



THE NEED TO KNOW PRINCIPLE

Saying what we need to say and no more is a skill that still eludes many of us. It is also an essential part of creating effective online newsletters, which can be a key business tool in the digital age

They say that last year's presidential battle in the US was the first to be won by new technology. Until he ditched it in the final months, John McCain sent out an e-newsletter compendium every Friday. Heavy on graphics, it ran key speeches or announcements for that week, the candidate's schedule and other news the campaign thought was important. Barack Obama's people, meanwhile, focused on short, timely alerts with clear calls to action, such as watching a video, emailing a friend, signing a petition or making a contribution.

Every post had a clear goal and the minimum graphics.

Obama benefited from having the innovators of Silicon Valley among his supporters, but the principles are the same ones that have always applied in print and broadcasting. So why is it that so many businesses fail to transpose the most basic principles of plain speaking into the language of the internet? Well, print has processes, proofs and, above all, a price. You can't go into print without consideration. However, you can send out an email shot in a trice, and if an e-newsletter is always sent

out on the 26th of the month, often it falls to whoever has time on their hands on the 25th to put it together.

TO THE POINT

A doyen of engineering public relations (PR), John Fisher of Fisher Marketing, has been sending out his monthly e-newsletter, *Technical Press Insider (TPI)*, for 10 years to people whose job it is to keep in touch with what is going on in the world of automation and control. He is still coming to realise how powerful email marketing and e-newsletters can be in promoting his



services. "The newsletter has helped us grow," he says. "It's cost effective, and is a great way of making sure anything really significant our clients have done goes to the right people."

TPI is a model of brevity, accessibility and focus. Mailed to a community of hundreds rather than thousands, it starts with a personal message from Fisher, continues with a digest of the month's industry headline makers (which drives traffic to his website) and ends with a list of events taking place the following month.

An e-newsletter should be the point where the different strands in a company's marketing come together, agrees the founder of Rostrum Communications, Mark Houlding. "If you have had positive coverage in the press, your newsletter is the perfect way to distribute that content," he says. "All you need is a headline and a link to the article."

When his client, the Docklands-based computer services company Connect Support Services, was profiled in the Telegraph Business Club for its fixed-price solution to the problem of differentiating its service in the face of cheap 'me too' rivals, a link to the positive article was included on Connect's e-newsletter. Good news can't travel fast enough...or can it?

WHAT FREQUENCY?

According to Fisher, information should be 'metered' out rather than going global instantly – even when it's positive. "Reporting things too quickly can lead to exaggerated optimism or pessimism and neither is good," he says. It's tempting to announce your latest product or service, but make sure all the bugs are out of it first. You wouldn't send out a press release without running it by the marketing department and perhaps your financial PR advisers as well. Remember, once it's out there, you can't recall it.

Many businesses don't need to send out newsletters monthly or even regularly. Think about the difference between a newsletter, a bulletin and a mailshot – if you are a quoted business, it may be necessary for you to send regular reports to shareholders and partners – that's a bulletin. Alternatively, something may happen that really needs to go out as a

priority. Product recalls or industry-critical upgrades fall into this category and call for a one-subject mailshot. Everything else, from your knighthood to your new office in China, can go in the newsletter. Do a thorough job on it, then give the recipients plenty of time before the next one.

Quarterly is usually plenty – not so rare that people forget who you are, but not frequent enough to trigger the G&T (groan and trash) reflex.

Your first aim is to get the email opened. If there was something of interest in the last one your audience will. Bore them twice and they will automatically delete it if they don't unsubscribe. But if you get the design and the content right, your

“ THE FOCUS IS ON KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND USEFUL INFORMATION RATHER THAN ON PROMOTING OUR SERVICES ”

e-newsletter will bring you business as it does for the user experience consultancy Webcredible. Its e-newsletter has hit opted-in inboxes monthly for more than four years, growing to 22,000 subscribers.

"Much of that has happened by it being forwarded, but the main benefit to us is that it generates around 1,750 visits a month to our website," says PR and marketing manager Jon White. "It's a soft sell, and the focus is on knowledge sharing and providing useful information for the industry, rather than on promoting our services. We obviously do this, but it's very much a secondary point in the format."

He stresses the importance of analytics. There's no excuse for not knowing exactly what happens to your newsletter, because you should get a report from your provider, or the likes of Campaign Monitor, Omniture or Google Analytics, that will tell you far more than how many people opened it and who clicked through. They will give you reports that show you exactly how your subscribers are interacting with the e-newsletter, which parts are of interest, who forwarded it, unsubscribed, bounced out or even marked it as spam. Incredibly,



MARK HOULDING. ROSTRUM COMMUNICATIONS

though, there are a significant number of small businesses that don't do this.

VITAL SECONDS

As Margaret Farmakis at Return Path points out: "Readers tend to dedicate an average of 51 seconds to e-newsletters, typically skimming the contents. Only 19% of them are read fully." But if you tailor content to the audience and make the design as engaging as possible, you're likely to demand a longer attention span. So keep graphics to a minimum, make headings punchy and informative, use abstracts and links to keep down the wordcount, and ensure the email's general subject line will make readers want to open it. Also, increase accessibility by optimising it for mobile phones.

Try different approaches and monitor open and click rates to find out what's working, adapting your approach accordingly. Aim for your e-newsletter to be 100% opted in, as then you'll know you're hitting the right people, while an unsubscribe button will allow you to keep your database clean. Encouraging feedback from readers allows you to find out more about them and what they want to read. It can even help you to develop a better product or service. Get to this stage, and your e-newsletter will have become an invaluable business tool.



Online exclusive: The *Growing Business* guide to making the best use of your 51 seconds
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