

Designing Your Newsletter

How a newsletter looks is important. A well-designed newsletter will draw readers to it. The design elements in a newsletter include the nameplate, masthead, headlines, departments, charts and graphs, art and photographs and color. All work together to give a newsletter a distinctive and unified look. All help make the newsletter easy to read and full of useful information.

Nameplate

As you would expect, the nameplate contains the name of the newsletter. It's usually at the top of the first page. But it doesn't necessarily have to be at the top. It can also be along the side, in the middle or at the bottom.

The nameplate is sometimes called the masthead. This is a misnomer. The correct terminology is **flag**. The masthead is described in the next section. The nameplate consists of the name, the subtitle, the origin of the newsletter and the date.

Name
Don't call it "Newsletter." "Update" is also a tired title. Think of something else. For example, the name of an employee newsletter for a shoe manufacturer is "The Inner Sole."

The name should be bold and dominate the page. It should be one or two words.

Subtitle
Have a subtitle to explain more about the name. For example, the newsletter "Caring Connections" has the subtitle "News for Child Care Providers." Subtitles help clarify who the audience is.

Origin
It should be perfectly clear where the newsletter is coming from. Who is putting it out and what is the address? Address and subscription information can be saved for the masthead. But always include who is responsible for the newsletter in the nameplate.

Date
Newsletters must be dated. Some authors also like to keep track of volume numbers for ease in binding later.

If you can't afford to get your newsletter printed so that it appears to be professionally done, at least try to get your nameplate printed. Seek professional help with the design of your nameplate. Then you can duplicate the body of the newsletter on whatever equipment you have available.

The cost for all this would be relatively minor compared to the benefits of a better looking newsletter.

Masthead

If your newsletter is written and put together by one person, it's probably not necessary to have a masthead. But if several contribute or if the newsletter can only be obtained through subscription, then you need a masthead. Always put it in the same place for each issue of your newsletter. Some people like to put it at the bottom of page two. Others like to put it on the back of a four-page newsletter.

A typical masthead includes a miniature version of your nameplate for a unified look to your newsletter and this information:

Authors and contributors

Address, phone number and place of origin of the newsletter

Date and volume number

Subscription information

Information about postal regulations, if needed (See your postmaster.)

Text

Two decisions need to be made. What style and size for the type? And how many columns?

Most newsletters are now done with computers that can mimic any type style previously reserved for printers and those who could afford typesetting. It is best to stick with a typeface similar to what you see in newspapers or magazines.

If you just have word processing capabilities with your computer, then by all means use a letter quality printer and not one that yields an obvious dot pattern. That type style is just too hard to read.

If you just have a typewriter, be sure to use a carbon or film ribbon, not a cloth ribbon, for a crisper and more professional look.

Use only one type style and size for your newsletter's text. A professional designer can mix type styles and sizes and make a newsletter look good. But it's difficult to do this unless you have that expertise. To simplify your life, stick with one.

Now, you need to decide how many columns and how wide they should be. One choice is to have one column go clear across the page. Some well-done and expensive national newsletters are produced this way. This format makes a newsletter easy to put together, particularly if you only have a typewriter or word processing equipment at your disposal.

But the wider the line of type, the bigger the typeface has to be for clear reading. It should be pica size if you are using a typewriter, or either 11 or 12 points high in printers' terms, if you are having it typeset. Also, be sure to leave ample margins on both sides so the eye doesn't have to travel too far. "The Newsletter on Newsletters" is done in a one-column format with a good inch margin on both sides.

An alternative to the one-column text, centered across the page, is the one-column that extends across two-thirds of the page, leaving the other third for headlines. This format shortens the distance the eye has to travel so you can get by with a little smaller type size.

Other alternatives are two-column, three-column, four-column or even more. See the Newsletter Templates on page 4 for guidelines on margins. When you use more than one column, you want to make sure that the space between the columns is not too large so that it creates a river of space that is not pleasing to see. Again, get ideas from well-designed newsletters, magazines and newspapers.

Headlines

Headlines can make or break your newsletter. To attract attention to your copy, the headlines must be well-written and bold.

If all you have is a typewriter, then underline or boldface the headlines.

If you have more sophisticated equipment or can afford typesetting, then make the headlines in a larger, bolder type than the text.

Give the best articles the biggest headlines. When you look at a newspaper, the most important stories have the biggest headlines. Follow that style with your newsletter.

Departments

Most newsletters have departments. It makes them easier to produce and read. To be effective, the departments need to appear in the same place and have the same format from issue to issue.

A department can be as simple as a table of contents boxed to lure readers to turn your pages or a calendar of upcoming dates. An employee newsletter for an oil company has a question-and-answer department appropriately called "The Pipeline."

Charts and graphs

Charts and graphs can be a way to boil down complicated information, so they are naturals for the quick read format of a newsletter. The secret to doing charts and graphs well is to make them readily understandable. Have all the information right there and not buried in the text so the reader will not have to move back and forth. This can be so confusing that the reader will give up.

Art and photographs

Art and photographs can add interest to your newsletter and help draw in the reader. But they have to help communicate your message, otherwise there is no point in using them. Too often pieces of art are just stuck in to take up space.

Both art and photographs have to be done well, otherwise they do more harm than good. If the photo is blurry and you can't identify the people in it, don't use it. It will make your whole newsletter look bad.

If possible, hire a professional photographer to take pictures for you. Sometimes this can be done for relatively little money. Good, crisp photographs can do wonders for your newsletter.

If you use a photograph, be sure to have a cutline or caption underneath. This explains what is going on in the photo. Well-written cutlines can entice the reader to read the entire article. If the photo is just a facial shot of someone, commonly called a mug shot, print the person's name underneath the photo. Don't assume that everybody reading your newsletter knows who that person is.

Original art may be difficult and expensive to obtain, depending on your access to commercial artists. However, ample books of clip art are sold. Unfortunately, much of the art in them is overused and outdated. Using it in your newsletter may detract from its appearance. So if you use clip art, use it sparingly and only to help communicate your message.

Color

Consider two things with color in a newsletter. One is the color of paper in combination with the color of ink. The other is: Should you introduce a second color of ink, also known as spot color?

The most readable combination of colors is black ink on white paper. So if you vary from that, stay as close to white with your paper as you can and as close to black with your ink as you can. The darker the paper and the less black the ink, the more you compromise the readability of your newsletter.

Black and white are the best colors to use if you have photographs in your newsletter, too. Looking at blue or green people in photographs can be quite disconcerting.

Spot color can add distinction to your newsletter. One other color in addition to black can brighten up its pages. Two colors beyond black can add even more excitement. However, the cost goes up with each additional color. And unless you are a trained artist, using two colors can be an overwhelming challenge. The ideal combination for most newsletters is black on white with one spot color.

The main rule to guide you in using spot color is restraint. The price is the same whether you use a lot of it or a little of it. But it's best to use only a little.

Some suggested places to use spot color:

In the nameplate
Some people have their nameplates printed in quantity using a color. Then they duplicate their newsletter onto those pre-printed sheets with the equipment in their offices. They find this saves money.

In large initial letters
One common design technique, popular now, is to make the first letter of an article extra large.

In pull quotes
These are short provocative quotes pulled out from the article and set in a slightly larger type. They help break up a long article.

In bars across the tops of pages.

In charts and graphs

Don't use the spot color in your headlines. This would be an example of overuse that takes away from the newsletter's effectiveness.

Putting together a newsletter can be a gratifying experience. Readers like newsletters. They appreciate getting timely information in an easy-to-read manner. Once a routine is established, putting together a newsletter can be done in a relatively short period of time.

But like anything, to be done well, a newsletter takes dedication to excellence. With commitment and these tips, you are on your way to making a difference in people's lives with your newsletter