

# The Art of E-Newsletters

Ideas to Effectively Create and Market  
Electronic Newsletters

By Mary Ellen Bates, Bates Information Services

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**About the Author:**

Mary Ellen Bates is the owner of Bates Information Services -- a Colorado-based firm that specializes in business research for business professionals and info pros, and training and consulting services for the information industry. She is a nationally known, veteran researcher with over 25 years of experience, and the author of a half dozen books and innumerable articles and white papers. She can be contacted through her web site at [www.BatesInfo.com](http://www.BatesInfo.com).



## Introduction

One of the most significant impacts of the Web has been that it enables anyone to become a publisher. First, we published Web pages. Then came blogs, which enabled us to create constantly updated journals, one blog post at a time. And now we have podcasts, videocasts, and who knows? We may start seeing subdermal implants for delivery of the news directly into our heads soon!

Interestingly, one communication tool that has not changed much over time is the newsletter. It is still an effective way to stay in contact with clients, colleagues, co-workers and – depending on your focus – the world at large. Many newsletters have dropped (or never had) a dead-tree version and publish directly to the Web and to subscribers' e-mail inboxes. These publications are known by various names: electronic newsletter, e-newsletter, e-mail newsletter, e-publication, e-media, or even e-zine. Whatever you call them, these publications can be fun to write and are cost-effective tools for keeping your information center's name in front of your constituency.

This paper looks at what is involved in creating and maintaining an e-newsletter, helps you determine what your primary goals are in becoming an e-publisher, and gives you the framework for setting up, writing and marketing your e-newsletter. Keep in mind that this paper focuses on free e-newsletters, developed by information professionals and designed for internal and/or client audiences, rather than subscription-based newsletters.

## What's the Point?

The first item of business is to decide what are the purposes in creating an e-newsletter. Some of the most common goals in e-newsletter publishing are to:

- Build internal awareness of the information center
- Market the expertise of the information professionals
- Maintain contact with your clients and prospective users and drive traffic to your Web site
- Promote internal training workshops and resources
- Build the research and information skill sets of employees within your organization
- Encourage use of a particular set of resources within the organization
- Build customer loyalty by distributing the e-newsletter to your organization's clients
- Establish a reputation for thought leadership
- Provide a public service that advances the goals of your organization (e.g., a pharmaceutical company publishing an e-newsletter with reviews of medical and health-related Web sites)

Note that you can have more than one goal – you may want to promote the information center's services, help your clients use internal resources more effectively, *and* remind employees of upcoming training courses, for example.

Once you know your goals in publishing an e-newsletter, focus on understanding your audience(s) and identifying their needs, issues and concerns. A newsletter that is not only readable but is actionable, thought-provoking or that solves a problem is one that gets read and passed along to others.

Keep in mind that your readership may change over time. You may start with one audience in mind and then find that your subscriber base has expanded into other areas or that your long-time readers are interested in other topics or types of information. Encourage reader feedback; put a note at the end of each issue along the lines of "We want this newsletter to meet *your* needs, and we encourage you to send your comments and suggestions to [editor@YourOrganization.com](mailto:editor@YourOrganization.com)."

### **What Will It Look Like?**

Once you have decided who your audience is, you will need to decide on the newsletter's structure, layout and appearance. Perhaps the most important aspect is the length of the newsletter as a whole and the length of the articles within it. A newsletter could consist of a single article; if this is what you choose, have each issue consist of no more than four or five paragraphs. More than that, and your subscriber has to spend too much time reading the newsletter in one sitting. Some newsletter formats include just a teaser paragraph with a link to a Web or intranet site for the rest of the article. The advantages include the ability to publish longer articles without having the newsletter appear text-heavy and the ability to

track readership by seeing how many people click through, which can help you target your articles to what people are most interested in. If your newsletter comprises several articles, begin your newsletter with a table of contents or list of headlines and an excerpt from each article, with a link to the full article (either later in the newsletter or on a Web page). This enables readers to skim the issue and jump directly to the articles of interest. It also lets you publish longer articles without forcing readers to slog through two articles of minimal interest to get to the one that grabs their attention.

### ***How Does This Work in Real Life?***

*Cynthia Shamel is an independent info pro and the owner of Shamel Information Services. Her monthly client newsletter (<http://shamelinfo.com/newsletter.htm>) has four sections in each issue: a Do It Yourself section that promotes information literacy among her clients; a Did You Know section that surfaces her expertise as a researcher; a section on Notes, News and Announcements that is a catch-all for talking about upcoming conferences, news about her business, comments from her readers and other topics of interest; and Subscribe/Unsubscribe information. At the top of each issue, she includes a list of what is included in the newsletter, in a format that invites further reading:*

Welcome to INFORMATION UPDATE, a monthly resource for information seekers and users

#### IN THIS ISSUE

- => Do It Yourself - Google Cache
- => Did You Know - Sometimes It Takes a Team
- => Notes, News and Announcements
- => Subscribe/Unsubscribe Information

*Depending on your audience, you could use a similar format with a section on news of interest to your organization, a section on upcoming training courses, Webinars and brown-bag lunches, and a section profiling one information resource to which your information center subscribes, for example.*

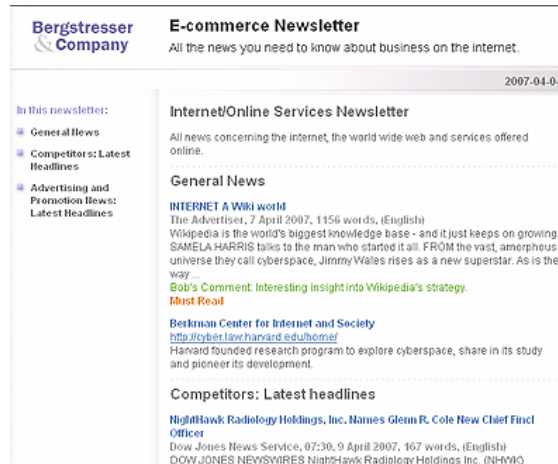
You have the choice to publish your e-newsletter in a variety of formats and through several distribution channels. While you increase your workload when you offer multiple channels, you also enable your subscribers to choose a medium and format that works best for them.

The lowest-common-denominator option is to send your newsletter in plain text. It is the most universally readable format, and it is the simplest to create, but let's face it – it looks pretty boring. If you decide to send a plain-text version of your newsletter, you may want to insert a line break at the end of each line, and include no more than 60 or 65 characters per line. This ensures that your newsletter will retain the look that you want when you send it out.

Your e-newsletter will look significantly more professional if you use an HTML format. You can include your logo, charts, graphs and photos, and you can embed long URLs behind a small anchor text link. In fact, according to a survey conducted by Bredin Business Information [\[1\]](#), 78% of respondents preferred HTML e-newsletters over plain text. If you publish in HTML, include small graphics that add real information, show your brand, or are charts or graphs; don't add clip art or other graphics just for the sake of adding color.

Unfortunately, some corporate firewalls block attachments from e-mail, and HTML code is sometimes handled as an e-mail attachment. If you are designing your e-newsletter solely for internal distribution, HTML will probably be fine. In any event, if you produce an HTML newsletter, offer subscribers the option to choose a text-only version during the subscription process. (Creating your e-newsletter in PDF is also an option if you want to retain the look and feel of a polished, professional newsletter, but you run into the same problem of having the newsletter viewed as an attachment, which may be blocked by some firewalls.)

There are plenty of resources for creating an HTML template for your e-newsletter. Microsoft offers a number of newsletter templates at <http://www.office.microsoft.com/templates>. In addition, Factiva, from Dow Jones offers a newsletter feature for subscribers. In Factiva.com, click on the “tools” menu and select "newsletter" and you will be walked through the simple and straightforward process of setting up a newsletter template.



*Factiva.com's newsletter feature lets you create professional-style newsletters with Factiva content.*

[www.factiva.com/newsletter](http://www.factiva.com/newsletter)

In addition to e-mail distribution, consider providing an RSS feed of your e-newsletter and posting a copy on your information center's Web site. Maintaining an archive of past issues also adds value to your site; you can even include an archive search function with a site-search widget that uses Google or one of the other search engines.

Regardless of the format you choose, you will want to develop an internal style sheet to ensure that your newsletter is consistent over time. This style sheet should include:

- Publication frequency – the first Friday of the month, the first and 15th of the month, every Monday, etc.
- Guidelines on the length of the newsletter as a whole and individual articles
- the general focus of the newsletter (e.g., internal news, Web searching, industry news)

Establish a publication schedule and stick to it. According to the Bredin Business Information study, the vast majority of people surveyed wanted to receive e-newsletters:

- Weekly (45%) or monthly (34%)
- Few want them daily (11%) or quarterly (6%)

This means that you will need to establish a routine to make it as easy as possible to generate content on a regular schedule.



## What Will Be In the E-Newsletter?

Now we get to the heart of creating an e-newsletter – pulling together the content. According to the Bredin study, e-newsletters that include how-to information are of greatest interest, followed by those that are "quick and easy to read" and "provide information relevant to my industry." For an e-newsletter produced by an information center, content could include:

- Trends in the organization's industry
- Reviews of professional resources (Web sites, value-added online resources, books, podcasts, etc.)
- Upcoming industry conferences
- Interviews with experts, either within or outside the organization
- Tips on how to work more efficiently, balance work and life, etc.
- Trends in the blogosphere related to your organization's industry

According to the Bredin study, the top reasons for canceling an e-newsletter subscription were irrelevant content (63%) and "found I wasn't reading it and didn't want to clog my mailbox" (58%). Readers want useful how-to tips in short, bite-size chunks, the more practical and actionable the better. Focus on providing tools that the reader can use immediately, such as a checklist of the five best Web sites on a topic, six little-known Google tools, or the best way to set up an RSS news filter.

One of the challenges of keeping to a publication schedule is that there are times when you simply cannot think of anything to say. Rather than fill your newsletter

with fluff, keep a few articles in reserve to use for those times when you have writer's block. One option for keeping a newsletter lively and interesting is to include items from third parties – published articles from newspapers or trade publications, other e-newsletters, Web sites, and so on. Of course, be sure that you have permission to reproduce, distribute and archive the content.

Consider segmenting your newsletter for different reader groups. One group may be interested in more in-depth information; others may just want a summary of current articles rather than the full text. In fact, you may want to consider a list of content areas you cover and allow subscribers to build their own customized newsletter with the components that interest them. "Modules" might include:

- Web search tips
- How to use internal databases
- A schedule of learning programs from the information center
- News of upcoming conferences and trade shows
- Your organization in the news
- Press releases from your organization
- News about your five major competitors
- News of interest to specific professionals – marketing, sales, HR, etc.

Include live links in your newsletter to any resources mentioned, to make it as easy as possible for your readers to come to your Web site. These links can point them to additional information on a topic, a page where they can sign up for a Webinar or training session, a reader response page, your information center's blog or wiki, and so on.

After you have written a draft of your newsletter, send a copy to yourself to see how it looks. Are there stray line breaks? Does it need additional paragraph breaks to keep it from looking like a solid wall of text? And do not rely on spell-checkers or your own set of eyes to catch errors; have someone else proof the newsletter for spelling, grammar and content.

### **What Other Issues Should You Consider?**

Perhaps the most important rule of e-newsletter etiquette is to *never* subscribe anyone automatically; make your e-newsletter opt-in rather than opt-out. Be sure to promote the newsletter and make it easy to subscribe to through your Web site. Build a subscription form that appears on all pages of your Web site. You can also use that form to capture valuable marketing information, such as how the reader learned about your newsletter, what page the reader was viewing when s/he subscribed, and so on. Allow subscribe and unsubscribe requests to be sent a special e-mail address (*subscriptions@whatever.com*). In addition, remember to directly ask all your clients and prospects if they would like to subscribe to your e-newsletter.

Send a welcome e-mail to all new subscribers, explaining that their e-mail addresses will never be sold or traded, that you will only use the addresses to send out the newsletter, and that you encourage them to contact you if they have any research needs. Also, remind them to add whatever return address you use to their e-mail address book, to ensure that the newsletter does not get filtered into a bulk-mail or junk folder. (If yours is an internal-only newsletter, this is not necessary, of course.)

Have a reminder at the bottom of each newsletter with directions on how your readers can unsubscribe or change their e-mail address; you can lose a lot of readers when they leave an organization or switch ISPs if you do not provide an easy mechanism for them to keep their subscription information updated. Be prepared to respond to readers' comments, kudos, criticisms and suggestions. A response – even just "thanks for your thoughts" – makes the subscription that much more personal and engaging.

### **How Do I Promote My E-Newsletter?**

Building a subscriber base takes a while, but there are plenty of low-cost ways to market your newsletter. When you begin your e-newsletter, send a broadcast e-mail to everyone you know, introducing the newsletter, linking to your inaugural issue and inviting them to subscribe. Include a note at the bottom of each issue encouraging people to forward the newsletter to colleagues. The note might say, "You are encouraged to publish or reproduce this newsletter. Just make sure you credit the source, [your information center], and include the URL, [insert URL to newsletter here]."

Think about all the contacts you make during a typical week, and take advantage of all the opportunities you have to tell people about the newsletter. Add a link to the e-newsletter in your e-mail signature file, such as "Stay updated on the latest trends in the automotive industry; subscribe to e-Auto, our free e-newsletter." Collect business cards at networking events, and e-mail subscription invitations to

each of the people you meet. Create a business card that is specifically designed to promote your newsletter, such as the following, and hand it out to everyone you come in contact with.

Do you subscribe to the **ZapInfo Newsletter?**

It's free, it's monthly, and it arrives in your email  
on the first of every month!

To subscribe, visit [www.OurOrganization.com/newsletter](http://www.OurOrganization.com/newsletter)

If this is an internal newsletter, send a broadcast e-mail invitation to everyone in a particular department, with a specific job title, in a geographic region, and so on, with a customized description of the value of the newsletter.

Be sure to include a field in the subscription form that asks how people heard about the newsletter. This can be a great way of tracking what marketing efforts work, of learning about a mention of your newsletter on an e-mail discussion list, of finding out whether your new subscribers come from word-of-mouth, and so on. On the other hand, do not ask for more information than you really need; a long subscription form will deter potential readers from subscribing.

When you are contacting a new employee or prospective client, following up on a contact from a meeting or conference, or following up on people who attended your training session or Webinar, include a copy of the most recent newsletter, with an invitation to subscribe. Do not automatically subscribe them, but send them the latest issue as a way to encourage them to subscribe.

Be sure to make at least one issue of the newsletter available on your Web site. You are asking subscribers to trust you with their e-mail addresses, and people may not be willing to do that without seeing the value of the newsletter.

Creating an e-newsletter can be fun, rewarding and a great way to promote your information center. If you need additional guidance on becoming an electronic publisher, consider reading Robin Neidorf's report, "E-Newsletters: A Guide for Publishers," published by FreePint ([www.freepint.com](http://www.freepint.com)). It is currently out of print, but may be available through the publisher in late 2007.

### **About Dow Jones & Company**

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### **About Bates Information Services, Inc.**

Bates Information Services, Inc. is a nationally known firm, with a solid reputation for effective, no-nonsense research and consulting, as well as research training for research professionals, knowledge workers, and research departments, and individuals who want to enter the field of information brokering and research services. Bates Information Services Inc. 8494 Boulder Hills Dr. Longmont, CO 80503, 303.772.7095 [mbates@BatesInfo.com](mailto:mbates@BatesInfo.com) [www.BatesInfo.com](http://www.BatesInfo.com)