

A Strategic View Of E-mail Newsletters

by David Baker, Monday, June 26, 2006

I'VE SEEN AT LEAST 20 new articles this year about e-mail newsletters and how to improve them--and now the Nielson Norman Group Report comes out on newsletter guidelines. Unlike all these reports, today's column is not another tactical list of things you must do to produce a good newsletter. Rather, today's column will take a more strategic approach.

There are three strategic factors necessary for any successful newsletter program: value exchange, audience type, and the editorial process. And every time I bring this up with clients or internal teams that are considering an e-mail newsletter, they think I'm making things too complicated--only to come back two or three months down the road asking for help in optimizing permission, content, design, measurement--and of course, how to test effectively. Let's explore a few of these strategic areas.

Value Exchange. There must be a value exchange in the content you deliver, defined as the value your consumers receive, and the subsequent business value you derive from your content/relationship; and you must know how to identify the value exchange through observation, response and feedback loops. Many think an e-mail newsletter has implied value to the business just by reaching the masses at a penny a clip. Wrong! The business value must be translated into measured response that should be communicated at the business unit/product level. I typically translate non-commerce-related newsletter response in terms of advertising reach, and break it out like a publisher with many advertisers. This allows me to treat business units and product lines as discrete businesses, and communicate as such. The bottom line is, you are providing (relatively) free editorial content that consumers have opted-in to, and you need something in return--at minimum a "view" or "click" specific to content that can be translated to your business lines. This is the value exchange.

Audience Type. Only a fraction of your customers will respond to you via e-mail, but that doesn't mean they aren't interested. You can classify them by four factors: How much business value they have to you, the ability to invoke a measured response, the type of e-mail consumer they can be, and how much you're willing to invest in these audience types. There is value in the active reader, the sporadic reader who always forwards to their colleagues and friends, the periodic reader who just wants to belong and only scans, and even the dormant reader who signs up and never reads. E-mail is just one channel, but your content has value on many levels, like through alternative delivery vehicles such as print, mail, Web or the sales team.

The Editorial Process. The main thing most businesses get caught up in when creating an e-newsletter is gathering content, prioritizing it, and then applying company filters (i.e. good content, tone, presentation). I've seen too many newsletters that were obviously thrown together at the last minute. We should remember that newsletters have more shelf life than most of the e-mails ever sent. They are typically archived, shared, and referenced. A "bad batch" can stay with you for quite a while. Be sure you have a locked-down editorial process in place, single owner, rules around approvals, strict timelines and contingency to allow for last-minute content inserts. Treat it like a newspaper--it has to go out on time, with no mistakes, and must have some consistency in what you deliver.

Last consideration that is often lost in translation. Use your employees. They should be the first to get the newsletter and the first to give you feedback before you blast away. They are your advocates, your evangelists, and your feedback loop to your customers; honor this and you'll be amazed at the participation.

I'll follow this column with another piece on tactical considerations for newsletters, yet hope these general guidelines will help give you structure to manage your program in a chaotic business world. Feel free to post your thoughts and questions to the MediaPost blog in the interim--I respond regularly.

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