

Secrets to an Effective Newsletter

How to create a newsletter

that's an invaluable resource to you and your career

By Maya A. Rock

Whether it's due to a push from a publicist or simply noticing that all the other authors have one, you've started a newsletter. But you're not quite sure if you're getting it right. Here are some secrets to ease your foray into one of this fun form of marketing.

THE RIGHT PLATFORM

If you're new to newsletters, you might be picturing a mass email to a blind carbon copied (Bcc) list. However, such an email is only appropriate for your social circle—not for what's known in industry parlance as your audience. To address your audience, you'll need the professional gloss provided by online newsletter platforms.

Mailchimp was the preferred platform among the authors I surveyed. Mailchimp's popularity is due in part to its having been around for a while, but it's also very good at what it does. It's easy to work with if you're not tech savvy; text and graphics integration is intuitive. Mailchimp users also have access to expert advice on how to produce a newsletter and manage an audience.

Mailchimp isn't the only option. Alternatives include MailerLite, Wix, TinyLetter, and Substack. MailerLite and Wix both got thumbs-ups from two of the authors I interviewed. They migrated from Mailchimp and said after a brief learning curve,

they had grown accustomed to the platforms and were satisfied with them. TinyLetter and Substack are hugely popular, but both are geared toward text. This makes them ideal for people who want to showcase their prose, but less so for those whose main aim is to sell books.

GROW YOUR NEWSLETTER AUDIENCE

When you start a newsletter, you may populate it first with friends and professional contacts, but eventually you'll want to grow it to include readers and potential readers.

If you build it, they will come—but it doesn't hurt to make the trip pleasant. Make sure your website has a newsletter sign-up page. Anna Adams, author of a bestselling self-published young-adult romance series, stresses the importance of this sign-up page being aesthetically pleasing and straightforward to navigate.

In addition to the official sign-up page, install a newsletter sign-up pop-up box on your website. You'll also want to include links to the sign-up page on all your social media profiles (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter) and, if possible, in your e-books. Whenever you do an event, have a sign-up sheet for people to be added to the newsletter.

Adams recommends sending new newsletter audience members a welcome email as soon as they join, easing them into the relationship. That's in addition to the promised giveaways for signing

up. These initial giveaways are known as “reader magnets.” One of Adams’s reader magnets is the first book in her series, which leads people not only to sign up for the newsletter, but eventually to buy other titles in the series. She also gives them a series soundtrack. Other reader magnets could be short stories, prequels, novellas, and bonus chapters.

Multiauthor book giveaways are also a popular way to build lists. Sci-fi and fantasy

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romance author Sharon Fisher worked with Ryan Zee at BookSweeps to grow her audience by bundling books by a wide variety of authors in exchange for the recipients signing up for newsletters. She was pleased with the results, although another author expressed mixed feelings about the service, as she wasn’t sure those recipients were the most committed audience members.

A CLICK-WORTHY SUBJECT LINE

A good subject line can be the difference between a newsletter being opened or left alone. The basics won’t work here. “If your subject line is ‘Dan’s Next Newsletter,’ you’re not going to get a lot of people opening,” advises Dan Berkowitz of consultancy AuthorPop.

Be sure to capitalize and remember, there’s power in the pithy—keep the line short and employ big buzz words. Using the word “giveaway” and teasing a cover reveal or imminent publication date garner interest. Tying a holiday or current event into your subject line can make it appear relevant to the moment and, therefore, click-worthy.

Kelly Siskind, who writes contemporary romances and has a monthly newsletter, says that successful subject lines create excitement and mystery, in the vein of “You’ll Never Guess What’s Happened.” Questions, inherently mysterious, are

also popular as subject lines.

REFINE YOUR DESIGN

As a book author, you excel at long-form writing; yet your newsletter is not the place to show off these skills. Your readers, in the midst of busy lives, prefer short, digestible chunks of text, images, and videos that allow the eye to effortlessly travel down the page.

One newsletter I receive takes simplicity to the max. It consists of a single, short column of several one- to three-line paragraphs, recounting a story drawn from the sender’s work or daily life. The column ends with a brief call-to-action paragraph about her services. I find myself opening this newsletter often, maybe even weeks after I received it, in part because I know it won’t be too taxing to read.

Although not all newsletters need be so minimal, they should all have clear delineation between parts, so the reader doesn’t get overwhelmed. Short sentences and paragraphs, along with lines, shifts in background colors, and headlines and captions can gracefully break up different elements, so they don’t bleed into one another.

Stay consistent in the design of your newsletter. Berkowitz encourages his clients to think of building a newsletter not just in terms of building an audience, but in terms of building a relationship with that audience, which means maintaining regularity in terms of visuals as well as in content and frequency.

CAREER CONTENT

The newsletter is the place to brag about all things career. You’ll want to highlight positive reviews your books receive, as well as share news about covers, foreign deals, audio deals, sequel news, and any press you’ve been doing. You’ll also want to mention any events you’ll be doing, such as readings.

Don’t be bashful about promoting your books. Provide links and buttons to facilitate purchasing them. Get creative by running fun contests and giveaways. Consider giving away book-related prizes such as bookmarks, autographs, posters,

or other art in exchange for audience members hashtagging the book on social media or leaving Amazon reviews. Lara Ehrlich, author of a recent short story collection, offered to send readers a handwritten card if they preordered her book.

MAKING A PERSONAL CONNECTION

Your readers are looking for a personal connection with you. If you're shy, you might take to curation—sharing links to the books, music, podcasts, or any other products that you've taken a fancy to.

Sharon Fisher found her newsletter kicked into gear when she adopted a theme, a concept a book marketer introduced her to. Fisher's theme for her newsletter is coziness. Her curation includes suggestions for products like atmospheric candles, baked goods, and blankets to snuggle under while reading. If you don't have your own ongoing theme, you can pull from the calendar for inspiration, perhaps building newsletter issues around seasons or holidays.

If you are more open to sharing your life, feel free to go ahead and do so. Newsletter writers have often been surprised by just how much interest readers show in their lives. Pictures of daily activities that seem ho-hum to you can end up being very popular and help foster the connection that will keep people returning to the newsletter.

WHEN TO SEND

Newsletters work best when they are sent on a regular schedule. Once every month is a popular option. According to Berkowitz, "The minimum frequency for sending out a newsletter is every three months, although I do suggest trying to go monthly. If a quarterly frequency is too difficult to maintain, it's fine to push that out to just a few times a year, but I wouldn't expect meaningful results in your engagement." If your newsletters don't come often enough, you won't develop a level of anticipation in the reader, where they begin to count on your newsletter's arrival.

Perhaps most importantly, when you choose a schedule, it's important to commit to it. Think of it as a commitment with a friend—they'll notice if you're absent, and the relationship might fray.

Most people give themselves flexibility about what day to send the newsletter. When you're ready to choose, keep in mind that people are less likely to open your newsletter on the weekend, on a holiday, or on the days around a holiday. Ehrlich vouches for Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday as the optimal days to press send, a conclusion backed up by studies.

As far as exact the time to send, the consensus is clear on one thing: avoid the night. Aside from nixing the sleeping hours, my research revealed a huge range in preferences for times to send: some cited the fresh-and-ready hours of the morning as ideal; others like to aim for the lunch break in the middle of the day; and some prefer the evening, when people are settling in at home.

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MAGIC OF METRICS

The metrics you can get for a newsletter are quite detailed. You can find out who opens your newsletter, where they're located, how many times they open it, what links they click on and when it all happens. The authors I talked with spoke of metrics as a mixed bag—sometimes helpful, sometimes just proving that there's no set formula for what works in a newsletter.

There's a wealth of information in them, and if you keep track, you can begin to notice patterns in your most popular content. It's one thing if your mother writes that she liked the picture of your puppy sleeping next to your book, and another if you notice your puppy email had a 30 percent higher open rate than your average newsletter.

There's a dark side to metrics, and it's known as "unsubscribed." After a while, you do grow more accustomed to unsubscribing, but it probably will sting if you're a newsletter

newbie. No one is immune from it, and unless there are huge numbers and some sort of pattern developing, you shouldn't take it personally, and you also shouldn't make it hard for people to do.

As your career grows, the newsletter grows with it and turns into an invaluable resource for getting the word out about you and your work to people who care.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

As you get into the rhythm of sending out a newsletter, you'll develop a routine that makes the process go smoothly. Here's mine: At the start of every month, I'll create and label a folder for that month's newsletter (e.g., January Newsletter). Then, all through the month, whenever I see content that would be good to link to or spotlight

in newsletter, I screenshot it and drag it over into that month's folder. I also keep a Word document in the folder where I write down ideas for content as I have them. When it's time to write the newsletter, around the third week of the month, I open up Mailchimp in my browser and start dropping items in. I tend to write the newsletter over the course of a week.

Before I settled into this routine, it used to be quite a scramble at the end of the month and almost a Memento-like psychological journey as I struggled to recall what had piqued my interest in the last few weeks for inclusion.

The first few times you put together and send your newsletter, the experience might feel a bit clumsy. You might grumble about how few people entered your giveaway. You might be appalled that your closest friends didn't even bother to open it. It's important to just get through those awkward early days. If you do so, you'll quickly find the rewards of doing the newsletters: the grateful replies, the giveaways that do take off, and that moment when someone shows up at an event because they read about it in a newsletter. As your career grows, the newsletter grows with it and turns into an invaluable resource for getting the word out about you and your work to people who care. ■



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