

## **NEWSLETTER PRODUCTION INTO A MARINE SCIENCE PORTAL**

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### **Introduction**

When making decisions about a newsletter, whether in print or electronic, the first consideration is “who is the audience?” Recent testing shows that users have “highly emotional reactions to newsletters” (Nielsen 2002). The second is “what information will be of interest to this audience?” The next consideration is what format is best. In a print newsletter this was a rather straightforward question of font size, layout on paper, placing in the issue. As electronic publication is developing the questions become more complex. There are differences in the way people read and scan online information. Online newsletters need to take these differences into account and build on them to develop a new format. This format, because of the ability to link to other sites and include more information not on that page, creates an entirely different publication. An electronic publication can easily become an information portal.

### **The “New” Newsletter**

People are viewing more on the screen and not enjoying much of it. They cannot absorb the load. An information item’s 15 minutes of fame has been reduced to no more than half a column and twenty seconds. So what would a newsletter/portal be like to hold the reader’s attention? It would be a specialized web page, with many links and options. This can engage the reader more in the topic and can provide feedback to the editor and authors.

It can be delivered directly to the reader’s e-mail through html or plain text or could be a link on a web page. The advantage to html-enabled newsletters is that headlines, graphics, and colors can be displayed. The advantage to a plain text newsletter is that it downloads faster. Both can be brief, while providing links to more in-depth information. This is a decided advantage over a print newsletter, where the majority of the information must be on those printed pages.

In both types of e-mail newsletters, after looking at a brief abstract or capsule of the item, readers would have the option of looking at the full story by clicking on a link to a web site. There can also be a link to a discussion of the article where readers can contribute their thoughts on and reaction to the article. The readers can also make comments about reviews of books, web sites and such. Hyperlinks can also guide the reader to calendars, meeting minutes, etc.

An interesting addition could be a questions and answer section, where people can ask questions about the organization, a topic of concern, etc. In some ways this can border on a discussion list or could be more narrowly defined to include, for example, only questions about the organization, and its events.

The archival advantage of print need not be lost, since back issues of newsletters can easily be made available on a web page. In addition, databases and indexes of the content can be built. This can easily provide the reader with a current index of all issues. Databases can be developed for specific item-types or topics. So all of the web sites from the *IAMSLIC Newsletter* could be added to a database that would be searchable by the readers.

#### **Advantages for the Editor (and a few disadvantages)**

Traditionally reader surveys receive low responses. In a survey of the IAMSLIC readership we conducted in 1999 we had less than a 15% response. In addition, surveys measure perceptions primarily, not the actual reading of the newsletter. The first thing the editors can do with an e-mail newsletter is to have the reader's e-mail package send them a "read response." Then by tracking the number of times readers click on the link to receive the full article, the editor can judge the level of interest in individual articles. With more sophisticated monitoring, the editor can also know how much time was spent looking at each item. This will only be an approximation, since interruptions cannot be measured.

By providing links to the parent organization's web site, traffic to the entire web site has been shown to increase (Persun 2000).

A distinct advantage over traditional black-and-white newsletters, is that better quality pictures can be part of articles through scanning and digitizing photographs or incorporating digital images. This, in addition to using html allows the editor to incorporate color into the newsletter without additional expense. However, the editor must remember how readers are accessing the newsletter and keep file sizes to a minimum.

The production schedule doesn't change. In order for the newsletter to keep the organization in the minds of the readers, it must appear on a regular schedule and content

must still be the driving force. The newsletter must contain information of importance to the reader for it to be successful.

Having ready access to the server where the newsletter/portal is housed is essential. The editor will most likely be responsible for creating the file structure, including the subfiles. There can be some issues of format between different e-mail packages. In addition, the editor needs to check to the finished product using all common Internet browsers, such as Netscape, Internet Explorer, Opera, Mosaic, and Lynx, to assure that the links can be easily read.

Even more than in the print newsletter, the reader will most likely only scan the content. Recent research has shown that only 23% of electronic newsletters are read thoroughly and 27% were not even opened (Nielsen 2002). Readers felt newsletters were bad if they take too much time or demand too much work on their part. Therefore, the format must contribute to the ability of the reader to scan and identify items of importance.

While the monetary costs can be cut, there is usually an increase in time spent on publishing tasks. There is the initial investment in time to learn the new software and develop new ways of thinking about format. You still have the same amount of time spent in cajoling authors to write and get articles in on time, in editing the copy you receive, in writing the articles you are responsible for and in doing the layout. After that, there is additional time spent in writing the capsules for each item and in creating and verifying the links.

#### **Advantages to the Reader (and a few disadvantages)**

Distribution is almost instantaneous. There is no more waiting for weeks to receive your October issue of the newsletter.

An electronic newsletter/portal can allow interactive communication. The reader can respond and provide feedback immediately upon reading an item. That feedback can go to the editor who would forward it on to the author, or directly to the author. Other readers could have access to this interchange through a link to a discussion site.

Newsletter/Portals could be customized to reflect the reader's interest. There can even be an alerting function, that would allow the readers to receive prepublication notice of items of particular interest to them.

Newsletters produced more frequently could mean the reader would be receiving small chunks of information which could be scanned more easily. This might appeal to the readers who read their print newsletters in bits and pieces. It would also be possible to produce a newsletter that could be downloaded to a PDA so readers could carry it with them everywhere, the same as the "old" print newsletter, and read it at their convenience.

## References

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