
NEWSLETTERS

Newsletters are an effective, if traditional, communications tool, particularly when you are trying to reach one specific target audience. Libraries of all types use monthly, bimonthly, and/or quarterly newsletters to promote their services, programs, and collections. Producing a newsletter on a regular basis can be a burden

FIGURE 5.2 Sample Publication Schedule

Publication Needed	May 1
To Printer	April 1
Copy to Designer	March 1
Copy Plan Developed	February 1

for library staff, however, and the content often suffers when the editors are overloaded with other work. It is important to consider whether or not a newsletter is the best tool for communicating your message.

DO YOU NEED ANOTHER NEWSLETTER?

A member of your library board may go to a conference and discover that lots of other public libraries have newsletters. He or she may return and deliver the decree that "Our library needs a newsletter." If that happens, the next questions should be "Why do we need a newsletter, what do we want to communicate, and to whom?"

Often, a new or stand-alone publication is not the best answer. There may be other ways of reaching your audience without incurring the additional expense and work a newsletter entails. For example, a public library might ask to have a monthly column or page in the city newsletter. This would save both production and distribution costs and also show the public that city agencies are cooperating. If there is no city newsletter, it might be worthwhile asking the parks department director if they have ever considered a newsletter. If the answer is "yes," consider a joint publication. If both the library and the parks department want to reach the parents of school-age children with a bimonthly publication, you can develop a slicker publication and circulate it more widely by pooling your resources. Such a plan has the additional benefit of presenting the positive image of two taxpayer-funded entities working together to save costs.

If you are a school library media specialist, it might be a good idea to request a regular column in the school district or neighborhood newsletter or newspaper. The answer is dependent on the audience that you have selected for your message. If you are trying to reach teachers and the school newsletter is geared to them, this is a good medium for your message. If you are trying to communicate with parents, a neighborhood newsletter or newspaper might be ideal. Often these publications are looking for reliable contributors who can produce good copy.

Any library considering developing its own newsletter should ask two questions: "Are there other publications that address the same audience that I am trying to reach? Might I be able to obtain regular space in the appropriate publication?" If the answers are "yes," consider the quality and reputation of the publication before you decide to go in this direction. For instance, if your school district has a newsletter that is considered an important source of information for the parents you are trying to reach,

and if parents really do read it, that is definitely where you want to be. On the other hand, if you are a public librarian and your city mails a monthly newsletter to all taxpayers, but it is regularly riddled with errors and ridiculed in the community, publishing your own newsletter is probably a better idea.

You should also think about how much time your target audience has available to read another publication. Young parents might not need another piece of “junk mail” to deal with every month, but senior citizens might welcome an information-filled publication that arrives regularly from the public library. Your Friends of the Library members might use a monthly newsletter as another membership perk and provide you with some funding. Parents of the children who use your school library media center might appreciate learning about the homework resources available at your library and reading about the interesting projects their children are doing in your library. If you decide that a newsletter is the best communications tool for your audience, thinking about the amount of time that your audience has available for reading the publication will help you shape content (the subject, length, and style of your articles) and will help you design the publication.

One reason for your library to consider publishing a newsletter is to help create and enhance its public image as part of the development of your corporate identity. A high-quality newsletter with a distinctive design that is consistent with the library’s corporate identity and that includes informative articles can help create the perception that your library is an important community institution that offers quality service.

DEVELOPING YOUR NEWSLETTER

Once you decide you are ready to develop a newsletter for your library, you will need to assess the resources available to you. How much time can someone spend on the writing, editing, and distribution of the newsletter? Who will do the layout and design? Will you hire an outside graphic designer or will you have to desktop publish the newsletter yourself? How much money does your library have to spend on the project? Is there a print shop in your library, school district, or university that can do the printing for free or at a reduced cost? Are there inexpensive ways, such as the campus mail, to distribute the publication?

Writing a publication description for your newsletter will help you determine the resources necessary for your publication. Then you can develop a budget based on what you want and determine what you can afford. Figure 5.3 outlines a newsletter publication description.



FIGURE 5.3 Publication Description Outline—Newsletter

Purpose: Describe the goal of your newsletter. What do you want to communicate or promote?

Description: This should be a physical description of the newsletter. What size are you thinking about? How many colors of ink would you like to use? How many pages will your newsletter be? Remember, standard formats (11-by-17-inch paper, folded for 4 pages; 8 1/2-by-11-inch, folded for 4 pages) will save you money.

Publication Dates: How often will your newsletter be published? If quarterly, indicate publication month.

Audience: Provide a detailed list of your audience with a ballpark number of members of each group (for example, parents of school-age children in our community—10,000; all members of the friends of the library—2,000).

Number Produced: Based on your audience, how many newsletters do you plan to print?

Cost: Use the information that you put in this description to determine how much your newsletter will cost. Then go back to your overall communications budget and see if you can afford what you are planning. If you cannot, you may need to adjust your description to reflect a newsletter that works within your budget.

Content: What kind of information do you want to include in your newsletter? What regular columns or standing "headlines" will you have? For example, every issue might include a calendar of events and an annotated list of new books.

Issue Descriptions (optional): If you plan to publish "theme" issues of your newsletter, list them and the specific issue here (for example, a back-to-school issue in September).

Distribution: How are you going to get your newsletter out to its intended audience? Information racks in your library? Bulk mail? Send it home with students? How timely will the information included in your newsletter be? Will you need a distribution method that will get it there quickly?

Person Responsible: Who will be responsible for each task involved in producing and distributing the newsletter?

The next step is to determine, based on your resources, how much work will be done in-house and what you can afford to hire outside professionals to do. Use the information provided in the publication budget section (page 51) to think carefully about developing your newsletter's budget.

NEWSLETTER SCHEDULE

The production schedule for a newsletter may be tighter than for your other print publications, particularly if the newsletter includes a calendar of events or other timely information. The total time frame from copywriting to distribution might only be six weeks. Think about whether and how often you can manage this tight production schedule. You may wish to publish a bimonthly or quarterly newsletter instead of a monthly one—with monthly publications you are constantly in the middle of a production schedule.

You should also think about newsletter stories that can be produced in advance and used when space is available in an upcoming newsletter. For example, stories about on-going library services and collections will be interesting to your readers but don't necessarily have to run in a specific issue. This gives you content for each issue that can be prepared in advance so that the time closer to the publication date can be used to write articles on timely topics (such as the kick-off of your summer reading program or a new service policy recently passed by the board).

Above all, with a newsletter it is important to stick to your publication schedule. People should know when to expect it and learn to depend on the information they get from it. If you always mail it during the first week of the month, be consistent. This isn't always easy when you have competing priorities, but it is critical to the success of your newsletter.

"Newsletters" by Lisa A. Wolfe was reprinted from *Library Public Relations, Promotions, and Communications* with permission of the publisher. Copyright © 1997 by Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc.