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Making Your Print Newsletter Effective

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Question:

Is your organization's print newsletter effective?

Ok, there is a bigger question. How would you even know if your organization's newsletter is effective? Have you ever strategized about exactly what it is you want your newsletter to accomplish?

When we ask that question, we tend to hear 2 immediate responses.

- 1) We need to get the word out about what we are doing.
- 2) The newsletter gives us a way to ask for money. We include an envelope, and people respond!

Getting the Word Out

Let's start with that first response. If ever there were a ridiculous goal, it is to "get the word out." Why ridiculous? Because if that is your goal, then we have to wonder what the real point is of getting the word out. What will it accomplish? What actions will happen directly because of your "getting the word out"? And if it is not an end in and of itself, how can we call it a goal?

Use It Today

If you want your newsletter to be effective (i.e. it actually accomplishes something), and you want to be able to actually measure its effectiveness, then it's time to start from scratch. The following steps will help you get a great start this time. And while they are intended for those who do a print newsletter, these same questions will help you strategize about your email newsletter as well:

- 1) Gather your management team, as well as any board members who are interested in strategizing.
- 2) Gather ALL your organization's plans for the year - your Community Impact Plan, your Organizational Wellness Plan, your Resource Development Plan, your individual program plans, and any other plans you have.
- 3) For each and every goal, from each and every plan, note WHO you will need to engage for that goal to be realized. Next to each of those groups, note what specific actions you want those individuals to take.

For example, if the goal is to foster deeper understanding of underlying issues, who is the target audience? Is it folks who already understand the issue, but might need talking points? Is it elected officials? Funders? Donors? Is it all voters? Is it absolutely everyone?

And once those people have the information, what actions do you want them to take? Discuss it? Convene around it? Use it for more informed voting? Volunteer to help your cause?

(And please, if you hear yourself saying, "We just want to get the word out," have someone volunteer to slap you!)

- 4) Now for each of your goals, and each of your target audiences, ask, "Is there a way our newsletter could help further this goal with this audience?" For many of those goals, the answer will likely be "probably not." That's great - you may have been

counting on the newsletter to help with something that, as you look at it critically, really isn't likely to happen!

For some of your goals, however, you may find the newsletter is a great way to engage folks.

- ▶ Is one of your goals that community members better understand the underlying causes of an issue your mission is trying to address?
- ▶ Is one of your goals to increase attendance at a workshop or lecture?
- ▶ Is one of your goals to gather community opinion about an issue?
- ▶ To collect in-kind donations?
- ▶ To thank supporters?

If there is even the remote chance the newsletter might further a goal, put it on the list. This is the time to include all possibilities - the time for winnowing options will come in the next step.

- 5) Ok, now start winnowing. Examine your list of goals, and the people who need to be engaged to achieve those goals. Which of those would be best addressed via a newsletter format? Narrow down your ideas to those that are the MOST likely to produce results via a newsletter. (And for the others, start thinking, "What other engagement tools will better accomplish this goal than our newsletter?" If you need help, use FriendRaising for ideas.)

For Information about FriendRaising,
▶ [click here](#)

- 6) For those items that might be well-suited for your newsletter, now it's time to look at the newsletter format. How might you craft a story or column or series of columns, that accomplish what you want to accomplish? With a newsletter, it is important to have some consistent formats (a few items that are always there, with changing content), and then some surprises.

As you begin crafting your newsletter (as with all other Community Engagement efforts), the most important thing to consider is point of view. Engaging your readers is not about you. It is about your reader wanting to read what you have sent. Otherwise, you can write and send stuff all day long - if they don't read it, they won't take action. And then your newsletter can officially be classified as "ineffective."

So for every goal, and for every idea, and for every target audience, ask yourself, "What will make folks actually take the time to read this?" Questions you might ask include:

- ▶ How can you inspire your audience to do what you want them to do?
- ▶ What could the newsletter / article / column include to encourage readers to take the action you want them to take?
- ▶ What would inspire YOU to want to pick up your newsletter at all, thinking, "There is usually a gem in here"? (I don't have to tell you that most newsletters end up in the "I'll get to it sometime" pile in the corner of someone's desk - if they don't end up in the trash first.)

- 7) Engage your readers in this process. After all, who better to tell you if you will hit the mark than the people you want to engage? You can do this via focus group, or via a survey sent to everyone who currently receives your newsletter. Let them know what you are trying to accomplish, and ask for their thoughts about the newsletter (or about those issues in general!). We guarantee you will learn a ton of applicable information - things that may save you time and money and effort, and are likely to further your goals even before you write a thing!

Extra Tip #1:

Is it Time to Scrap the Whole Thing? Just because you have always done a newsletter doesn't mean it's a good thing to be doing now. If you have reviewed all your goals and

target audiences, and it doesn't look like you will be able to accomplish much with a newsletter, it may be time to consider scrapping it. Before you do, you may want to engage those who currently receive your newsletter, asking if they read it / like it / would miss it. As we noted in Step 7 above, we know you will find their comments useful in furthering your thinking.

If there is no strategic reason to keep the newsletter, you might consider seeing if you can accomplish what your readers DO like about it (if anything) by doing something that DOES help you achieve your goals. Again, just because you've always had a newsletter is not a good enough reason to have one now.

Extra Tip #2: Use the Envelope as an Indicator of Effectiveness

If you want to test for the effectiveness of your articles, try this: In one or more of your articles, ask folks to include something specific in the envelope. It could be, "Please write your check for \$1 more than the amount on the form - we will use that dollar for X." So if you get a lot of \$26 instead of \$25, you will know they read it.

Or "please include a sheet of stamps in the envelope - that will save us on postage." Or in every single article, have the same request - "Please vote for your favorite article in this newsletter, by slipping a note in the enclosed envelope along with your gift."

Or whatever. Find something creative, that can let you know they are reading the letter, and not just using the newsletter and envelope as a reminder to give.

What's So Bad About The Newsletter as a Reminder to Give?

Ah, the \$64,000 question.

"If the newsletter is effective at getting people to stick a check in the envelope, who cares if they read it? We do it so we can make money - the content of the newsletter is superfluous, because we just know if we send it, folks will send a check."

Those who have been reading our articles for years know what's coming - a discussion of opportunity cost. If you are taking the time and effort and production dollars to create a newsletter, just so folks will drop a check in the envelope, is this the most effective way to do that? Would the return be the same if you just sent a letter, with considerably less hassle? Is there something different you could do to more deeply engage folks, to raise more money for all that effort?

The best decision-making tools will help you weigh your options against objective criteria (how much time will it take, how much money could it raise). If you don't currently use a matrix for making those decisions, you may be surprised at what is revealed when you weigh your current efforts against objective criteria, and against each other.

If you are not currently using a matrix for decision-making, check out our [Magic Matrix for Fund Development Decision-Making](#) [▶ click here](#)

The Bottom Line for Newsletters

Newsletters, whether they are printed and mailed, or email newsletters, have almost become the junk mail of the Social Sector. They clutter our mailboxes and clutter our desks, and the vast vast vast majority are thrown away or ignored, unread.

So we challenge you: Make your newsletter strategic and effective. And if you won't do that, then save us all the effort of throwing it out. Just stop sending it.


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