

# Creating Excellent Newsletters

## A 4-Part Series by *do good* Consulting

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Newsletters play a critical function in reaching out to educate and involve membership in your organization's work. In this age of electronic media, the "old-fashioned" mailed newsletter still plays a critical role in organizational communication.

This month, we will take a look at some of the do's and don'ts of good newsletter development, focusing on graphic design and layout – particularly for the front page. Next month, we'll bring Part Two of this series, focusing on the interior pages of your newsletter. In January, the series will look at how to use the power of storytelling to have readers turning page after page (and sending donations, too!)



So what can you do to spiff up your newsletter and make it more appealing to your readers? Here are some tips and ideas for you to put into action:

### **Newsletter Size**

If you don't already have a newsletter, we'll assume it will be a standard letter-size format. If you are going to print on an 11x17 sheet and fold it in half, you will have four panels of space in which to work. Now, make a paper template and fold it in half (or thirds) so you can see how it will look when it gets mailed. Sketch out where all the articles and photos will go so you are familiar with the panels before you start on the computer.

### **Decide on the number of columns**

Decide how many columns your newsletter has, how they are structured, and how much space is around them. This template applies to every page, no matter what – no changing column set-up to accommodate stories or photos. For a basic letter-size format, decide upon 2-, 3-, or 4-column design. The most dynamic layout is the 3-column design, where the middle column is wider than the other two (see photo diagram above). This way, your most important information can be in the main area and smaller, shorter blurbs can go on either side.

### **Set margins**

The margins *around* information (the white space) are one of the most critical ways to reduce clutter and increase readability. Uncluttered spaces indicate good taste, refinement and affluence; it is also more restful to the eye to read or

view items that have a generous amount of white space surrounding them. (This is why museums always use broad white walls as a backdrop for paintings on display).

That said, keep your margins at least  $\frac{3}{4}$ " from the edges of the page, and 1" from the top and bottom if you can. If your content does not fit, resist the temptation to cheat margins into the precious white space. Try going back for a second edit, adding more pages, or saving the rest of the article for a "Part 2" in the next issue instead.

### **Decide on fonts and font sizes**

You get to choose two fonts and three font sizes. That's it. Pick them now, and don't cheat.

Sans-serif fonts (without "tails" on the letters, like Helvetica or Geneva) are generally easier to read as a headline. Serif fonts (with "tails" that visually connect the letters together for easier reading) work better for body copy, though these are guidelines, not rules. Script fonts are never recommended for text design, headline, or body copy, and should be reserved for wedding invitations. Also stay away from trendy "display" fonts like Comic Sans or any that look like they were written by children. These may be cute for greeting cards but not to represent a professional organization.

- *Font size #1:* Main headlines, 30-60pt (fonts are measured in point-sizes, abbreviated as "pt"), in a strong bold font.
- *Font size #2:* Subheads, 15-24pt, in the same font as above, just smaller.
- *Font size #3:* Body copy, 8-12pt. Unless your readership is mainly elderly or low-vision, you can get away with a font size between 8-10pts. If you are using a smaller font size, however, be sure margins are generous and do not mess with the leading (space between the lines). Most computers automatically figure this number; resist the temptation to adjust it to fit more copy.

A common mistake in newsletter design is to adjust font sizes just a *wee* bit to allow for more content. Some articles are 9pt, longer ones go down to 8pt, something short goes up to 11pt to "fill up space". If you keep the font "rule of three" in mind, the layout will be cleaner, easier to read and classier looking. Which means when it's time to ask for money, people will assume your organization has its act together and will use wisely the higher dollar amount you're asking for.

### **Masthead**

A good newsletter begins with a good masthead. The masthead should contain the name of the publication, usually the organization's logo (or a specially designed one for use on the masthead), plus the date and/or issue number.

Draw the name for your newsletter from nouns related to the organization's mission. If your mission involves aid to children, try looking up words related to caring or help: "The Tenderheart" or "The Caretaker", followed in smaller type by

"The Newsletter of The Children's Aid Fund" or similar. This masthead should take up no more than 1/3 of the space on the page, but no less than ¼ of it. The font size should be very large and strong, since this is what a reader will see first and will begin to recognize in further issues.

Think of it like a magazine: it should remain the same on *every* issue - same name, same size, same location. The only thing that can change is the date/issue, the color, and the content below it.

### **Front Page**

The appeal of the front page is critical to draw readers attention away from the stack of mail they are sifting through and encourage them open your piece and read it. Often, a front page is so densely packed with text that it intimidates a reader from even starting to "browse" it. If it looks like it's going to take too long to read, it will likely end up in the recycle bin.

Make it easy to approach your information by keeping the front page light and fun. Be sure to have a strong lead story (Habitat Builds 4 Houses in 5 Days!), and a large headline - above the fold - to accompany it. Font size should be 30-60pt, preferably bold. Be sure to also include a photo, which means keeping your eyes and ears peeled for good stories throughout the month/quarter/year and being sure *someone* with a camera is there.

Another way to increase the likelihood that someone will read your newsletter is to start a few other articles on the front page, but finish them on the inside. Don't try to start all articles on the front page, however. Depending on newsletter size, make sure you can fit at least one or two paragraphs of the story before bumping the reader to the inside to finish. You don't want the front page to look like a long list of headlines. These secondary stories should also have short, interesting headlines, between 15-24pt type in the same font as the headline.

Think of it like a website: the front page usually has the least content but the most (and largest) pictures to draw your attention. The heavier content is further into the site.

Next month we'll move to the interior of your newsletter, providing you with some design and layout tips to keep readers reading. In January, we'll conclude the series by talking about the power of storytelling in your newsletters.

## **Creating Excellent Newsletters, Part 2 of 3**

Our continuation from last month's issue of [\*Doing Good\*](#) on the basics of newsletter design brings us to the inside of your publication. In November, we talked about the need for a strong masthead, eye-catching headlines, and how to select



columns, fonts, and font sizes. This month, we'll review how to develop the inside pages of your newsletter to keep your members reading all the way to the end!

### Interior Design

Now that you've succeeded in getting a reader to open up your newsletter, keep the interior pages of your newsletter as organized as your front page. Resist the urge to suddenly expand margins to accommodate a too-long story. Better to edit it, or continue to the next page. Add pages if needed. Do not alter with the page layout, either: keep the grid system the same on all the pages.

### The Power of Pictures

Much evidence supports the idea that people learn more deeply from words with pictures than from words alone and, overall, several studies combined have shown a median percentage gain of 89% effectiveness.\* Photos and illustrations give a sense of reality and excitement to the stories in your newsletter. They allow a person to understand immediately what they missed or need to know. Use pictures judiciously and they will likely increase donations, too. Here's a story from Derek Riddle at the McKinley Church & Foundation on the power of pictures:

"We use McKinley's newsletter, *Foundation News*, to keep in touch with our alumni and solicit them for support. Past newsletters were text-heavy and contained few photos. They brought in about \$5,000 per mailing, sometime \$10,000 at certain points of the year. Recently, we sent a nearly all-photo newsletter and \$12,000 rolled in! I now carry a digital camera at all times and get as many pictures as I can, especially of programming activities and our new building project. I fill the newsletter with them, saving many for another 'Year in Pictures' edition. For me, the camera is as much a development tool as contribution envelopes and thank you letters."

Of course, the better the photo, the more helpful it will be. Readers must be able to see the images in order to identify with them. Don't use images that are smaller than the width of a column, and (with discretion) you can even break your margins if a larger image would pack more punch. See the helpful list on the right from Kodak for more tips.

#### 10 Tips for Better Photos

1. *Get down on their level.* Kids and pets don't have to look directly into the camera, the eye level angle itself will create a personal and inviting feeling.
2. *Use a plain background.* A cluttered background distracts while a plain background emphasizes your subject.
3. *Use a flash outdoors.* Even outdoors, use the fill flash to improve pictures. On sunny days, it will lighten dark shadows under eyes and nose; on cloudy days it will brighten faces and make them stand out from the background.
4. *Move in close.* To eliminate background distractions, move a few steps closer or use the zoom until the subject fills the viewfinder. For small objects, use the camera's macro or "flower" mode to get sharp close-ups.
5. *Take some vertical pictures.* Many subjects look better in a vertical picture, including buildings and portraits.
6. *Lock the focus.* Center the subject, push the shutter button halfway down, reframe your picture (while still holding the button halfway down), then press all the way down to shoot the picture.
7. *Move it from the middle.* Imagine a tic-tac-toe grid in your viewfinder. Place the subject at one of the intersections of the lines.
8. *Know your flash's range.* For many cameras that's only 10 feet: about 4 steps away. Pictures taken beyond the flash's range will be dark.
9. *Watch the light.* Study the effects of light on your subjects face. Avoid overhead sunlight that casts harsh shadows.
10. *Be a picture director.* Take an extra minute to add some props, rearrange your subjects or try a different viewpoint.

From Kodak

Captions are very useful tools. Often readers hurriedly flip through publications, with photos catching their eye; captions stop them to read further. Well-written captions accompanying great photos can draw a once-hesitant reader into your story. Captions should be short and to the point, giving away just enough information to pique readers' curiosity and draw them in. Recognizing people in your photo, too, helps readers identify with your clients, volunteers, and donors, also drawing them in.

In a photo pinch, a good source for stock images and illustrations is [www.istockphoto.com](http://www.istockphoto.com). Most images are under \$10 and come in a variety of formats. So if you forgot your camera at the annual dinner, you can find an image of some roast beef to accompany your article about it!

### **Cut the Clip Art**

So you've set up comfortable white space, and stuck to your fonts choices. Great! Your images are well-composed, well-shot, and sprinkled into your layout. Perfect! Now, just resist the urge to toss in clip art images everywhere and you've got a nice-looking newsletter.

Clip art should be used sparingly and only when really necessary (like on pages where you might have mostly text and either small or no photos). Most clip art is childish, silly, and/or badly drawn, especially if it's free. A silly dancing cow to "decorate" your article about upcoming events is not only unnecessary, it makes your organization seem silly and childish. Instead, try a simple pencil or calendar, if a graphic is needed at all.

Printed newsletters can and should be a powerful tool in any nonprofit organization's outreach and fundraising toolkit. They inform readers of your good work, keep them updated on your plans and growth, and solicit their involvement - but only if they are read. Stick to the tips outlined in these issues, and you are well on your way to designing eye-catching, action-packed newsletters that will keep readers turning page after page!

## **Let Me Tell You a Story... Writing Great Newsletters, Part 3 of 4**

If you've followed *do good Consulting's* [columns on newsletters](#) the past few months, you have probably made some important improvements to your own publications. You now use consistent fonts, minimize confusing images, and reach the right audience. But how do you draw your readers into your newsletter rather than just have them scan it? How do you use your newsletter to persuade them to volunteer, to contact their legislators, to donate, to care, and to get involved?



Tell them your story!

Storytelling isn't just for your newsletters – it really is an essential tool for all of your organization's communication efforts. Research confirms that powerful stories about people inspire donors and volunteers more than broad information campaigns or even targeted special events. (For more on this research, see [The Chronicle of Philanthropy](#), July 2007.)

Kivi Leroux Miller summarizes several effective storytelling strategies in her blog, [Nonprofit Communications](#). Use these strategies to make the pages of your newsletter come alive. When you do, you will have readers turning page after page, moved by stories about your work, the people you serve, and the impacts you have.

Include a story about a real person. Talking to potential volunteers? Tell a story or two about a real volunteer and the difference she is making in the lives of others. They can take the form of personal profiles, first-person accounts, or short testimonials. Use this technique whether you are writing for your newsletter or annual report or giving a speech.

**Single out one person you are helping.** Instead of talking broadly about the need for low-cost childcare in your community, talk about the plight of a single mom. This is an effective technique for newsletters and fundraising appeals.

**Use serial storytelling.** Hook readers with frequent updates about a particular person, animal, or item. Environmental and humane groups regularly and effectively use this tactic: tracking a particular whale's journey ("Will he evade the evil whale hunters?") or a dog that has been badly abused, but is now on the mend after rescue ("Will she live? And walk again?"). This "to be continued" tactic is great for newsletters to keep readers anticipating your next issue.

**Turn a story into a 'how-to' article.** Using the first person ("How I..."), have someone on your staff, a board member, or a volunteer explain how to do something, based on his own experience in learning how to do it. This is a great idea for your newsletter and your website.

**Include testimonials.** Ask people who attended your workshop to provide testimonials about how they personally used what they learned at the event in their own work. Scatter testimonials throughout newsletters, your website, and other marketing materials.

**Give each board member a good story to use.** All board members should advocate for your organization at all times. Give them real stories they can use that will put your organization in a good light with potential donors, volunteers, clients, and community decision-makers. Make time at your next board meeting to learn the stories and practice telling them. Having a board member write an original story for your newsletter or website can be very powerful!

**Lead your next press release with a story.** Stories work great for your newsletters, blog, and website, but also work very well in working with the media. The media loves real stories, so use them as angles in your press releases and interviews. If you can make the real person in the story available for interviews, even better.

**Incorporate a story into trainings.** Who do you train? Volunteers, new staff, community members, others in your field? Incorporate a good story into your next training session and you will help to build even more dedicated volunteers and staff.

**Rotate stories on your website.** Collect stories about specific people related to your organization and rotate them on your home page to keep things fresh and keep readers coming back.

Click [here](#) for more great tips for nonprofit communications. Next month, read up on how to use your newsletter to raise money for your organization.

## **Let Appeals Do the Asking & Newsletters Do The Informing: Part 4 of 4**

I once worked with a group that was in great turmoil over their newsletter's role in fundraising.

The board was convinced that this was the way their group should use to ask supporters for money. "It's a 'nicer' way of asking for money," said one member at a meeting. Their director knew better and requested funds in the budget to plan for two annual appeals each year. The funds were denied.

When I interviewed board members to find a solution to this impasse, I discovered two general opinions. One was, "The newsletter does a much better job at telling the group's stories and appealing to emotions. Donors will feel inspired to give". The other was the general thought that sending appeal letters was repetitive and rather direct.

Both of these opinions are right, technically. But what board members didn't see was the overall role that their organization's newsletter played in raising funds and inspiring donors.

Newsletters are a means to an end, not the end itself. They are a cultivation tool, not a fundraising tool. Although many newsletters come with giving envelopes saddled-stitched in, your newsletter should never replace mailed (or in-person) appeals at your organization.

When produced with care and sent regularly, newsletters help cultivate donors by telling them your organization's stories, sharing inspiring photos, and

demonstrating success and action. They are a tool to be used to “warm up” donors: to cultivate a sense of interest, belonging, and hope. But they should never be relied upon to fuel an organization’s fundraising program. Why?

First, when timed right, the one-two punch of a newsletter, then mailed appeal, appearing in supporters’ mailboxes can have a powerful impact on your organization’s bottom line. Such timing builds donor confidence and helps them remember the goings-on while staying focused on donations.

Second, your newsletter should focus mainly on storytelling, using real people as much as possible, copious photos, and strong layout. While some may feel inspired to give as a result of reading the newsletter, you rarely have the opportunity to grab their attention in a way to directly ask for money like an appeal letter will. It is perfectly fine to appeal for funds in your newsletter (I always advocate including an envelope), but never rely on newsletters for your organization’s bread and butter.

In short, your organization’s newsletter should be an overall part of your group’s fundraising and communication plans – research shows that donors like getting newsletters. Plus, the general rule is to mail to your list eight to 12 times each year, so mixing up newsletters and appeals works perfectly to attain this mix. Each newsletter should work in conjunction with your mailed appeals and major funds efforts. The timing of each newsletter should compliment your concurrent fundraising efforts, but never replace them.

In [Parts 1-3 of this series](#), we talked about how to develop strong layout, content, and stories for your newsletters. A well-designed newsletter, filled with compelling content and motivating stories and photos is one of the most powerful cultivation tools you can put in a donor’s mailbox (or as a ‘leave behind’, like at a doctor’s office). In producing each one, always think about your last appeal and recent projects and the upcoming appeal and future projects. By subtly linking your newsletters’ timing, stories, and purposes with your fundraising, you will create a powerful giving program for your organization.

So, let your appeal letters do the asking and your newsletters do the informing.