

Best Practices for Developing Effective E-Newsletter Content

These guidelines will help you plan and compose a compelling e-newsletter. The tips are organized by topics that should always be considered and/or addressed in content planning for your e-newsletter. For information about creating an attractive, well-functioning e-newsletter, [consult the Design Best Practices guide](#). You should become familiar with this best practice information *before* you begin following the steps to create your e-newsletter, which are outlined in the [how-to manual](#).

Planning an E-Newsletter

When you are creating the first issue of a new e-newsletter, the majority of your time will be spent in the planning stage. (For more details on this stage, see the [how-to manual](#).) There are dozens of essential questions that need to be answered before you can even begin writing content or designing the e-newsletter. You should also build in extra planning time for the second issue to address any glitches you discovered or negative feedback you received from the first issue. (For specific guidance on developing a schedule, [download this sample schedule](#).) After the first two issues, planning should be more straightforward and focused on content, rather than more fundamental issues like functionality and overall effectiveness.

These recommendations will help you maximize success during the planning stage:

- [Establishing Goals and Benchmarks](#)
- [Determining the Audience](#)

Establishing Goals and Benchmarks

Setting an objective for your e-newsletter is the most important step in creating or re-vamping your e-newsletter. Before you decide who your audience is, what the e-newsletter should look like, or what information/messages you want to include, you need to know—and get consensus on—what you want to achieve by sending out an e-newsletter. That means you need to set benchmarks (or measurable outcomes) for each of your goals. For example, if you want to use the e-newsletter to help increase event registrations, what percentage increase would be considered a success? Once you've set those benchmarks, you can determine if they were successful or not by evaluating the performance of your e-newsletter each time you send it out. This topic is discussed in [Track Performance](#), which is in the What to Do After You Send Your E-Newsletter section below. You can find more details about establishing goals and benchmarks in the [e-newsletter how-to manual](#).

Determining the Audience

Before you can determine the content of your e-newsletter, you must determine who your audience is and gain an understanding of what information will interest them and entice them to open it. What kinds of readers will receive your e-newsletter? Will they represent a narrowly focused segment, such as engineers? Or will they be wide ranging, such as business leaders, alumni, faculty, and hiring prospects?

- **Focused Audience:** Make sure the overall content in your e-newsletter has relevance to the type of reader you're targeting. If you are targeting engineering alumni, you should include content like engineering-related events, the latest developments or breakthroughs in that field, profiles of pioneering engineers, etc. However, don't forget that engineers are whole

human beings too. For example, that engineer could also be a UW alumnus/alumna, the parent of a prospective student, an amateur musician, etc. Therefore, don't miss a good promotional opportunity, such as an event or newsworthy occurrence, because your focus is too narrow.

- **Broad Audience:** We all know that you can't please all the people all the time, and that's why e-newsletters with broad audiences can be tricky beasts. No matter what the mix, you should always bear in mind that, as with the focused audience, each of your readers opens this e-newsletter wearing more than one hat (e.g. parent, taxpayer, community activist, etc.). E-newsletter content should always pass these tests: "Why would the reader care about this?" "What's in it for the reader?" If the content fails these tests, then don't include it. That said, if there's a certain segment of your audience that brings a unique perspective, you should consider building in a special section for them. For example, if your e-newsletter goes out to both alumni and non-alumni, consider creating a For Alumni section.

Creating the Content

For e-newsletter writers and editors, this is the really fun part. To make sure your readers get as much out of it as you do, consider the following recommendations for how to maximize the effectiveness of your content:

- [Content Types](#)
- [Tone/Voice](#)
- [Call to Action](#)
- [Subject Line](#)
- [Headline](#)
- [Interactivity](#)
- [Legal Responsibilities](#)

Content Types

There are two primary types of content in e-newsletters: content that entices people to click to learn more and content that is contained entirely within the e-newsletter itself. Both content types should be concise, quick to read and easy to understand at a glance. Both types are appealing to e-newsletter readers: One allows them to get more information if they choose to; the other allows them to take away something tangible from the e-newsletter itself, which increases its value as a standalone communication device. Here are examples of each type:

Type 1:

[Curing Cancer Without Chemo](#)

Find out about a UW chemist who is creating nanocages—tiny boxes with porous sides—that target and destroy cancer cells without the debilitating side effects.

Type 2:

Q: On average, how many UW students graduate with a degree from the UW School of Engineering each year?

A: Each year, approximately 425 graduates earn bachelor of science degrees across 10 disciplines of engineering.

[Note: Since e-newsletter content is usually too short to convey more than a couple of key points, adding a link may still be appropriate, for example: [Find out more about our engineering disciplines.](#)]

Tone/Voice

Your target audience should guide the tone you choose for your e-newsletter. In general, e-communications are more informal and conversational than printed communications. In part, that's because it makes for faster reading, but it's also the nature of this new medium, which grew organically and is still quite young. Aside from these unique aspects, the usual principles apply:

- The tone should encourage dialogue and interaction.
- The language should be clear and concise.
- The terminology and acronyms used should be familiar to the vast majority of the subscribers (but do avoid overly jargony language).
- The voice should be active (instead of passive) and compel action on the part of the reader. For example:
 - "The Huskies beat the Cougars" is active voice.
 - "The Cougars were beaten by the Huskies" is passive voice.

Call to Action

To encourage interaction with your e-newsletter, the content should ask the reader to act—whether it's something as specific as "Sign up for an event" or as general as "Learn more." This promotes engagement with the content and the University, and it helps extend your interaction with subscribers beyond their e-mail inbox.

Here are examples of common calls to action (CTA) in e-newsletters:

- "Register for an event"
- "Tell us what you think"
- "Watch the video"
- "Find out more"
- "Get the answer" (a good CTA for an FAQ section)
- "Find more articles about [insert topic]"
- "Download a course catalog"

Subject Line

The principles here are similar to those described in the [Headline](#) section below. The subject line of your e-mail newsletter can make the difference between whether a subscriber opens your message, skims right past it, or deletes it, so it's worth taking a little extra time to craft an eye-catching subject line. Also, try to keep the subject line to 35 characters or fewer; open rates drop from 24% to 17% on average when the subject line goes over 35 characters.*

When crafting your subject line, bear in mind that a lot of e-mail users like to be able to sort or search their messages easily. So your subject line always should begin with the name of the newsletter. Here are the three elements (listed in order) you should include:

- **Name of the e-newsletter.** You can use an abbreviated name if space is an issue; just be consistent about how you refer to it there.
- **Date or volume/issue number.** Again, abbreviations are fine here.
- **A reference to something specific** about or within that issue of the e-newsletter. For example:
 - If you do themed issues, do something like: *[Newsletter Name], [Date Stamp]: Focus on Cancer Research*

- If you have a really compelling piece of content, highlight that:
[Newsletter Name], [Date Stamp]: Nelson Mandela to Visit Evans School

Some e-newsletter editors go an extra step and do message testing with the subject line: For example, they'll come up with two different subject lines—say, one that touts an upcoming event and one that teases a news item—split their subscriber list in half, and send each group one version or the other. Then they'll examine the open rates and other measurements to determine which subject line led to better performance numbers. Gaining this kind of insight helps you begin to hone in on what interests your readers the most.

* Source: MailerMailer, Email Metrics Report, July 2006

Headline

One of your best defenses against having readers lose interest in your e-newsletter and decide to unsubscribe is to make their reading experience as quick and compelling as possible. And that means good headline-writing. Most readers will scan the headlines in your e-newsletter first and will only read or click if they see something that intrigues them. Given that you have mere seconds to catch their eyes, each word in the headline becomes very important. Here are some tips to keep in mind when crafting headlines:

- **Include a call to action.** (See [Call to Action](#) above.) Readers want to know what you want them to do with the information you're giving them. You can't just throw it out there and expect it to stick. For example, write "Find out how UW ranks vs. other public universities" instead of "Public university rankings released"
- **Use numerals and abbreviations.** Even though style manuals require spelling out all numbers below 10, you should throw that rule out the window when it comes to e-newsletters. The headlines that draw the most clicks in e-mail, and on the Web, deliver bite-sized pieces of content. For example:
 - "3 tips to help you land that grant"
 - "Raise \$500M in 17 months? How will UW do it?"
- **Be a name-dropper.** If you've got news about a famous person, don't be coy: use that name in your headline (and your subject line and use a photo in the blurb): "Yo-Yo Ma to Teach Master Class at Kane Hall"
- **Ask questions.** This not only creates intrigue, but it can also invite dialogue or encourage interactivity. Example:

Do Cougs Have More Spirit Than Huskies?
You won't believe what our online poll is telling us.
- **Puns can be poison.** Don't expect your readers to have the same sense of humor—or command of the English language—as you do. It's OK to be conversational and even lightly humorous, if you have the skill for that sort of thing, but it's more important to be clear and compelling. One study showed that, on average, only 56% of e-mail recipients correctly interpreted a humorous message. (Source: Kruger and Epley, *Egocentrism over E-mail*, May 2006)
- **Write for your audience, not your dean.** Avoid using insider terms (like "vertical segmentation") or acronyms (like "CSE") unless you know they are familiar to the majority of your audience or you have a way to define them. Also, don't assume your readers know or care about your organizational structure. They care what your organization is doing, not who your boss is.

Interactivity

Don't forget about the "e" in "e-newsletter!" Take advantage of the technology to build deeper relationships with your readers.

- **Invite them to send feedback, questions, or even content** (such as photos, videos, tips or news tidbits that are relevant to your audience).
- **Provide an e-mail address** where they can send feedback, questions and suggestions. But first make sure you have sufficient resources available to read and respond to their messages.
- **Interactive polls are another fun option** that may even yield some usable data. Ask for readers' opinions or perceptions about your e-newsletter, your school/college, or a hot topic in their area of focus, such as:
 - How satisfied are you with your overall relationship with the UW?
 - Very satisfied?
 - Satisfied?
 - Dissatisfied?
 - Very dissatisfied?

Then tally and display the results online. Catalyst, an internal UW tool, provides some [easy-to-use tools](#) to help you create polls.

- **Don't just link the headline.** Look for other opportunities to link people to more information on the Web or even within the e-newsletter itself (e.g. a Table of Contents/In This Issue element). For example:
 - [Microsoft and UW](#)**
When Microsoft went looking for a competitive edge in the digital photography software business, they found one at the UW: [Photo Tourism](#), a combination of image modeling, rendering, browsing, retrieval, and annotation software. It was developed by UW graduate student [Noah Snively](#).
- **Invite them to share the e-newsletter with friends**, and be sure always to provide a link to your subscription page. You can do this in a special section or in an opening message, or simply include a "Send to a Friend" link that goes to your [archived](#) e-newsletter Web page.
- **Offer personalization** (also referred to as segmentation or customization). The simplest way to do this is to greet the subscriber by name at the top of the newsletter. More sophisticated options include splitting up the list by region and offering content, such as local events, that is specific to that region or allowing the subscriber to determine which sections of the e-newsletter s/he wants to receive and removing the parts s/he's not interested in.

Legal Responsibilities

Thanks to spammers, organizations that send e-mail messages to large numbers of recipients have some legal restrictions on how they communicate electronically with those recipients. The restrictions, outlined in the federal [CAN-SPAM Act](#), primarily apply to for-profit businesses, not nonprofits like the UW. However, complying with the spirit of this law will encourage readers to trust your e-newsletter and not assume that it's spam. Here are steps you should take to make your e-newsletter legally compliant:

- **Always include a link to a privacy policy.** This is a legally vetted statement describing what you will do with any personally identifiable information you collect from your subscribers and how you will protect their privacy. Until/unless we develop a statement specifically for e-newsletters,

you can link to the overall UW Privacy Policy:

www.washington.edu/computing/rules/privacypolicy.html

- **Always include a current copyright date.** It is best to use **(c)** rather than the symbol © to ensure that the symbol doesn't become obscured due to an HTML code-translation error.
- **Always provide a way for subscribers to remove themselves from your mailing list.** Most e-newsletter mailing software automatically inserts information about how to unsubscribe and a link to a page that will confirm their removal from the list.

UW Technology offers UW-specific guidance on this topic in its [Security Standards and Policies](#).

Ensuring a Positive Reader Experience

The e-newsletter experience doesn't—and shouldn't—end in the recipient's inbox. When planning content, you should think carefully about when to include links, where those links send your readers, and whether they'll be satisfied with what they find when they get there. Most e-newsletters contain multiple links to Web pages, and those Web pages may not always live on a Web site that you control. If those Web destinations are poorly designed or written, readers will associate the negative experience they have on that site with your e-newsletter. After all, it's the reason they ended up there.

Links should open in a separate browser window. That prevents readers who read their e-mail on the Web, instead of in an e-mail program, from being sent out of their e-mail inbox to another Web page and having to use the Back button to return to the e-newsletter. Adding the HTML tag **target="_blank"** to an **<a=href>** tag is one way you can ensure that clicked links will open a separate browser window.

To ensure that your readers have the best possible experience with your e-newsletter, put yourself in their shoes when you're gathering content. Make sure the content accurately reflects the information readers will expect to find when they click on your link. Don't oversell a Web page just to draw more clicks. This will cause readers to distrust your publication. If you discover that a Web site provides a negative experience, contact the Web site owner and request that it be fixed. Otherwise, consider cutting that content, saving it for a future issue while the problem is being resolved, or finding a better place to link to.

Here are some steps you can take to help provide your reader with a good experience:

- **If you ask readers to register for an event,** try registering for the event yourself first (you can always cancel later). Ask these questions as you go through the registration process:
 - Are you able to find information you need to know (time, place, cost, etc.) before you begin the registration process?
 - Are the steps for registering clear?
 - Does the registration form provide a link to a page that explains how the University will protect the privacy of the information you provide?
 - Do you receive confirmation via e-mail or a confirmation Web page at the end of the registration process letting you know if you were successful?

- Is there information about what to do if the registration process fails or if you need to update or cancel your registration?
- **If your e-newsletter promises something** (e.g., "Find the 10 most popular majors at the UW"), **make sure the destination page delivers** on that promise—that the list actually contains 10 majors and is easy to find on the destination page.
- The Web is still very much the Wild, Wild West. So **be sure to test the links on all Web pages you link to in your e-newsletter** to make sure they're in good working order and they link to legitimate, appropriate content.
- **Make sure the Web page doesn't display errors or incomplete content.** For example, if the Web page includes a video, it should also include a link to the site where readers can download the software that runs the video, in case they don't have that software already on their computer.
- **Make sure the Web site is reliable.** The Webmaster or IT team responsible for the destination site can help you make this determination. The site should have sufficient server capacity to handle an increase in visitor traffic on the day you send out the e-newsletter. This is usually not a problem, but it is something to consider if your subscriber base is large (100s of thousands) and you're including a piece of content that you know is going to be very popular (e.g. "Now available: Get tickets for the 2007 Apple Cup game").
- **Make sure that the Web page you're linking to will be there when you need it.** For example, you might not be aware that a site you're linking to is in the middle of a major redesign and the page you're linking to might be slated for the cyber trash can. Confirm the sanctity of Web content with the Web site owner. Or see if there is another more reliable place to link instead.
- **If you provide an e-mail address where readers can send questions or requests for information**, make sure there is a person and a process on the receiving end so that you can deliver on the implied promise of a response.
- **Test ALL of the links in your e-newsletter**—and then test them again. You can't be overcautious here. For more information about testing, check the [how-to manual](#).

What to Do After You Send Your E-Newsletter

What to Do After You Send Your E-Newsletter After you've sent out your e-newsletter to subscribers, it's important to take a step back after you send it out and assess both the process and the product. The following recommendations will help you ensure the long-term success of your e-newsletter:

- [Debrief](#)
- [Archive](#)
- [Track Performance](#)

Debrief

After your first issue of an e-newsletter or a newly redesigned e-newsletter, you should hold a debriefing meeting with all the people who participated in conceiving it to discuss what went well, what didn't go well, and what you will do differently next time. Be as inclusive as possible with your invitation list: For example, include the content contributors, reviewers, designer, technical support people, and Web site owners.

Archive

Even though your e-newsletter should be optimized for reading and viewing in an e-mail setting, e-mail is not the right medium for archiving back issues. That should be done by posting them to the Web, either as a downloadable PDF or a Web page that uses similar code. There are several good reasons to archive back issues:

- Potential subscribers can preview archived newsletters before choosing to subscribe.
- Since most e-newsletter designs tend to degrade when they're forwarded, an online archive allows people to share the e-newsletter with colleagues or friends without having to forward it via e-mail.
- It gives subscribers who have trouble viewing HTML in their e-mail client an error-free place to view the HTML version.
- It adds more well-crafted content to your Web site, giving the e-newsletter a longer shelf life.

Track Performance

No amount of planning and research can get you all the information you'll need to have a successful e-newsletter. You also have to get the readers' perspectives and that means finding out how they used the e-newsletter and what they thought about it. This input is invaluable for future planning and the continued success of your e-newsletter. But it will only help you if you actually take the time to analyze it and make decisions based on it. You can gather the data through statistical reports that are available in most e-mail distribution software and through periodic reader surveys or usability tests.

Here are some of the important reader inputs to incorporate into your content planning:

- **Reader Behavior:**
 - **Open Rate:** The percentage of the recipients who opened the e-newsletter. (The education industry standard is 23%–26%.)
 - **Click-through Rate:** The number of individual headlines clicked divided by total number of e-mails successfully sent. This gives you an indication of how effective your content was at compelling readers to want to learn more. (The education industry standard is 6%–8%.)
 - **Unique Click-throughs:** The number of times each individual link was clicked. This gives you an indication (but not the only indication) of which pieces of content were the most and least compelling to your readers.
 - **Unsubscribes:** The number of people who opted to remove themselves from your subscriber list. If this number spikes for a particular issue of the e-newsletter, you should compare that issue with previous ones to determine the cause. Was it a technical glitch that, perhaps, rendered the message poorly? Was it the type or length of content you included? Then make adjustments, as appropriate, and monitor future unsubscribe levels to make sure they stay low.
 - **Spam Reports:** When a recipient of your e-newsletter, a mail server, or an Internet service provider reports it as unwanted or deceptive e-mail to the [Federal Trade Commission](#). As with unsubscribes, if these requests spike, you should [contact the FTC](#) to see if a particular Internet service provider has blacklisted your e-newsletter (AOL is one of the more vigilant spam blockers) and why they did so. Then make

the necessary adjustments, as appropriate, to get reinstated as a whitelisted sender.

- **Technology:**
 - **Bounce-backs:** E-newsletters that were not successfully delivered to some subscribers. This usually occurs because a subscriber's e-mail address has been recorded incorrectly (it might include a typo) or no longer exists. Be sure to correct that information or remove the subscriber from your list. That will help keep your list "clean" and up to date, and it will help decrease the amount of time it takes to send out the e-newsletter.
 - **Number of HTML versions sent and number of text versions sent.** This helps you prioritize which version receives more of your time and effort. If more than 25% of your subscribers are receiving the text version, you might put more thought into how to maximize its readability and effectiveness.
- **E-mail Feedback:** Direct responses from your subscribers, such as reactions to content, suggestions for content, questions about the e-newsletter, etc. Use this information to guide your decisions about what content to include and whether to adjust the design or layout to increase reader satisfaction.