

Used well, a newsletter can create a sense of community for website visitors, which contradicts the impersonal distance of the Internet. If they feel involved, they will keep coming back.

Words on the Web

2. Newsletters

Frequent, loyal visitors, masses of interest, regular, growing sales - is that your experience with Internet trading? For most small businesses, the promise of the web has yet to be fulfilled. The website is there, but few people seem to visit the site and even fewer buy from it - or even make a second visit. So you lose interest, the site declines, visitor numbers drop away even more, and you give up.

Self-fulfilling prophecy

Imagine what would happen if a shopkeeper took the same attitude to his storefront. It would quickly become a self-fulfilling prophecy... few people come, so the shop is neglected then *nobody* comes. Website traffic cannot be taken for granted; you have to work to keep the visitors coming and one of the recognised ways to stimulate visitor loyalty is to issue a Newsletter. Does your website have one?

Sense of purpose

Whether published in print or electronically, newsletters suffer the common fate of starting well then tailing off. They can lose their way over time, reducing in size, quality and readership until the effort no longer seems worthwhile. Some succeed, however - establishing a loyal readership and contributing positively to the business which sponsors the effort. The problem is that *is* it an effort. A good newsletter does not happen by accident. It needs planning, hard work and consistency; and it needs to generate a sense of 'belonging' among its readers. Success begins with a sense of purpose.

Create a community

The purpose of a website newsletter is to create a community where readers feel at home. The Internet is a remote, and relatively static, medium that speaks to an audience of distant individuals quietly staring at sheets of glass. It is an unreal environment inhabited by lone individuals. A good website will hold the attention of those individuals long enough to convey the site's message while they are still on-line. A good newsletter will bring those visitors back to the site - again and again. They become loyal because the message is right for them. The message will be right for them if you have clearly defined your audience.

Shared interests

Describe your customers. What do they like? Where do they live? What do they want from your business? Why do they visit your website? The answers to those questions will determine the contents of your newsletter. At its most basic, a website newsletter will tell people about the latest features and offers on your site; but why be basic? To build a real community you need shared interests that do not necessarily have a price-tag. The things you tell your readers should not always be blatant sales messages. Mass-market magazines earn their money through advertising, but few people would read them if that were all they contained.

Respect

Statistically, direct mail is a successful means of promotion. True, the majority or 'junk mail' ends up in the bin, but the low cost of mailing makes it value-for-money compared

with media advertising and cold-calling. Email campaigns perform better than direct snail-mail and, with no postage to pay, are even more cost-effective. But a website newsletter is not unsolicited mail. Newsletter mailing lists are 'opt-in' (or they should be) so a high proportion of readers are on the list because they chose to be. This is a ready-made audience that deserves the respect. It is not respectful to bombard them with trivia several times a week. There are examples where daily news may be welcome, but the majority of website newsletters need pacing less frequently (if you overdo it your former readers may be dumped in their 'Blocked Senders' list). On the other hand, if you space your mailings too far apart, your readers will forget you. Monthly or bi-monthly is probably about right for most sites. Strike a happy balance that maintains the community and promotes your site effectively, but and avoids becoming 'spam'.

Publishable material

When you have identified your audience, built a mailing list and determined your publishing programme, it is time to construct your newsletter. It may not be long before you encounter the problem of finding material to publish. Friends, readers and business colleagues may wish you well, but few will become reliable sources of information. However they are published, that is a problem for most newsletters and the classic solution is to keep a 'bin' for every potential snippet. Walk the world with open eyes, scanning for potentially publishable material. Above all, look for news stories from your clients and, perhaps give them scope to promote their services through your newsletter. Stories have broader appeal than unvarnished facts. Changes and additions to your website, products and services provide your primary news items but, if that's all you say, your newsletter will be just a bare-faced advert. The interest you build by publishing your collected 'snippets' is what softens your message and turns your mailing into a good read.

Fast-paced language

Now start writing. Select enough material to fill one page, or two at the most. Headline your paragraphs and provide a table of links, in addition to any hyperlinks you may place within the text. Use fast-paced language and be descriptive, but edit out unnecessary words. Novelists can indulge in slow-paced writing to suit readers who are curled up on the settee. Newsletter writers need to use words economically, conveying the maximum impact in the briefest reading time - especially when the publication is to be read on screen. Writing compact copy is a lot harder than it looks - which may be why many well-intentioned newsletter schedules run into the buffers.

Challenge

Frequent, loyal visitors, masses of interest, regular, growing sales; these are desirable objectives, which your newsletter can help to achieve. Are you ready for the challenge?

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