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Producing newsletters

Criteria for success

Newsletters, while informal when compared to peer reviewed journals and organisational reports, are a popular communication tool used to provide and share information, for and about people with a common interest or need. Newsletters are an effective way to build networks and improve communication. As the editors of several newsletters in primary health care, the authors have developed criteria that aim to increase the success of a newsletter.

Define the purpose

To make sure the newsletter is focused, give it a realistic and clearly defined purpose that forecasts both the publication's general content and its intended audience. The purpose of your newsletter may be to:

- broadcast internal information to colleagues
- provide relevant information to readers
- publish material provided by the readership
- promote an organisation or group and its achievements, or
- a combination of the above.

Ensure that your purpose is flexible enough to suit the changing needs and interests of your readers.

Meet the needs of your audience

A newsletter's success will depend on how well it meets the needs and interests of its readers. Conducting a simple survey is an effective way to discover these. The survey should focus on preferred content, length, and distribution method. Phone inquiries are another way of finding out the needs and interests of your readers, and are also a good way to monitor them over time. To ensure you meet their needs, invite your readers to participate as writers, send ideas for articles, and provide feedback.

Create a strong image

Give your newsletter a name and a design that is compatible with your organisation. Give the newsletter a strong visual and verbal identity making sure that it is consistent with the rest of your organisation in the font, colour, and tone you use. This will make your newsletter stand out from the wealth of information already received every day by your

readers, and, at the same time, promote your organisation. However, a visually stimulating newsletter won't mean a thing unless your content connects with your readers.

Be concise, credible and connect

The best newsletters have their own voice, and include articles that are objective and informed. Articles should aim to be of value and interest to your readers. You may wish to highlight current trends and discuss how you are dealing with them, or provide advice and instruction in response to issues. You may wish to showcase some of the leaders in your field with interviews or profiles. You should aim to develop regular features that will allow your readers to become familiar with your newsletter.

Postbox or inbox?

Deciding whether to produce a newsletter electronically or in print should be determined by the readership (how do they prefer to read a newsletter?) and budget (electronic is less costly than printing). Once decided, the formatting of the newsletter will need to reflect the medium, eg. short sentences and plenty of white space are desirable for on-screen reading but not necessarily for off-screen reading.

Use news that is relevant

Use the purpose of the newsletter to distinguish between the content you will and won't use. For example, considering your own purpose, scroll through this list and decide what would and would not be appropriate for your newsletter:

- articles covering current issues
- reviews (books, journals, websites)
- relevant media releases
- conference reviews
- forthcoming events
- interviews
- profiles of key individuals
- graphics that capture current issues.

Gather content from readers

Inviting readers to submit articles can give the newsletter a broader perspective and contributors a sense of ownership, and might encourage others to participate. Produce author

guidelines to steer authors in the direction you want the articles to go.¹ Guidelines might include word count, writing style, acceptable graphics or photos, submission methods and contact details to include with the article. The more guidance you provide the easier it is for writers to match your criteria and the less editing for you.

Editing

Good writing is often the product of good editing: 'Edit for clarity, conciseness, jargon, length, correctness'.¹ Consider putting together an editorial team to share responsibilities. Don't be afraid to change articles; however, if you edit something substantially you should contact the author to see if it still conveys their original message. Do edit and exclude material that is defamatory or offensive because you are responsible for what is printed. The *Style manual for authors, editors and printers*² is a useful resource to assist you with editing.

Determine a publication schedule

Determine how often you will produce the newsletter – weekly, fortnightly, bimonthly, quarterly, or annually. To a large extent, this will be determined by available resources and content. Be realistic, and allow sufficient time for writing, editing, formatting, checking, uploading and/or printing, and distributing. Once you have decided on a publication schedule, ensure that you keep to your deadlines.

Promote the newsletter

While it is great to produce a newsletter, it needs ongoing promotion. Obviously it is easier to develop a subscriber base when there is no cost involved in subscribing to the newsletter. Many organisations subscribe members to their newsletter as part of a membership fee. Promoting the newsletter can be done via your website, mailing lists, at conferences, by word of mouth or on the websites of similar organisations.

Evaluate your newsletter

Measuring the success of your newsletter can be based on several factors – the size of your readership, subscriber feedback (solicited or otherwise), the level of awareness of perceived

readership, response to requests for articles, requests from readers to publish articles in your newsletter, and use of information in the newsletter. Regular surveys of the readership can assist with this. Evaluation will assist you with ensuring your newsletter continues to meet the needs of the readers.

Good writing: some quick tips

Good writing doesn't just happen. It often takes multiple drafts to produce excellent articles. There are simple techniques you can use to improve your writing:

- write in the active voice.³ 'GPs prefer printed newsletters' rather than 'Electronic newsletters are preferred by GPs'
- put the action in the verb, don't maroon it in the adverb. 'He enthused' rather than: 'He said enthusiastically'
- 'gerunds (words formed by adding -ing to their end) can enliven your writing by enabling you to create nouns (or noun phrases) that can describe things in a precise, vivid or action focused way'.⁴ 'She was renowned for her empathic consulting'
- be clear and concise
- use the five Ws (who, what, where, when and why) in your opening paragraph⁵
- keep sentences short – no more than 15–20 words³
- avoid jargon and clichés³
- write acronyms out in full the first time you use them – don't assume your readers know what they stand for.³

Conflict of interest: none declared.

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