Article**

If blank paper or a blank computer screen tends to retain its pristine whiteness in your hands, you might consider working from an outline. This outline need not, perhaps even should not, be organized and detailed precisely. Sometimes a loose outline is all you need get the pen moving or the keys clicking. This outline might be just a list of the points you want to cover in roughly the order you plan to present them. Creating a more detailed outline can stifle the writing process.

But for some, the problem isn't one of stifling the writing process, but jump-starting it in the first place. Here are some tricks for sparking your writing mind:

- Tell a staff member what you want to say. Have him take notes, then compile an outline from the notes.
- Write it badly. Editing works wonders and is easier than wrestling with a blank piece of paper.
- Set a timer for 20 minutes. Put the pen to paper and write as much about the topic as you can until the buzzer buzzes. Even if it's all wrong, it will give you the elements for an outline and the energy to move forward.
- Write a letter to a friend describing the article you want to write. This will give you at least the core of the article, and sometimes the article will come out nearly perfect—just remove the salutation.

Encourage staff members to write for the newsletter. Additional writers add to the quality of the publication and give the staff a further investment in the enterprise. If they worry about their writing style, let them begin with short pieces to build their confidence and competence. Someone particularly timid about writing could be dispatched to find quotes for fillers or to research the quiz column.

A note on style: For most newsletters, corporate standards determine the tone, but whenever possible, *Marketing Treasures* favors lively, friendly writing. Writers with a

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strong style, however, should stick with that style. A highly formal writer trying to sound friendly, can sound strained or sarcastic. A casual writer trying to comply with formal writing standards often sounds overly pompous. But regardless of the tone of your writing, remember that the best writing is simple and direct.

### **Strunk & White to the Rescue: Editing and Proofreading**

No matter how good a writer you are, you should find an editor for the parts of the newsletter you write yourself. At the very least, this editor should examine your work for coherence, logical transitions, and clarity. If syntax, word choice, and fluency can be corrected, so much the better. After your work has been looked over, you can resume the role of editor, fine-tuning your own pieces and editing those written by others. If editing were reduced to a single rule, surely it would come from Strunk & White's *Elements of Style*, which says, under the topic "Omit Needless Words" that "a sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences . . ." I would add that an article should contain no unnecessary paragraphs.

When proofreading, follow this checklist from Volume 3 of *Assistant Editor*:

- Check spelling—running a computer spellcheck is a good start, but don't rely too heavily on artificial intelligence.
- Check punctuation.
- Check verb tense agreement.
- Eliminate passive voice—forms of the verb "to be" will flag this error for you.
- Look up chancy words—the ones you're not positive about the meaning of.
- Examine every "it" and "this" in your piece—can you find a noun that will make a livelier substitute?

As you proofread, personalize this checklist by adding any specific errors you're prone to commit. Proofreading also includes making all articles conform to your rules of style, checking facts, confirming the spelling of names, and ensuring that an article marked "continued on page 3" doesn't end up on page 4.

So now you have your newsletter—a good mix of article types with interesting subjects that will catch your reader's eye and draw positive attention to the information center. You wrote it with a minimum of sweat, then edited and proofread it for maximum polish. Now that you know the articles for the next several issues, your mind is already buzzing with angles and phrases. A staff member mentions

she has to leave early to attend a dinner for literacy training volunteers. Your eyes light up—staff profile subject located. You schedule a speaker for your next lunchtime workshop. As you leaf through the advance information she's sent, an article takes shape in your mind. Someone calls asking the average age of bus drivers in a small neighborhood in Jakarta. You record the trail of your search with renewed interest. Who knows where this may lead?

### **Postscript: A Farewell To Acquisitions Lists**

A library newsletter is first and foremost a public relations piece. The newsletter should focus on the library's contributions to the organization. It is not the place to post new phone extensions or calls for overdue material. And it is not the place for an acquisitions list.

Although some librarians believe that placing the list in the newsletter will increase the likelihood of the list being read, it will more likely detract from the newsletter's readability and polish. There is, however, a savvy way to exorcise the need to include your list: Choose a few new acquisitions to review in each issue. Reviews will relieve some of the urge to include the list in the newsletter, and will succeed where the acquisitions list fails: they *interest* readers in your new selections.

As for phone extensions or overdue notices, bear in mind that a public relations piece must give meaning to such information. For example, if you change your starting time from 7 a.m. to 9 a.m., a simple announcement may leave your clients feeling that yet one more service is denied to them. But an article explaining the minimal use during those hours, boasting about the money saved by a later opening, and detailing resources to consult during the hours the library is closed leaves clients satisfied. Illustrate your article with charts showing library use during those hours vs. staff time invested. Make it easy for users to see this as another example of the library acting in the best interests of the organization. By interpreting the information for the user, you have turned off-putting news into a mini-commercial for the information center.

## Worth Its Weight in Gold

Build ease into newsletter production with scheduling. A clear and workable schedule will take stress out of the days leading up to deadline, helping you create a better product. Planning shouldn't consist of picking a three-week period and noting "NEWSLETTER" in red letters on your calendar. Instead, write down the steps in the production process, estimate appropriate time allowances for each, and create a production schedule. Below is a list of possible deadline considerations to include:

- Topics selected
- Topics approved and finalized
- Articles, artwork, and photos assigned
- Articles, artwork, and photos due
- Articles, artwork, and photos approved
- Articles, artwork, and photos to editor
- Editor's deadline
- Issue laid out
- Issue proofread
- Corrections made
- Final proofread complete
- Address labels generated
- Camera-ready copy produced
- Printing specifications prepared
- Camera-ready due at printer
- Printer's blueline examined and approved
- Printer's delivery date
- Newsletters labelled
- Newsletters mailed
- Original artwork received back from printer for filing
- Archive copies of newsletter filed
- Thank you notes & complimentary copies sent to contributors

Create your production schedule from the list. Start with the date the newsletter must be in the mailroom, and count out your deadlines backwards from there. Be sure to build in slippage—time allowance for unforeseen circumstances. Include slippage when the entire process moves from one set of hands to another: when the issue is submitted for approval, when corrections must be in for layout, when the issue is due at the printer's.

When you have a realistic schedule, send it to the entire production team. Be prepared for problems the first few times you work from the schedule and make adjustments as needed. After a few cycles, the logistics of newsletter production should take care of themselves.

## Promotion Gems

Trying to get a more accurate picture of customer satisfaction levels? If your customers find marketing surveys too narrow and face-to-face comments too inhibiting, consider dedicating a phone line or voice mail extension to customer comments. The January/February 1994 issue of *Services Marketing Today* reports that AVCA, an Ohio engineering and architectural firm, developed "Speakline," a hotline that records up to three hours a week worth of messages. According to the report, customers phoned in to "inquire about bills, make suggestions, and praise jobs well done." Each month, approximately half of the firm's active customers call the line. The company's president responds to Speakline customer calls—usually within 24 hours. If you feel that your suggestion box is not getting the workout you'd like, jump on the telecommunications bandwagon by adopting this simple alternative. It should fill the blank spaces in your picture of customer satisfaction.

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The American Library Association would like you to remember that you're not the only one looking for a picture of customer satisfaction. The ALA is trying to take a national "snapshot" of library customer satisfaction. To obtain this snapshot, they have created a "check-one" format survey for libraries to give to their patrons during National Library Week, April 17-23. The ALA encourages all types of libraries to participate in the survey for a minimum of 12 hours, and to report their results to the ALA Public Information Office by May 15.

The survey includes questions about the helpfulness of the staff, the frequency of library visits and calls, and the ease of finding library materials. There is a space to share comments and suggestions as well as an optional space for the client's name and telephone number.

The ALA sends survey administration tips along with a camera-ready copy of the survey. Tips include customizing the survey with your library's name and logo, sending a press release publicizing the survey, and throwing a "coding party" to make tabulating the results a bearable chore.

For more information, write the ALA Public Information Office at 50 E. Huron Street/Chicago, IL 60611 or call 800/545-2433. In the words of ALA President Hardy R. Franklin, "Customer service is the heart of our profession. Sometimes that means asking questions as well as answering them."

## Sparkling Reviews

*Sustaining Knock Your Socks Off Service.* Thomas K. Connellan and Ron Zemke. AMACOM Books, New York, NY 1993. ISBN: 0-8144-7824-7

"Quitting smoking is easy," said Mark Twain. "I've done it hundreds of times." This joke illustrates the difference between *Sustaining Knock Your Socks Off Service* and the authors' two previous books, *Delivering Knock Your Socks Off Service* and *Managing Knock Your Socks Off Service*. The premise of this addition to the series is that the "shot in the arm" approach (a short, powerful, but temporary, boost) plagues the service realm, but is not appropriate for excellent service. It is ironic, therefore, that this book seems to be written as a shot in the arm for service providers.

This downfall is typical of many fun-to-read business books. While they raise important issues, you are more likely to read them before going to bed or during a coffee break than while sitting at your desk, ready to create

a long-term plan for sustaining top rate service. Still, the book's enthusiastic tone and update message are likely to inspire you to put together such a plan, and its short and sweet chapters will point out many of the elements that should end up in that plan.

The heart of the book is the idea of service as a system composed of goals, inputs, activities and behaviors, outputs and results, and feedback. To optimize the reader's understanding of the system, the authors make some helpful distinctions, such as the difference between activity and results and between process and outcome.

Although there's no earth-shattering material in this book, it will keep you attuned to service issues from the perspective of "knock your socks off service." Maybe this will be the shot in the arm you need to finally develop a sustainable service plan.

## The Crystal Ball

March 1 "Measuring and Evaluating Your Communications & Public Relations Efforts." A one-day seminar presented by Lou Williams Seminars in New York, NY. Also March 18 in Boston, MA and March 25 in Arlington, VA. Contact: 800/837-7123 or 312/565-3900.

March 2 "Advanced Design for Desktop Publishing." A one-day seminar presented by Ragan Communications in Chicago, IL. Also March 4 in Minneapolis, MN; March 7 in Indianapolis, IN; and March 9 in Cincinnati, OH. Contact: 800/878-5331.

March 3 "Market Research—What Does the Customer Need?" A one-day course given by the National Federation of Abstracting and Information Services in Philadelphia, PA. Contact: 215/563-2406.

March 4 "Marketing Library Services: A Nuts-and-Bolts Approach." A one-day post-conference seminar given by Barbie E. Keiser at the Computers in Libraries Conference in Arlington, VA. Contact: 800/632-5537 or 203/226-6967.

March 7-8 "Basic Multimedia: A Hands-On Opportunity." A two-day course offered by The George Washington

University Center for Career Education near Leesburg, VA. Contact: 800/947-4498 or 202/994-5299.

March 11 "Communications Skills: Increasing Your Management Potential." A talk given by Kaycee Hale at the Academic Library Association of Ohio. Contact: 614/292-8041.

March 13 "Marketing and Promoting Information Services: The Alaska State Library Experience" A talk given by Mike Mitchell at the Alaska Library Association State Conference in Anchorage, AK, March 12-14. Contact: 907/465-2942.

March 16 "Newsletters from A to Z." A one-day seminar offered by Lou Williams Seminars in Boston, MA. Also in Morristown, NJ on March 23 and Philadelphia, PA on March 29. Contact: 800/837-7123 or 312/565-3900.

March 18 "Producing, Designing, Editing & Writing Newsletters." A one-day seminar presented by The Newsletter Factory in Greenbelt, MD. Also March 23 in Washington, DC. Contact: 404/955-2002.

March 21-24 "Designing The Multimedia Project." A four-day course offered by The George Washington University Center for Career Education near Leesburg, VA. Contact: 800/947-4498 or 202/994-5299.

March 22-23 "Effective Newsletter Editing." A two-day workshop offered by EEI in Alexandria, VA. Contact: 703/683-7453.

March 24 "Design for Newsletters." A one-day workshop offered by EEI in Alexandria, VA. Contact: 703/683-7453.

March 25 "Interactive Multimedia." A one-day seminar offered by Archives & Museum Informatics in Washington, DC. Contact: 412/683-9775.

March 31 "Creating Effective Brochures." A one-day workshop offered by EEI in Alexandria, VA. Contact: 703/683-7453.

April 14 "DMA's Direct Mail Production: From Mechanical To Mailbox." A one-day seminar offered by the Direct Marketing Association in Chicago, IL. Contact: 212/768-7277, ext. 486.

April 27-29 "Newsletter Design." A three-day workshop given by Dynamic Graphics Education Foundation in San Francisco, CA. Contact: 800/255-8800.

May 1-4 "Communications Strategy." A four-day program sponsored by the J.L. Kellogg Graduate School of Management, Northwestern University, James L. Allen Center. Contact: 708/467-7000.