

# The Newsletter's New Clothes

By Michael Selissen, Case Mountain Communications

**N**ewsletters (print and email) provide an effective link between nonprofit organizations and their donors. But when it comes to communicating the kind of information that keeps those donors engaged, most fall woefully short.

## Unhappy Donors

Reading through the last two donor surveys from **Cygnus Applied Research**, you'd be right to conclude that donors are frustrated with the communications they receive. That's because only six percent of donors read newsletters all the way through. More than half find them uninteresting. And 40 percent disapprove of contribution requests tucked into publications intended to inform.

Instead, donors crave educational content that helps them understand the issues and offers solid reasons to keep on giving. Three out of four insist on knowing the impact their contributions are making. And they want to hear directly from those on the front lines who carry out the programs.

Compare these expectations to what you might find in a typical nonprofit newsletter:

- A nondescript welcome message from the president
- An article describing last month's golf tournament
- Photographs of people posing uncomfortably alongside the executive director
- A success story about an individual, family or community
- An article promoting the next big fundraising campaign
- A calendar of upcoming events
- A prominently positioned contribution request

It's a format designed to promote rather than inform. And one that often results in loss of donor interest over time.

## Toward a New Direction

So how do you produce a newsletter that donors will read and share issue after issue?

The first step is to stop thinking of them as, well, donors. Instead view them as investors and champions of your cause. If possible, develop a persona for each donor category that describes their philanthropic priorities along with what motivates them to give, what motivates them to stop giving, and what personal or professional satisfactions they receive by contributing to your organization.



This simple change in perspective will go a long way toward transitioning your newsletter from a piece of sales collateral centered on your need to raise money to an educational platform centered on cultivating a sense of trust and affinity.

Next, you'll want to establish an editorial process for how you select the right topics and create memorable pieces. This process is mostly the same whether you publish a print newsletter or email newsletter. The main differences are that an e-newsletter is more likely to be read if it's written for online-style reading and it contains fewer content pieces.

With that in mind, here are some guidelines to help establish your process.

- **Think long-term.** Consider each newsletter issue as one point in an ongoing conversation with your donors – a conversation that will go on for years. Take the long view on critical topics such as organizational impact, budgetary matters or legislative challenges. Address one aspect per issue rather than writing a one-and-done article.
- **Create a publication template.** Select three or four topic categories or content formats (i.e., features, interviews, infographics) that you will include in every issue. Lead with an informative and newsworthy article rather than the President's Letter. Involve key staff members in creating content. Ensure every piece has the author's byline and picture so that readers get to know who they are.
- **Engage the community.** Leave room in your template for content created outside your organization. Consider contributions such as photos, videos, personal stories, donor/client questions, or contributed articles from subject matter experts, partner agencies or clients.

- **Paint the whole picture.** Success stories are important. But so too are stories about what happens when things don't go well. Address factors outside your niche that contribute to your clients' overall challenges. Explain how you work with partners, councils or other stakeholders that contribute to your organization's success.
- **Choose photos that tell a story.** Instead of posed pictures from the latest fundraising event, use photos that document the story of your mission and its impact. Look through newspapers and magazines for ideas on how to frame a compelling photo.
- **Rotate calls to action.** Include one per issue such as volunteering, letter writing or attending an event so that you don't focus solely on monetary contributions. Lead readers to your website with a "For more on this story..." invitation.

With nearly 70 percent of donors favoring organizations that demonstrate success, your newsletter offers one of the best opportunities for sustained support.

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## The Payoff

Establishing a donor-focused publishing process offers two important benefits to your organization: It helps you plan and create each issue more efficiently and it ensures that donors will get clear and actionable information that turns them into advocates.



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