

Learn to Use e- Newsletters Smartly



Tommy R. Young III

618-566-0034

tommy@webranding.org

Introduction

The online marketing industry likes to call e-Newsletters “smart.” And while we agree they can be used smartly—they are only as smart as the degree of preparation and planning invested in the original development process. Effective e-Newsletters have great content and provide many avenues of data collection. To launch a successful e-Newsletter requires strategic planning at the outset—what content will be included, what data needs to be tracked, and how will the data be analyzed and used. Discovering the answers to these three questions and exploring the dynamics of their interrelatedness will ensure an e-Newsletter campaign is successful, effective, and “smart.”

First and Foremost: Content

Fact: e-Newsletters are only as good as the content they contain. If your e-Newsletter does not provide value to the readers, then it won't get read. A significant part of your planning process needs to focus on content:

What type of content will be included?

Information/Education Articles

This type of content will form the foundation of the e-Newsletter. In-depth discussions of issues relevant to your subscribers' needs and industry trends create enthusiasm for, and interest in, the e-Newsletter. Readers will look forward to receiving each issue. A key offshoot of providing this valuable information is that it positions the newsletter publisher as an industry expert.

Testimonials/Case Studies

Studies have shown that testimonials increase sales by 250%. Obviously this is a powerful way to showcase your successes and provide real world, tangible, defensible proof that your company's products and services make a difference and improve clients' bottom line. Featuring a client company in this way provides an excellent opportunity to strengthen the current relationship. The company being profiled is also receiving valuable, free publicity, which will prove to be a powerful incentive for prospects to become clients.

CRM (Customer Relationship Management)

One of the latest and hottest buzzwords in marketing today. e-Newsletters are the ultimate incarnation of CRM because they promote interaction with, and an understanding of, each and every prospect, lead and client your e-Newsletter reaches.

Subscriber Participation (Surveys/Polls/Letters to the Editor/Questionnaires)

This type of content encourages interaction and helps with profiling your subscribers. People like having their opinion solicited. They usually respond favorably to a forum that encourages them to identify their concerns and provide feedback. When you show interest in learning more about customers and prospects, the relationship is strengthened—think CRM to the nth degree. The information you glean from these activities is invaluable and will boost the analytical power of the e-Newsletter as well.

Entertainment and Humor

Appeal to your readers' lighter side. Make them look forward to receiving your e-Newsletter by including funny anecdotes, jokes, parodies; things that make fun of your particular industry are especially amusing to participants. Consider hosting a contest for subscribers to submit an original joke or absurd, but true, situation they have encountered in their own professional practice. A fun way to break up information-laden articles is to include quizzes with answers in another part of the e-Newsletter or in the next issue.

Advice Columns

One of the main functions of an e-Newsletter is to establish the publisher as an expert in the field. Including an avenue for subscribers to ask for advice or suggestions regarding specific situations is an ideal way to enhance your expertise. It also publicizes your specific products or services using a soft-sell approach. Providing precise and specific insight into the actual problems faced by potential customers is the most direct and effective way to secure your status as an expert.

How will the content be acquired?

Depending on your time and talent, you may be able to provide your own content. Remember, though, content is key and it cannot be an after-thought, or something that is hastily put together the day before delivery. Outsourcing the content or even the whole publishing process is a common and efficient approach. Some e-Newsletter service providers even enable the subscriber to choose the content they would like to receive. Regardless, the entire process must be thoroughly planned and professionally executed. An e-Newsletter is an important piece of the overall brand image presented to prospects and clients. A sloppy, disorganized e-Newsletter will only convey the message that your company is sloppy and disorganized; certainly not the image you want to portray.

How will the content be evaluated?

This is where the “smart” quotient of e-Newsletters factors in. There is little guesswork or speculation about which articles, features, or columns interested readers and which ones fell flat. The click-through and open rates provide precise information for analysis including which articles each particular subscriber liked the most, read the most thoroughly, and visited the most often. This is the best evaluation system going; you get immediate access to usage and receptivity data that you can apply to subsequent issues and use to define potential market segments.

Data Tracking

The importance of click-through and open rates has been the topic of many, if not most, on-line marketing discussions. Marketers now are realizing that there is a whole host of other potentially more valuable data that relates more to how the reader interacts with electronic information/content. This interactivity can be analyzed but only if it is tracked. Some important information to track includes:

1. **Which subscribers read the e-Newsletter? Which ones don't?** This will tell you who is the most interested in your content and most likely in need of your services. You can focus your attention on the prospects that show the most initial interest. This is also an excellent opportunity to devise content that may appeal to those who are not interested. Knowing what people don't like is fodder for thinking outside of the box. Ask yourself, or ask your subscribers, what you can offer that will pique their interest and encourage a response.
2. **What articles were read? Which ones were the most and least popular?** This information provides clues to the needs already recognized by the majority of subscribers. If you are using a mixture of content (articles, quizzes, surveys, etc...), which of these is the most popular? If one feature is consistently ignored then it is probably not a good fit for your audience. If your readership rates are low across the board, perhaps a survey is in order; asking readers to indicate the type of content they are most interested in.
3. **In what order were the articles read?** At first this information may seem too narrow to be of much use, but in fact, it gives insight into the subscribers' hierarchy of interests. This is useful information to use when determining your product/service mix and the amount of promotion for each different product or service offered. It also provides excellent clues for cross-selling clients—if you know that most people

who read about topic “X” then go immediately to topic “Y,” chances are there is a strong correlation between the two. This gives you ideas for packaging and promoting your products and services i.e. two for one, discount on one with purchase of the other, or creating value bundles.

4. **How much time was spent reading?** This statistic indicates the level of interest and engagement. While you can never know for sure how much time was spent reading (perhaps the person read intently for 20 minutes or perhaps they were called away to a meeting for 20 minutes immediately after the file was opened), the number of times the file was opened is an indicator of real interest. Those subscribers that can be identified as engaged are more likely to enter the sales cycle in the near future. Sending them more personalized information or incentives may speed up the process. When sending these customized messages, though, it is important not to overwhelm your prospects with information. The e-Newsletter and all related content must always be valuable and sent with a purpose. Bombarding a promising prospect with reminders and incentives will only put them off and the information quickly deteriorates into SPAM. Aggressively marketing to prospects tagged as “unengaged” also increases the SPAM factor of the message, which is exactly what effective e-Newsletters are designed to avoid.
5. **How many other parties was the e-Newsletter or article sent to?** Two invaluable pieces of information are gleaned from this. Number one it tells you immediately what content had the most impact and was considered the most valuable. Second, it provides leads on potential prospects for your e-Newsletter circulation. One stat; two big whammies!

Data Analysis

So, you’ve set up an e-Newsletter system that is tracking all your information and spitting out spreadsheet after spreadsheet of data. Now the real work begins. This data needs to be

analyzed so that it is meaningful and relevant to your business objectives. A primary objective of data analysis is customer segmentation. A “smart” e-Newsletter helps you figure out who is interested in what and allows you to personalize your approach accordingly.

Customer Segmentation

From the previous discussion on data tracking, we hope you are starting to realize the potential that e-Newsletters hold for breaking your target market into well-defined niches. By profiling your current and potential clients you gain a better understanding of their needs. This gives you the ability to address their needs individually. Individualized incentives and messages create the feeling that you are speaking directly to the person. This personalization breeds trust and trust breeds sales; and well, to continue the metaphor, sales breed profitability. Personalized messages are a surefire way to engage more customers and increase revenue.

To maintain a high level of customer/prospect engagement, it is important to evolve the e-Newsletter content as necessary. Stay current with the industry trends and ensure you are always delivering information that speaks to the issues facing each segment of customer, and better yet, each individual customer. Continuous tracking and analysis of the metrics discussed will allow you to know your customers so well that you will be able to anticipate their needs. Eventually your subscribers will look forward to your e-Newsletter and other communication because they realize and appreciate the value it brings to their own business.

List Segmentation

From your analysis of the data it should be clear that some content is more appealing than others. In order to find the best combination of features like articles, editorials, surveys, “Subject Line:”, and banners; it is useful to split your list into two segments. This is referred to as A/B segmentation and the technique is very effective and straightforward

A/B Segmentation Technique

Once the list is segmented, offer each segment different types of content, execute the e-Newsletter differently, and adjust the creativity level. Keep track of the response rate and then after a few months, you can compare the data and determine what was the most and least effective. Finally, merge the lists and use the top performing features from each segment to create a “super e-Newsletter” that encompasses your best practices. Ultimately you will be delivering customized messages to each of your subscribers and each element of every e-Newsletter will have been proven to be the best and most effective.

This is what we refer to as using the data *smartly*, and it becomes immediately clear why e-Newsletters are considered *smart*. The real intelligence though, is gleaned only after in-depth planning and preparation. An e-Newsletter in and of itself is no smarter than any other type of marketing material. It is the potential inherent in the e-Newsletter format that distinguishes it from the crowd. Unlock that potential and get it working for your business. Understand the capabilities, plan to exploit the features, and interpret the data masterfully: Essentially, use e-Newsletters “*smartly*” to understand your customers as individuals and increase your profitability exponentially.

About weBranding

weBranding is a small marketing and interactive virtual consulting firm based outside St. Louis. MO. Our primary focus is helping small to mid-sized organizations harness the Internet and emerging technologies to generate leads and build brand awareness. Feel free to contact Tommy Young at 618-566-0034 or via email with any questions or to set-up a short initial

"sourcing" meeting to talk about your requirements and how we'd approach meeting your needs on time and on budget.