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How to Write Newsletter Articles Without Going Insane

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I've been asked to write an article about writing articles for newsletters. I'm drafting the article while sitting on an airplane. So my first piece of advice is if you're going on an airplane, take a pencil. Pens leak. But if the pencil breaks you can't sharpen it because TSA confiscated all of your sharp implements. So take two pencils. Also take something to write on. Paper is best; your arm will do in a pinch.

If you have a laptop, ignore the first paragraph. But be sure to use a memory stick. I prepare for writing newsletter articles by doing back exercises. Pain is distracting. I also do a lot, and I mean "a lot" of research before I start writing. Actually I don't personally do the research. I have "people" for that. Non-professional writers generally will have to do their own research. The point is research is important.

Research helps you to better target your audience and hold their attention. If you don't know who your audience is, trying to hold their attention will be a little like shooting fish with a slingshot in the dark.

You'll need a thesaurus, and an AP Style book. And you'll have to have a better than average grasp of grammar and a firm grasp on reality ... because good writing isn't easy. Oh, the physical act of writing is easy. That's why so many corporate managers think they can do it. It's the cerebral, physiological, scientific and creative aspects that are foreign to these individuals. And that's why they can make a real writer's life so wretched.

Words need to be attention-getting, memorable and persuasive. To put it another way, you need to use the best words and put them in an order that will be attractive to your audience. Ultimately your message should be as entertaining as it is practical. And I don't mean "entertaining" as in "Ha. Ha." (Although that's often a plus.) I mean "entertaining" as in "interesting." In this information-overloaded world, if it's not entertaining (interesting), it's just stuff ... and that's not enough to gain awareness or interest.

Think about it. People (including you) read for only two reasons: To be entertained and/or to learn something. If the articles in your newsletter don't accomplish at least one of those things, don't bother to publish it because no one besides you is going to read it.

If you want to put what's important to you in your newsletter rather than what's interesting to your audience, you may as well use your pencil that broke on the plane as an implement to poke yourself in the eye. At least that will get people's attention ... for a short time ... which is more than your newsletter will ever accomplish.

I can't tell you how often I've grappled with clients who want to re-write newsletter articles so that the words convey what they want to say. Now some of you may think that that makes sense. If so, you're as clueless as my examples. And you probably should have restraining orders banning you from being within 50 yards of the creation of any marketing or employee communication materials.

Company representatives have agendas. As such, they want to push those agendas. That means they generally want newsletter articles to contain topics and words that are of interest to them. The problem, of course, is that their audiences don't give a crap about those topics or words. Their audiences want interesting, helpful information that they can enjoy and use.

Company representatives also want to exploit their agendas as the foundation for newsletter articles because it makes things easier. It means they don't have to put any work or thought into making the newsletter really good. Let's face it ... it's hard to come up with original topics that grab a targeted audience's interest time after time. If it doesn't seem hard, you're probably doing a half-assed job of it.

But as a writer, it's important to remember that corporate managers are not your adversaries. You're on the same team. To be successful, you must be a tactful, thoughtful diplomat who can convince managers who are marketing/communication illiterate, that they're getting in the way of their own success and the success of their company's newsletter. (Good luck with that.) That's one reason I do not recommend that you place a photo of your favorite writer on your desk; especially if they are one of the famous ones who committed suicide.

On the other hand, when the person you write for tells you something's wrong or doesn't work for them, they're probably right. When they tell you exactly what they think is wrong and how to fix it, they're almost always wrong ... especially when they delete a chuckle.

So if you write and produce a newsletter: Be brief. Be truthful. Be interesting. (Be entertaining if you've got the talent.) And never forget that people produce newsletters for a lot of different reasons. But there are only two reasons why people read them.

Of course you could just call Brown & Martin, Inc. We've been writing newsletters for over a quarter of a century and we're good at it. We're fast, we're professional and we're fun to work with. We'll at least I'm fun to work with. Most of my associates are busy researching, brainstorming, interviewing, surveying, writing, designing and producing newsletters.



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