

Publishing Email Newsletters

by Sue Patterson

Publishing an email newsletter is becoming one of the more popular ways to communicate within a group.

The two biggest advantages are:

- 1.) It's FREE!
- 2.) You don't have to leave home to do it

Starting any newsletter can sound like a daunting task. But by choosing the e-mail format, editors eliminate many of the hassles of layout, printing, and mailing. Gone are the out-of-pocket expenses. No more worries about printing enough copies or absorbing the costs if you overshoot. And, now, with free email and the ease of technology, very few families are without email. The frugal homeschooler will quickly see the benefits of receiving their news electronically.

Finding a subscriber base is easy if you're publishing for a local group. If your group collects information for a phone directory, ask the data gatherer to collect email addresses too. If your newsletter is larger scale, you'll need to do a little more promotion on the web to find readers. In either case, be sure to list your newsletter in the NHEN Newsletter Database. By making this database available, editors are able to describe their newsletter and find readers looking for the information they publish.

Many times email newsletters are used as a promotion tool for a website. If this is your goal, simply highlight the new information on your site and provide links directly to those pages. Use an excerpt from that webpage or do a quick summary about what the reader will find there if they click the link. It's easy to have your website become one of the many "bookmarked favorites." A monthly newsletter can work as a reminder to readers about all the information you've accumulated at your website. Adding a section on your homepage asking if the reader would like to subscribe to your newsletter will surely boost your subscriber numbers.

Developing a schedule is next on your "editor's To-Do List". As with hard-copy newsletters, subscribers need to know when to expect the publication. Pick the time of the month that works best for you and your readers. They may be relying on your newsletter to fill in their calendar so publishing on a schedule will be appreciated. Publishing at the end of the month or the first day or two of the new month will probably work best. Occasionally this can be flexible. For instance, if a scheduled activity is planned for the first of the month, you'll want to be sure to get the news to the subscribers in time to attend. Some months this may give you a little more time, other months less.

If your newsletter is not activity or calendar-related, you'll have a little more flexibility. Still, once you decide on the day or time of month to publish, do your best to stick with it.

Subscribing and unsubscribing information should be placed in each newsletter. Email newsletters are often forwarded to other people. Making it easy for them to know how to subscribe themselves will help you and them. And although we hate to see subscribers leave, if someone wants to unsubscribe to your publication, make that as convenient as possible for them as well.

Focusing on the layout is not nearly as tricky in email as it is in hardcopy. Editors will have to determine how long their readers are willing to sit at the computer reading their newsletter. Some publications have "die-hard" fans who read very long articles in the email publication. Other publications finish the longer articles at their website, where the layout can be a little easier on the eyes. Even if your publications isn't really a website promotion tool, you might want to use some of the free webspace available for archiving those great articles you're publishing. Of course, readers have the option of printing out their copy so they don't have to be tied to the computer. But most email newsletter editors are aware that many readers are

scanning their newsletter for tidbits to read. Your wordier writers will need to be aware of that. Simple two or three sentence paragraphs giving the who/what/when/where will often please many readers. Don't forget to include email contact addresses when you're writing about local activities.

Making the email newsletter pleasing to the eye is one of the goals of layout. Play with different character combinations as dividers. Try out a few and then stick with one that can be identifiable as your newsletter's style.

For Example, from everyone's keyboards:

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=:=:=:=:=:=:=:=:=:=:=:=:=:=:=:=:

~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*~\*

Examples from the "Symbol" section of word processing documents:

α:α:α:α:α:α:α:α:α:α:α:α:α:α:α:α

§~§~§~§~§~§~§~§~§~§~§~§~§~§~§~§

?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?-?

Different dividers can sometimes differentiate your publication and make it immediately recognizable. Dividers can also give the "inner artist" in each editor something to create.

Publishing in "Plain-text" or HTML format provides another visual option for newsletters. Of course, html is more fun artistically, but not all computers can handle the load. This makes plain-text the method of choice for subscribers with older machines or sometimes when you're communicating between Macintosh and PC's or AOL and non-AOL users. Sending an html version to some subscribers could result in their system overloading, stalling, and shutting down - leaving you with some very unhappy readers. But if you're the artsy type that just can't bear the drab look of plain-text email newsletters, ask your readers to choose html or plain-text. You'll have to send out two versions but if you build it HTML or rich-text, scaling it down to plain-text will be a simple small clean up job. Nevertheless, even the artists can find some satisfaction in the use of symbols and characters if they're working in plain-text.

The physical line length is another formatting issue. Some editors remove all hard returns and let the reader's computer set their own hard returns. This can produce newsletters that have slight formatting variances from reader to reader. But if the newsletter is simple text paragraphs, it may be perfectly ok for your newsletter. "Hard returns" are what makes the line break. Widow and orphan lines are sometimes created sentences that flow along and then have a single word on every other line.

Other editors sidestep this problem by inserting line breaks early in the line (around 60). This forces the readers' program to break the line before their own settings are triggered. It does produce a more uniform "look" from reader to reader, but makes the column of text narrower. This narrow column will create more pages with the same amount of text. But this is usually not a problem.

Experiment with either of these options and ask friends to be your "testers." Ask them for feedback on your publication. Be sure to let them know that you're open to criticism and critique. Otherwise, you may hear only the encouraging "it looks great!" instead of the specific "nit-picking" that you might actually need before you publish that newsletter for the masses!

When choosing your testers, be sure to pick those with a variety of different systems, servers, mail programs. Your newsletter may look different to those with Macintosh computers or PC's. Those using

Eudora, Netscape, AOL, or Microsoft Outlook Express may see something entirely different. The more variety you can enlist for previewing your newsletter, the more likely you'll catch problems before you publish.

Mailing to the subscribers is the final phase. You may choose to store your subscribers in your mail program's address book, in a database, or in one of a variety of word processing files. No matter which option you choose, be sure to list your subscribers in the Blind Carbon Copy (BCC) area of your mailing program. To mistakenly place them in the Carbon Copy (CC) area, will result in your readers having to scroll through all the names before even getting to the content of the newsletter. Not good. Most mail programs require that a semi-colon and a space separate each name. If you're mailing through America Online, you can change the regular CC area to BCC by placing a parenthesis before and after your entire list of names.

Lastly, remember that ALL publications live and die on content. Knowing what your audience wants to read - and providing it - will give you a long successful life as a newsletter editor.