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For many years, newsletters were looked at as a kind of quaint way to get news out about your company. Businesses were never sure who actually read them, or even whether they were getting read. But email changed all that. Today, newsletters can -- and often should -- be a vital part of a company's branding and marketing strategy, and new software tools take all the mystery out of measuring an audience. Newsletters can be extremely important to a company's overall business plan, but they require some forethought and planning. Here are some tips from experts for companies with any size budget on how to produce quality pieces that get noticed.

**1** - Write down why you want to send a newsletter. "Before you do anything, ask, "Why are we doing this?" suggests Timothy Votapka, director of business development at Winet Communications (<http://www.winetcom.com/>). "Are the goals identified? Have we written down what we want to do to achieve our goals? There's an old axiom that's helpful to follow: If it isn't written, it's not true." Writing down exactly what you hope to achieve through a newsletter codifies your intent, and helps to keep the project on track. It also helps to differentiate the newsletter from collateral materials you already have, such as brochures. Remember, a newsletter is topical, not static. Mission statements, philosophies and the like belong in a brochure or a Web site (which can be linked to through an HTML newsletter), but they should not be part of your newsletter. (More on this in #5, "Content.") Remember, there are many legitimate answers to the question: "Why are we doing this?" Among those are: trying to increase sales, getting name recognition, and maintaining relationships. Each requires a strategy to achieve that specific goal.

**2** - Use your target audience as a guide. Your mailing list should be made up of contacts, clients, people whom you've "touched" fairly recently. Ask whether the goal of your newsletter pertains to your audience. If the two don't line up, it's time to reevaluate your mission statement. If they are in sync, be sure to clean up your list, deleting any old contacts and adding in any new ones. Don't worry if your list is huge; the clear benefit to using email to disseminate your message is cost. Email is much less expensive than direct mail and offers virtually the same response rate, notes Ronen Yaari, president and founder of Open Moves (<http://www.openmoves.com/>). In addition, you'll be better able to track how your audience responds to an email newsletter. "With email reporting, you can tell who opened it, what they did with it, and who they forwarded it to," says Yaari. "You can even send to a subset of your list and determine what the best subject line is before sending it to everyone. That way, you can conduct testing that is fast and inexpensive."

**3** - Select an HTML tool you are comfortable with. "That is the most important thing," says Ron Dresner, president of Your PR Department (<http://www.yourprdepartment.com/>). "Don't use plain text, and never send attachments. There are plenty of options out there, but shop around, because some don't include reporting [in the initial pricing], and others charge for things like uploading graphics." Two of the most popular tools are Constant Contact and Bronto, but there are plenty out there that can provide assistance with not only the design but also the reporting of recipient data. "Don't underestimate the importance of reporting; there is lots of research you can get with these tools," Dresner adds. Contracting with an organization to manage contact lists and track email communications can be done for as little as \$30 to \$50 a month, with costs rising commensurate with the number of services provided.

**4** - Determine a design. Once the goals of the newsletter are set,

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the list is ready and a method of production has been determined, it's time to name and design the publication. "Do research. Figure out what your readers want. You can do this through informal polling, focus groups, etc. If you don't know, you are taking a big risk of producing something that doesn't meet readers' needs," Votapka says. It's worth the expense to have the newsletter designed professionally. That could be a one-time cost of \$750 or so, but, considering you'll be using the template on a regular basis, perhaps to thousands of readers, it's a worthwhile investment, and will project your business in a professional manner. In addition, the template should be coded professionally by the designer and should work across email platforms. Be sure the designer has experience specifically in email newsletters. A word of warning: Despite how attractive PDFs can look, stay away from creating your newsletter in that format and sending it as an attachment, most experts advise. People don't want to have to go through an extra step just to read a newsletter, plus people are wary of messages with attachments due to virus threats.

Determine whether your readers want a newsletter that's all text, text with links to content on your Web site, or a combination of text, links and graphics. "It's hard to [create a newsletter that's] just plain text to describe a product. Many are going to HTML newsletters. Keep the graphics light, and be sure it's coded properly so the [most basic] email program can view it accurately," says Yaari. Finally, the design should be compartmentalized and "expected," advises Dresner. "Don't change the look and feel every time." Organize the content sensibly. Don't make it hard to read by choosing a too-arty font, or by putting a colored typeface on a colored background. Don't go wild on the use of color; use a basic scheme. Often, it's helpful to maintain the look and feel of other collateral material you may have produced, but not always. For example, if you are trying to differentiate one division of a large company, you might purposefully choose a color scheme and masthead that separates it from the parent company.

**5 - Create Killer Content.** Here's the bread and butter of your newsletter. Having top-shelf content that is pertinent to your audience will make your readers become loyal devotees of this publication. That, in turn, is going to drive them to your Web site, which will, ultimately, allow you to sell your product to them. But the newsletter itself should not be a hard-sell. "Steer away from sounding or looking like a brochure," says Votapka, adding, "Make sure it doesn't sound sales-y." Appropriate types of articles include case studies, how-to's, light features, data charts, interviews in a Q&A format, and brief, concise items. "Remember, no one is really interested in new hires, new alliances, press releases," says Yaari. "This is not all about you," but, rather, it's about what the (prospective) client finds interesting.

Don't forget the importance of the subject line, either. Coming up with something informative yet clever is a challenge that shouldn't be underestimated. Most people will see an email in the in-box and wonder, "What's the point of this?" If the subject line is vague or too cute, most people won't even bother to open it. Headlines with "How to" or "Top Tips" are eye-catchers. "Make this newsletter valuable to the customer," Dresner advises. "Offer events, speaking opportunities, workshops, and conferences. Make it a tool for them to look forward to."

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