

1. Stand out in a crowd

If your business depends on maintaining or establishing a reputation for quality, service and dependability, you should definitely consider a newsletter as part of your overall marketing mix. That's because a newsletter can help establish you or your company as an authority in your field. Here's what Joe Marney had to say, in the July 18, 1988 issue of Marketing:

“Newsletters are a high-impact advertising alternative. Because they offer an inexpensive way for companies to communicate consistently with current clients, prospects and the media, newsletters have become a popular form of marketing in the last few years. A newsletter can enhance an organization's visibility, credibility and dominance in its selected market area by keeping readers informed of trends, product development and additional services.”

No matter what kind of business you are in, you are essentially selling only one thing — a benefit to the customer. And, from the customer's point of view, why should he or she buy from you, rather than someone else?

Consider your own buying habits. For some products or services, the main benefit you seek is simply price and/ or convenience. But if you are making a more complex purchase, you are looking for a good deal more. If, for example, you are considering buying a computer system and know little about computers, chances are you'll seek out a dealer who will help you make an intelligent decision. That simply means that he or she will pay very close attention to your needs and then attempt to tailor a system around those needs.

The best dealer will be one whose salespeople obviously know enough about their products and the competition's to help you make the right choice. If it turns out for example, that you need a computer only for word processing, a helpful dealer will guide you to a lower-priced machine rather than a state-of-the-art computer far more powerful than you need. The major benefit in this case would be the money you save by making a more rational purchase.

The same considerations would also apply if you were in need of other products or services. If you were seeking legal advice, you would try to find a lawyer whose advice would, despite legal fees, ultimately save you money or, worse, a prison term.

In both cases, you would seek advice from those you believed had the best knowledge of their field and the honesty and integrity to help you make the best possible choices. And, in both cases, a well-written and designed newsletter can help you find the people you need.

In Vancouver, a number of companies publish newsletters to accomplish just that goal.

Ward Music's Music Connection store publishes an excellent newsletter on synthesizers and music software produced by salesman Graeme Bennett. Graeme writes and edits the newsletter using an Atari desktop publishing system. The newsletter is an excellent, unbiased source of advice on all types of keyboards and software, for MS-DOS, Macintosh, Atari and Amiga users.

One of Vancouver's largest law firms, Bull Housser & Tupper, uses a newsletter to establish the companies' expertise in specialized areas of law.

Corporate newsletters are not new. For years, many companies have used newsletters to keep in touch with regular customers. But, in the past, production costs were generally high — beyond the reach of smaller to mid-sized companies. But, largely because of the computer desktop publishing revolution, the cost of a newsletter is now within reach of the smallest companies. Newsletters now seem to be produced by just about every imaginable kind of business, from fitness centres to high-tech companies.

2. Target your market

Unlike other, more general forms of advertising, a newsletter allows you to zero in on the people you want to reach.

Bull Hausser & Tupper sends out 2,137 copies of its Technology and Trade Report each quarter, mostly to company clients. In each edition there are a number of short articles on patents, trademarks and copyrights. As well, the newsletter features a profile on at least one lawyer in each issue.

The newsletter is well received. Clients often write or phone in to comment on articles they have read and the law firm frequently gets calls from people who have heard about the newsletter somewhere else and would like to be put on the mailing list.

The law firm's example is a good one. When considering distribution, make sure your regular customers come first. They are the people who have already helped to make your business successful; they will continue to play a major part.

If you are in the retail business, ask for your customer's name and address at the counter, while they are making their purchase. Radio Shack stores employ this tactic to great affect. Although the company does not publish a newsletter, it does send out a catalogue at regular intervals filled with specials to attract people into company stores.

If your business exists mainly to serve a local area, use mail drops. Canada Post can help you choose how wide your distribution should be.

If you wish to target specific industries, you might try using the yellow pages. Do try, though, to address your newsletter to the decision-maker at the other end. You can find the right person by either phoning the company and asking, or by using the Contacts Influential directory available at your library.

For more specific marketing you might want to try using a targeted mailing list. These are available from a number of companies in Vancouver. Some printing houses provide a separate mailing service.

3. Bang for the bucks

A newsletter can be your most cost-effective form of advertising.

Using the simplest of equipment available, you can produce a newsletter. Even a typewriter and a copy machine can do the job. For some newsletters, such as financial bulletins, a typewritten newsletter conveys a sense of urgency, of news that is "hot off the press".

If time is even more of the essence, you might consider using your fax machine for distribution. So long as you provide solid information and don't fill up your newsletter with unnecessary fluff and self-congratulations, those receiving it will not consider it just another addition to the heap of "junk fax" spewing out of their machines.

If you wish a more professional look, desktop publishing is the way to go. Today's Macintosh and IBM computers are, in the right hands, excellent and reasonably priced tools. But make sure you have the right hands on the job. No matter how good the computers and software, they are only as good as the person at the keyboard. And that person should know something about design. A poorly designed newsletter can defeat the purpose of the whole exercise.

It may help, for starters, to hire a graphic designer to design a template for your newsletter. A template establishes a consistent design from issue to issue. Your logo, for example, remains on the front page in the same position. The copy is set in a particular font, such as Times or Helvetica. Headlines may be set, like this newsletter, in Futura Bold. This way, once the rules have been established, even a relatively inexperienced computer operator can turn out a good-looking newsletter.

But please don't assign the task to a busy secretary who has no enthusiasm for the job. Realize that desktop publishing is fast becoming a highly specialized skill in itself. You will need to train an employee to handle the job. And, preferably, you should train two employees at the same time so that you will not be caught short in the event of illness or of one employee quitting at the worst possible time. If your firm is small, it may well be preferable for you to hire an outside desktop publishing service.

The same principles apply to the writing of your newsletter. Either hire a professional copywriter or make sure you have someone on staff who can do the job. Copy should be interesting, informative, and (if possible) exciting. For a newsletter, it should also be short. Everyone thinks they can write. Few can.

If in doubt about the copy for your newsletter, show it to your friends before publication and ask for their candid opinions. If the material is difficult, make sure they can understand it.

Production can be cheap or very expensive. A type-written newsletter represents the low end. At the top are four-colour newsletters. This newsletter is somewhere in the middle. It was written and designed on a Macintosh SE and initially proofed on a Laserwriter Plus but the final product was taken to a service bureau and output on a Linotronic 300 Laser Imagesetter machine. That was because the Linotronic, unlike the Laserwriter, is capable of printing out in tabloid (11"X17") size and at much higher resolution.

This publication is simply a tabloid-sized page printed on both sides and folded once in the centre. Only two tabloid size printing plates were required as pages one and four were set on one tabloid page and pages two and three were set on another page.

The Linotronic 300 is capable of printing out paper or film proofs. For a final check, I requested paper proofs of EDGE and, after making final corrections, ordered film output from the Linotronic machine. This film was used to make the printing plates for EDGE, bypassing the old process whereby a printer had to shoot mechanicals — the final, pasted-up page — in order to create film. (Much like a photographic process, film is used to create the final image on a sensitized printing plate.)

The process you choose to produce your newsletter is important, but more important is the thought and care which goes into your product initially. No matter how glossy the final product, it will impress no-one if it is poorly written and/ or designed.

The Number One Rule? Do not publish a newsletter if you are not confident that it is the best you can produce and that others will find readable and attractive.

4. Solid product news

Today's world is changing so quickly that businesses cannot afford to be out of date.

You can help to ensure your customers know about the very latest in technology that will affect them. In a newsletter, you can show them how they can benefit by utilizing what's new on the market. For an important new product, you could devote an entire issue of a newsletter to an explanation of the product and how it could benefit potential users. You could even employ, as examples, other customers who have used your product and show how they have maximized its potential. This would both flatter your existing customers and provide solid advice for new customers.

Or, perhaps, you can show potential customers how they don't need the newest and latest on the market. Much of the latest computer software, for example, is far beyond the needs of most small businesses. What they need is simple, easy-to-use software that can make running their business a lot easier. And you can show them how to do it.

Remember, the most important goal of any newsletter is to your establish you, or your firm's, credibility. If you can show newsletter readers how best to use what they already have in terms of products or services, you are doing them a great favour. When it comes to important buying decisions in the future, you will be remembered.

Again, consider your own buying habits and you will realize the importance of honesty and good advice in determining how you choose to spend your money.

5. Beat the seasons

Most businesses experience ups and downs depending on the season of the year. These cyclic variations can be difficult to manage. Part-time help may be required to deal with overflow periods. Cash flow crises may arise. Careful planning of your business, coupled with an informative newsletter, may help to offset these variations.

Consider one example: a bicycle shop. Typically, a bike shop is extremely busy during the summer months when the weather is fine and customers are purchasing bikes. During the fall and winter, business languishes.

However, the fall and winter months can be used to best advantage by providing products and services not available during peak periods. Bike tune-ups and maintenance, for example, can be accomplished much more speedily during slack months than when a shop is coping with a press of customers. Profits may not be as great for maintenance as for sales, but a reliable and reasonably-priced maintenance service provides an excellent opportunity to establish customer confidence and trust. You'll not only get repeat customers, but you'll get new customers because of excellent word-of-mouth advertising.

A good way to let your customers know about off-season specials and additional services is through a newsletter, perhaps published on a quarterly, seasonal, basis. Again, if you are in a retail business make sure all customers receive the newsletter by taking names and addresses when customers make a purchase.

Use your imagination to consider how you could plan your own business to best deal with seasonal variations and how a newsletter could best serve your needs.

6. A great sales tool

Before your salespeople even leave the office, they can use a newsletter to generate prospects.

A well-written and designed newsletter is the best introduction your sales people can have. Again, a newsletter establishes your credibility in the field. It shows new prospects that your most important product is expertise, service and reliability.

When your salespeople make calls, a newsletter is an excellent piece of promotion to leave behind. Or it can be used to help salespeople explain your latest products or services. As well, you can insert your newest brochures and leaflets inside the newsletter. A package like this would make an excellent hand-out at trade fairs and conventions.

Don't forget that your sales people are in the frontline of your business. They are the people who most often deal directly with customers. Make sure, therefore, that your salespeople are involved with the newsletter. They know what problems your customers face and how your firm can best help them. So listen to your salespeople. Encourage them to make contributions. Make sure that your newsletter reflects the reality of what is going on in the real world — i.e. the world of your customers.

7. Boost company morale

A newsletter can serve other needs besides promotion. It can also be a very valuable tool for communicating with your employees. But be careful.

Bad corporate publications can foster staff alienation and cynicism. The good ones provide real news about your company and stress employee contributions towards its success.

For your information, David Burkett in *Very Good Management* (Prentice-Hall, Inc.) cites a survey which indicated that only 18 per cent of 45,000 employees polled were satisfied with their company publications. 95 per cent wanted more information about their company's future plans and 90 per cent wanted more on personnel policies and practices. Nearly as many wanted more job-related information and additional articles on productivity improvement.

Only 57 per cent, far down the employees' wish list, wanted more personal news such as birthdays and anniversaries. Employees, in other words, are not much different than the general public. They want significant news. Not just corporate bumpf. But how many corporate employee newsletters fill that need?

According to Harold L. Taylor, writing in the March, 1987, issue of *Sales & Marketing in Canada*:

“Company publications reflect the qualities of the company, are an important communications vehicle, and can help the readers feel better about themselves and the company. They should not be relegated as a ‘joe job’ or ‘filler’ for an unqualified person. They should be professionally written and professionally presented. Otherwise they can do more harm than good.”

So make sure you understand what you are trying to accomplish with an employee newsletter. If in doubt, the following philosophy, quoted from *In Search of Excellence*, (Warner Books) could well serve as the guiding principles of your publication:

“Treat people as adults.

“Treat them as partners; treat them with dignity; treat them with respect. Treat them — not capital spending and automation — as the primary source of productivity gains... if you want productivity and the financial reward that goes with it, you must treat your workers as your most important asset.”