Creating An eNewsletter That Gets Results

Five Big Ticket Items For Maximizing Impact

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When it comes to growing your donor list, increasing charitable donations and creating a much greater presence, an eNewsletter is an excellent idea.

If done right, an eNewsletter can get your organization's cause and key messages in front of a whole host of important and influential people. What's more, it can also keep your current donors and primary constituents up-to-date and in-the-know. And, if successful, not only will your eNewsletter generate a never-ending list of new prospects, but it will also increase your organization's charitable contributions as well.

In this article, we'll share with you five big ticket items for developing and delivering an eNewsletter that gets results. By reading this article, you'll gain a greater understanding of not only what's required, but the precise steps you can take to ensure that your eNewsletter gets read.

But before we roll up our pant legs and step into the water, we need to take a moment to talk about why we want to get wet in the first place.
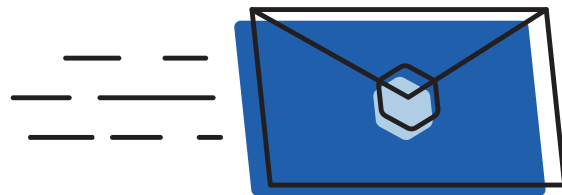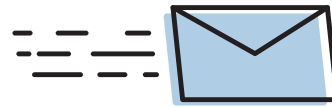
It's A Crowded, Confusing And Undisciplined Environment

While email—and especially eNewsletters—can be leveraged as useful tools to help you advance your organization's cause, it shouldn't be a surprise that it's a crowded, confusing and pretty undisciplined environment when it comes to developing, designing and delivering electronic communications.

Just how crowded, confusing and undisciplined is it you ask? Great question.

According to the national M+R Benchmarking Study, the average not-for-profit organization sent a typical subscriber on its list, 49 email messages in 2015—19 of them were direct fundraising appeals, 12 were advocacy messages and 9 were newsletters. And while nonprofit leaders might get an "A" for effort, there's still a lot of work to be done.

And if all of this unfruitful activity and effort isn't blowing your mind, then consider this: In 2014, more than one-third of nonprofit organizations did not send a single email to new subscribers within the first 30 days of signing up! Astonishingly, this is exactly the time when new subscribers need to hear from you most.

In fact, of the 100s of millions of nonprofit electronic messages sent in 2015, the typical charity's overall open rate was a dismal 16%. The response rate was even worse—the average advocacy response rate was 2.1% and the average fundraising response rate was 0.06%. What's more, by the end of 2015, the typical nonprofit lost on average 11.8% of the email subscribers they had on January 1st. To make matters worse, about 24% of a nonprofit's email subscribers are considered to be inactive.

What these statistics confirm is that when it comes to nonprofits and their use of electronic messaging, it really is a crowded, confusing and undisciplined environment.

However, this shouldn't deter you in the slightest from wanting to jump into the deep end of the pool. Rather, it should cause you to be much more interested in how you can take measures to differentiate yourself from the others who are out there.

> " *90% of the information in your organization's eNewsletter should be directly content-driven.* "

Five Big Ticket Items For Maximizing Your eNewsletter's Impact

Here are five big ticket items that will help you in developing and delivering an eNewsletter that gets results.

BIG TICKET ITEM #1:
Content Is King

As you begin conceptualizing and thinking about your nonprofit's eNewsletter, it's important to understand that content is indeed king. And when we refer to this notion of "content," we're talking about useful and necessary information that helps your readers and subscribers to become better informed, more inspired and, as a result, dedicate (or re-dedicate) themselves to helping your organization advance its cause.

Specifically, it's recommended that about 90% of the information in your organization's eNewsletter should be directly content-driven. The other 10% can be appropriately related to appeals and requests for assistance. When you violate this ratio, your subscribers and constituents get the feeling that they are being strong-armed—and this is exactly what you don't want to have happen. To be sure, you want your people to genuinely look forward to receiving your organization's eNewsletter—and the only way this is going to happen is if you fill it with motivating content. Content can come from a variety of sources which may include late-breaking news developments; great human interest stories (that are a result of your nonprofit's efforts); interviews with interesting donors and volunteers; helpful hints and tips at being a better person/supporter; etc.

While the opportunities for delivering fresh content are endless, it's essential that you make a concerted effort to identify and create exciting and useful information on a regular basis. No doubt this will mean making some internal changes regarding the way your nonprofit does business.

For example, according to the 2014 Nonprofit Content Marketing Study, more than half of all nonprofits presently outsource their content creation citing a lack of time and/or a lack of budget as the top challenges they're facing. But, here's the thing: The most effective nonprofits are less likely to outsource design, writing and content planning/strategy than their least effective peers. But whether you outsource or take on the responsibility internally, developing killer content requires diligence, attention and effort. In fact, only 26% of nonprofit leaders currently rate themselves as effective in content marketing—this is going to have to change in a big way if you expect your organization to grow.

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BIG TICKET ITEM #2:
Simplicity Rules

The second essential tip that we can give you to maximize the impact of your organization's eNewsletter is to keep it simple. Far too many eNewsletters are far too ambitious. While incorporating a large number of graphics, departments, headlines, font styles and links sounds good when you're talking to a consultant, the reality is this: All of these big ideas don't translate very well when they reach someone's inbox or handheld device.

Oh sure, there will be those who will tell you about the power of visuals and images (all true by the way), but if those images can't be viewed and come across as a garbled mess, your eNewsletter is dead in the water.

Instead of relying on graphics, visuals and video, we suggest writing exciting headlines and compelling copy—these are foolproof strategies in the eNewsletter environment. Said another way, if your eNewsletter is not immediately easy-to-decipher and easy-to-read, you'll lose people in droves. Perhaps this explains why so many nonprofits lose so many of their supporters each year.

To maximize your e-Newsletter's impact, we suggest keeping the format elegant and as simple as possible. Remember, the ultimate goal is to deliver an eNewsletter that's packed with useful information that can be read easily and seamlessly from any device, anywhere.

BIG TICKET ITEM #3:
Use A Double Opt-In Approach

The third big ticket item to maximizing the impact of your organization's eNewsletter is to use a double opt-in approach. For the uninitiated, a double opt-in approach requires your subscribers to adhere to a pretty rigid protocol when signing up to receive your information.

According to LifeWire, by using the double opt-in protocol, not only will a user subscribe to your newsletter, mailing list or other email marketing message, but—when they do sign up—they're also making their request to become a part of your tribe explicitly known by confirming their email address in the process.

There's no question that employing a double opt-in approach to gaining subscribers requires more up-front effort, but the payoffs are much more pronounced. In fact, by utilizing this method, subscribers are overtly telling you that they want to be a part of your community. In so doing, they're giving you unfettered access to their email address and making it known that they want to hear from you.

These are all good things.

Rest assured, when you have a tribe of double opt-in subscribers, you gain a real sense of confidence knowing that you are sending information and appeals to people who are not only ready to hear from you, but will likely take action as well.

Just one more thing before we move on. It's a very wise move to make it easy for your subscribers to unsubscribe at any time. Remember, you only want to work with people who want to work with you. It's better to have 200 committed followers than 2,000 people who don't really care about you or your organization's cause.

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Here's the mantra: It's not quantity...it's quality.

BIG TICKET ITEM #4:
Do Not Confuse The Offer

The fourth big ticket item to maximizing the impact of your organization's eNewsletter is to never, ever, ever confuse the offer.

Here's what this means.

Earlier we shared with you that the ideal content-to-appeal ratio is 90/10. This means that 90% of your eNewsletter's composition needs to be genuine content—the other 10% should consist of a direct appeal asking for support. With this in mind, marketing experts tell us that it's unwise to give your subscribers a laundry list of potential support options. In fact, the more donation or volunteer options you give them, the more likely they're not going to take action at all.

While somewhat counterintuitive, this recommendation is something to which you should pay very close attention as providing too many offers becomes overwhelming and creates what is known as decision fatigue. (Don't forget about those dismal response rates listed earlier in this article).

We suggest appealing to your eNewsletter subscribers with a very simple, low-commitment offer. By taking this approach, you increase the likelihood that someone will respond immediately. This accomplishes two things. First, it lets you know that there are people out there who are actually reading your eNewsletter (and responding to your request). In addition, it also allows you to follow up at a later time to establish a deeper, more meaningful relationship.

In examining the current best practices of nonprofits across the U.S., the organizations that are adhering to this recommendation are the ones whose subscriber lists are growing and their support base is ultimately contributing more often and in greater amounts.

BIG TICKET ITEM #5:
Religiously Monitor Your Metrics

One of the most commonly overlooked recommendations in maximizing your organization's eNewsletter is making the commitment to religiously monitoring metrics.

By failing to monitor your eNewsletter's metrics, you are in essence, flying blind. Not convinced? Ask yourself this one simple question, "If you don't monitor the metrics, how will you know the specific steps to take to refine and improve your eNewsletter if you aren't absolutely sure what appeals to your readers right now?"

Without monitoring the metrics, you are making the decision to be mediocre. After all, it's the last six inches that matter most right? Indeed, if you're going to invest all of this time and effort into identifying, generating and formatting motivating content, why in the world wouldn't you want to know what is useful and what isn't?

Tragically, the vast majority of nonprofit professionals do not monitor metrics. But this doesn't have to be your lot in life. Although it will take a little bit of effort, you can master applications like Google Analytics, Mailchimp, Constant Contact, etc. And, when you do, you (and your organization) will prosper in a big way.

Parting Thoughts

As you can see, there is substantial opportunity in leveraging an eNewsletter to reach and influence your key constituents—as well as attract a whole host of new supporters. In this article, we have shared with you five big ticket items relating to developing, designing and delivering a great eNewsletter.

While not exhaustive, if you take to heart these recommendations you'll greatly increase the likelihood of your success. Certainly, implementing these big ticket items will take some significant effort on your part. But by taking these necessary steps, you'll be separating yourself from the rest of the pack and identifying your organization as a best-in-class nonprofit who's committed to excellence. ●

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