

Ezine Readers Not Biting? Change the Bait, Part II

By Jessica Albon

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Newsletter design from The Write Exposur <http://www.designdoodles.com>

Every day we get dozens of letters from frustrated company newsletter publishers who want to know why their newsletter's not selling like they think it should.

While every newsletter and each audience is different, we've found 9 areas that often need improvement. This time, we'll discuss focus, format and measurement.

4. Focus: What's your newsletter's goal? Is it to increase sales 15%? Is it to increase name recognition for your brand. To cut down on calls to your help desk? Whatever your goal, you'll want to make sure everyone who works on your newsletter understands that goal and how they can help reach it.

A manufacturing company recently contacted us when they discovered only about 25% of their readers remembered receiving their newsletter. We took a look at their layout to suggest changes. First, we discovered they printed their company name just once in the entire (very lengthy) newsletter! Plus, though they used HTML, the newsletter looked nothing like their other company materials, and it didn't even include the company's logo!

Because the manufacturing company wanted to build name recognition, they needed to start by helping readers associate the newsletter with their company. For all newsletters, this means using your company name throughout the newsletter. For HTML newsletters, this means keeping the look of the newsletter in line with your company image as much as possible.

5. Format: The formatting of your newsletter absolutely matters, and it relates strongly to your goals. A newsletter that's designed to increase sales should make it easy for readers to buy (lots of clear links, pictures if appropriate, etc).

Before you make any other decisions, though, you have to decide whether to publish only in plain text or to also offer a HTML version. Our clients have found HTML to be anywhere from 50-75% more effective than plain text.

With HTML, you can include pictures of your products, use colors to emphasize special offers, and repeat elements of your image to strengthen your brand both on and offline. Plain text, however, is easier to send (since with HTML you need to send both), so if you only have time for one version, make it plain text.

Whichever you choose, to best take advantage of a newsletter's major strength (permission-based

follow-up), you'll want to keep the format consistent. Many publishers rearrange their newsletters each month, taking out and putting in new sections, re-ordering the articles, etc. No matter what your main newsletter goal, consistency is a powerful ally. By getting your readers accustomed to always finding a tip after the editor's letter, they'll become accustomed to your company.

6. Measurement: Without measurement, you can't be sure how your newsletter's doing. Certainly, some things can't be measured easily (like brand recognition), but by keeping an eye on statistics and running surveys, you can get a pretty good idea what's going on with your readers.

One stat to measure if you're publishing in HTML is your open rate. While it's not foolproof (or even especially interesting), keeping an eye on your open rate will alert you to potential problems. By watching for declines or surges in your open rate, you can learn which subject lines are most popular; you can also learn which newsletters trigger more filters than usual, and which newsletters might have bugs in the HTML code.

Another stat to keep an eye on is sales made as a result of your newsletter. An easy way to do this is to offer special discounts to readers of your newsletter. Using trackable links also helps, but it doesn't alert you if your newsletter readers prefer to use the phone to order.

Keep an eye on your rate of subscription and unsubscription. Do readers unsubscribe more after you've covered certain topics? Do you see surges in subscribers when you offer bonuses for referrals? Watching what happens to your list from week to week can be very revealing.

A final stat all newsletter publishers should keep an eye on is bounces. Depending on how you maintain your list, you may lose 30% or more of your subscribers each year to full and abandoned email boxes. Keeping an eye on this stat each month helps you gauge which newsletter promotion plans are working and which are bringing lots of temporary subscribers.

What's the secret to more profits, happier customers, and expert status?

A pink and purple polka-dotted ping-pong paddle, of course.

Rocky explains: <http://www.designdoodles.com/ping-pong.htm>

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