

E-mail marketing – E-newsletters – Devising and Refining

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Introduction

The magic number? Just 16. That's the average preferred number of e-mail communications from different companies according to a Quris (2003) survey of e-mail subscribers. This includes account status updates and offer-related e-mails as well as e-newsletters. Yet more evidence that we need to work hard to improve our e-newsletters since consumers want to limit the number of permission e-mail contacts to a manageable number which really add value.

How many e-mail newsletters do you subscribe to? If you're anything like me, the number is well into double figures, and most weeks I will opt-in to another. The trouble is, the more I subscribe to, the less likely I am to have time to look at them, so some are never opened. I think we all have a mental list of 'must read', 'maybe read' and 'only if I have time' e-newsletters. Typically, I don't unsubscribe, since I may have a chance one week to look at it.

So, for organisations to make their e-newsletters successful, they have to work really hard to get them into the 'must read' category of their subscribers. This is a big challenge since in any sector many companies have seized on the opportunity provided by e-mail newsletters to build relationships with potential customers and develop relationships with their existing customers.

However, it is certainly possible – in the UK, consumer newsletters from online brands such as lastminute.com, dabs.com and Tesco.com get great open rates and deliver a substantial amount of business. Many business-to-business e-newsletters have also found the secret of success within their niche.

This article aims to distil the success factors for e-mail newsletters which helps get them into the 'must read' category. I will present the success factors as a series of decisions which should be taken when you are devising your first e-newsletter or reviewing and refreshing an established newsletter.

In this article, we look at the first ten factors to consider when planning or revising a newsletter in a logical order for planning.

Decision One – Organisation objectives

The starting point for planning an e-newsletter has to be to examine, or re-examine why you are publishing. You will probably have a primary objective such as boosting sales on a site through clickthrough or building a brand by providing value to customers, but what about other objectives? The 5S's of Smith and Chaffey (2001), originally applied to a corporate web site, provide a good way to think about e-newsletter objectives:

- *Sell* – Grow sales (the e-newsletter often acts as both a customer acquisition tool and a retention tool – the lastminute.com e-newsletter has this dual role)
- *Serve* – Add value (give customers extra benefits online such as online exclusive offer or more in-depth information about your products or the industry sector)
- *Speak* – Get closer to customers by creating a dialogue, asking questions through online research surveys and learning about customers' preferences through tracking – which content are people most interested in.
- *Save* – Save costs (Of print and post if you have a traditional offline e-newsletter can you reduce print runs or extend it to those customers you can't afford to communicate with)
- *Sizzle* – Extend the brand online. A newsletter keeps the brand at 'front-of-mind' and helps reinforce brand values. Added value can also be delivered by the e-newsletter by informing and entertaining customers.

All the newsletter design decisions we discuss below should, of course, be controlled by these main objectives of the e-newsletter.

Decision Two – Measuring success

When thinking about the objectives, think about how you will judge, or do judge the success of your newsletter.

The following metrics are commonly used to assess the effectiveness of e-newsletters through time:

- Open rates (for HTML e-newsletters)
- Clickthroughs to more detailed content or promotions;
- Number of unsubscribes;
- Number of new subscribers.

While it is easy to automate collection of these metrics, think about whether these really relate to the goals from decision one. For example, a company like lastminute.com has a click-tracking solution that links clickthroughs to sales, so they know which sales are newsletter related. It has been reported that the lastminute.com e-newsletter is profitable in its own right and in 2002 achieved over £500,000 revenue.

Think also about whether the automated measures give you the full story. Tesco.com also conduct surveys to determine softer measures related to how the customer perceives the newsletter and how it impacts the brand.

Decision Three - Resourcing

For an e-newsletter to be categorised as 'must read' by its subscribers is usually not cheap. It will usually take at least a day of one persons time compiling the newsletter. This will involve going out to the people in the company or partners who know the customers best and asking them to contribute copy or develop offers. The newsletter may not be perceived as a priority by these content providers, but a way has to be found to communicate the importance of the newsletter to the brand and ensure that good quality content is contributed.

Costs of broadcasting must also be considered. An internally hosted mailing software package is the cheapest option if you have the staff to manage it. If an external provider is used there is wide variation in cost and capabilities for targeting and tracking, so it is worth making sure you get the best balance of cost/performance.

Decision Four - Audience

Before deciding on the proposition, content and structure of the newsletter we have to think about readership. This is a tricky problem for newsletters since many will try to accommodate both existing and potential customers. If you are refreshing your e-newsletter, assess the proportion of subscribers who are existing customers, or potential customers. In the case of lastminute.com, the majority of subscribers are not in fact customers, so one of the main measures of newsletter success is the conversion rate achieved from e-newsletter subscribers to customers. For some organisations, separate newsletters will be justified for new and existing customers.

For both existing and potential customers, existing newsletter providers should analyse subscriber-base to assess whether they fit into existing segments. Lastminute.com uses a segmentation based on three segmentation variables as shown in the table below.

Lifestage	Geographic	Interest
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • directors • national trustees • frasiars • ikeas • nine to fivers • young ones • this lifes • bargain hunters 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • London • Manchester • Birmingham • Scotland • Bristol • Leeds 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • restaurants • sports • short breaks • popular culture • theatre/culture • pampering • family

Segmentation is based on asking customers questions such as their postcode, but also watching their preferences – for example a subscriber may mainly click through to the theatre section.

Remember that there are non-customer audiences too. A business-to-business company may have press, students, consultants and of course competitors subscribing.

Decision Five - Proposition

The proposition defines how value will be delivered to the main audiences. The proposition will need to be carefully formulated and then communicated online and offline to encourage and keep subscription. The proposition will show how your e-newsletter will deliver value to subscribers through:

- Saving time through providing a single, up-to-date source
- Learning – increasing knowledge and solving day-to-day problems
- Saving money – for instance through exclusive offers or offering new ways of working through a company's products
- Entertaining – all newsletters can and should be fun for their audiences – this is not only the preserve of consumer newsletters
- Trust – you will also need to demonstrate you are a reliable knowledgeable source and that the customers data is safe.

For business-to-business e-newsletters think about how you can add value through acting as a filter for information about your market sectors. Your e-newsletters can potentially Alert, Aggregate and Distill information through market alerts, industry trends and in-depth best practice case studies. But to deliver this information-based value will not-be-cheap since the content will have to be up-to-date, relevant, accurate, concise and clearly presented.

Decision Six – Content

The e-newsletter will live or die according to its content, as for any periodical publication. So think carefully about the type of content which will lead to regular reading by subscribers and that which will stop unsubscription. What special offers or nuggets of information can be provided which are indispensable?

Existing newsletter providers can assess which type of content receives the greatest number of clickthroughs. Whats New in Marketing (www.wnim.com) conducted a survey six months after launch to enquire about what which content was good, bad or missing.

The details of content provided should be driven by the objectives, audiences and proposition described above and the proportion of content should be driven by the balance between these. Often it won't be possible to accommodate these all in a single e-newsletter or communication. In next months article we look at options for providing different versions of newsletters.

The sell/inform balance

Achieving the correct balance between using the newsletters as a sales tool and a value-adding information supply tool is a key to success of a newsletter.

Remember that this relates through to the structure also – the most enticing content needs to be above the fold when the e-mail is opened. Start with what you feel are the strongest articles for your audience. Have regular topics plus new topical articles separate in each issue.

Decision Seven – Format

Options to consider related to format are as follows:

- MIME – the normal approach to be used will be to send out a multipart MIME e-mail which will be displayed according to the capabilities of the e-mail reader. HTML will be displayed by default. If resources permit HTML e-newsletters should be used. Not only do HTML e-mails tend to get the highest response rates, they also provide options for multi-column layout which is a much better way of delivering the sell vs inform balance.

- Text only – this may be best option for a technical audience, particularly if the e-mail is brief and limited to alerts. Often limited resources will be the only reason for a text only newsletter option.
- Give choice – despite the benefits of HTML the reader may prefer text or the e-mail reading platform may not support HTML well. In both these cases readers should be given the choice of HTML vs text and the text version should be given the attention it merits.

Decision Eight – Layout and structure

A strong layout that helps deliver the right content to the right audience to meet the right objectives is important. If you look at a range of newsletters, they have common features. These are some of the features to consider which make up the layout of the creative.

1. *Header block.* This graphical area at the top of the e-mail is used to brand the e-mail and can also be used as a navigation element. It can also include a varying headline that indicates the theme of the current newsletter. This can help gain engagement rather than having the same header each month.
2. *Table of contents.* A compact ToC is a must, but this is often missing. For HTML e-mails, the ToC should include links to the content in the e-mail
3. *Web site features.* It may be useful to replicate some familiar web site features, to 'take the website to the inbox'. For instance, Amazon use the familiar search box from the web site on their e-newsletter to prompt an action. Menu options from the web site can be included, although this can confuse since they are not directly related to the e-newsletter content.
4. *Column layout.* A two or three column layout maximises use of space as for print. The number of columns can be varied through the newsletter, but not too diverse. Columns are good for managing the Sell/inform balance – selling is often best restricted to a narrow column with the main column providing content to inform. Cross-selling can still result.
5. *Dividers.* Horizontal Dividers are used in both text and HTML e-newsletters for separating the articles. Blocks of text can also be reversed out for this effect also.

Decision Nine – Naming

There are many newsletters called Newsletter, eNews or eAlerts, so think about using a name that stands out. The name should summarise the proposition and be a clear differentiator. Whats New in Marketing, AvantMarketer and Flesh and Bones (for medical student text books) are good examples. However, if the newsletter is branded consistently with the organisation distributing it, this is fine since the organisation name will prefix the newsletter and it can be located as part of the main web site at www.<company_name>.com/<newsletter>. Since some subscribers to a popular newsletter will be by word-of-mouth it is often helpful to have a separate domain name registered to help people find it.

Decision Ten – Branding

E-newsletters traditionally mirror all aspects of an organisation's branding in terms of brand name and brand image. The tone of voice and style should also be consistent.

In some cases, a brand-variant approach can be used which appeals to the reader at a different level – a different personality that is more in-keeping with the informal nature of Internet e-mail. Brand imagery is still used to make the connection between brand and e-newsletter.

Decision 11 Personalisation and tailoring

One of the key decisions for revising an e-newsletter is to look at the choice of e-newsletters that you offer. Whether you offer one or several, options for different e-

newsletters should be revisited to assess whether the benefits of producing the e-newsletters are offset by the resources to produce them.

If you only offer one e-newsletter, ask whether a 'one size fits all' e-newsletter is really delivering what the organisation and its subscribers are looking for. Take the example of IBM, it offers a general IBM Weekly Update e-mail for the US (https://isource.ibm.com/world/example_weekly.shtml) which is tailored according to profile, and it also recognises that other audiences require additional e-newsletters.

Each company has a range of potential audiences as listed below. IBM has taken strategic decisions to use e-mail for its business and consumer audiences as indicated:

- Customers (IBM Use iSource and are encouraged to update their profiles as their interests change – this consolidates from a previous situation of many separate e-newsletters to give a more consistent message and fewer communications)
- Potential customers (Also use iSource)
- Different customer segments (iSource)
- Different members of buying unit (a quarterly magazine is offered for more senior managers, with separate newsletters for managers and users);
- Different products and markets (iSource)
- Resellers (IBM Partnerworld at http://www-1.ibm.com/partnerworld/pwhome.nsf/weblook/nws_ltr.html has rationalised its communications to three targeted newsletter – a hardware edition, software edition and developer edition. It also offers a 'quarterly e-magazine, Business Partner Directions, which complements the e-mail newsletters by providing clear, consistent, and actionable information to help you align your strategic positioning with key marketplace opportunities.'
- Announcements (e.g. https://isource.ibm.com/world/example_announce.shtml)
- Other audiences such as media, potential employees

One way to assess the need for different e-newsletters is to analyse clickthroughs to different types of content according to different types of subscribers. Alternatively you can use the profiling information to assess the balance between different audiences such as customers who have adopted different products or services, prospects, media and employees. A simple opt-in form such as the subscribe option at www.microstrategy.com can be used to assess this information.

Of course few organisations are likely to have the diverse customer base of IBM coupled with its turnover and resources. Often a compromise will be to offer different newsletters in one or two of the areas listed above. For example, Tektronix (www.tektronix.com), who offer technology solutions for test, measurement and monitoring, decided to offer newsletters for three geographies (Americas, EMEA and Asia-Pacific) and four product lines.

If you offer a range of e-newsletters and find they are a drain on resources which isn't recompensed by the benefits, then you may want to rationalise your e-newsletters by reducing the alternatives and/or reducing their frequency.

Decision 12 Frequency

Think of the frequency of most e-newsletters you receive. The frequency tends to be daily, weekly or monthly. Why is this? Perhaps we are still in the print mentality of dailies, weeklies and monthlies?

With so many e-newsletters out there, it may be a benefit both to subscribers and publisher if the frequency is lower or less regular. Subscribers may be more inclined to opt-in to a communication that is bi-monthly, quarterly or less often, since it will take less of their time and is more likely to contain important announcements. For publishers, less resource will be required for each e-newsletter, a significant saving since each newsletter will take at least one person day to publish, and if it has multiple contributors, substantially more. You also won't have to search so hard for 'newsworthy' topics each week or month, instead major announcements and news can form the basis of the newsletter.

We don't have to limit ourselves to fixed frequencies. Where different e-mail newsletter options are offered for different audiences or different needs then the frequencies, can of course vary.

Decision 13 Timing

Closely related to frequency is timing, by which I mean time of the day, week or month.

In many cases, a regular consistent timing for e-newsletters is something to strive for, so our brand can become part of the recipients' routine. How many organisations actually achieve this regularity? More often it is Tuesday one month, Thursday the next?

At the moment I receive the DM Newsletter (www.dmnews.com) and E-consultancy briefing (www.e-consultancy.com) every Tuesday, 'without fail'. Not many e-newsletters arrive on that day, so I expect these and often have time to check them out. I even look forward to them! Or perhaps your taste is a satirical e-newsletter such as Popbitch (www.popbitch.com) which arrives on a Friday when people are winding down for the weekend. Conversely, the Peppers and Rogers One to One newsletter (www.1to1.com) arrives on a Saturday, when I am hopefully not in the office, so it rarely gets opened.

We also tend to notice e-newsletters that arrive on the first day of the month, but perhaps this approach is too common?

As for time during the day, the main learning is to deliver the e-mail when the audience is most likely to be using their PC or PDA. This tends to increase response rates. For businesses, this means during office hours and for consumers, during the evening or weekends.

Decision 14 Themes

It is still common to see un-themed newsletters. These are easy to spot since they have the same subject line each and every time and when opened, a list of news items with equal weighting. These are a lot less likely to get opened or clicked.

Themed e-newsletters place an emphasis on content that delivers a greater response. The subject line can stress the theme and this will give a higher open rate for hot topics or great offers. The themed content is then given precedence. For example, the theme for WNIM 22 was Data protection and this was flagged in the subject line and given prime position. Future themes can also be flagged up to raise expectation for future content.

Decision 15 Marketing Communications Integration

There is a tendency to plan our e-mail newsletters with blinkers on. If this happens we lose opportunities to leverage the strengths of different communications media for different purposes. Here are some ideas on how to do this:

- Use the e-newsletter to preview future offers and product developments before other media. Highlight unique web offers – this will be an incentive for audiences to open the e-newsletter.
- Use the e-newsletter to re-invigorate recent or current campaigns or promotion that were first highlighted in other media.
- Use the e-newsletter to give more detail than the offline newsletter or house magazine – refer visitors to the online version and reduce the size and cost of the offline communication. Alternatively, put the whole magazine online as with <http://www.easyjetinflight.com>.
- Rather than referring the media or other audiences to press releases or a media centre, refer them first to an e-newsletter item. This will give them a more complete picture of what the company stands for, and current news.

Decision 16 E-mail integration

Alongside the e-mail newsletter, there will be many other e-mail communications from an organisation. This leads to decisions about what is the best way to break major news such as a product launch or upgrade.

I have seen newsletters where a major initiative such as a product launch or an event invitation becomes lost in all the other news items. Many newsletters templates could be improved by avoiding the newsletter being a list of items with similar weightings.

What stands out!

This danger can be reduced through themed subject lines, or an e-mail newsletter design that gives precedence to certain items and is not too long. But the danger of diluting the message still occurs. In the case of the product launch it will be best to use a separate e-mail to give this message. The opt-in form should give this option so that the e-mail received is in keeping with the subscribers expectations.

Decision 17 Web site integration

One of the benefits of e-newsletters compared to their paper-based equivalents is the ability to deliver a large amount of valuable information at a low-cost. Of course, this is a double-edged sword. Too much information will make the e-newsletter unwieldy and your message will not get across or the recipient will not be able to locate the information relevant to them. So, when we want to convey a lot of information as is the case with many newsletters, we have to decide on the split of content between the e-mail newsletter and the web site where more detailed content may be hosted.

Figure 1 shows five options for selecting the correct balance between content in the e-mail and on the web site described in more detail in *Total E-mail Marketing* (Chaffey, 2003).

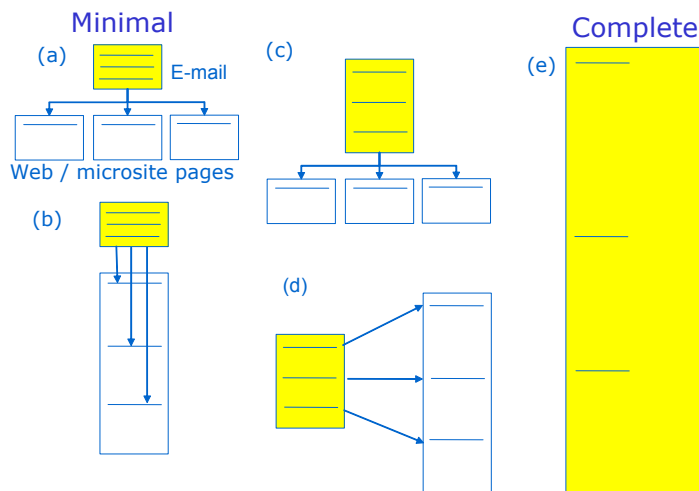


Figure 1 Options for split between content in e-mail (yellow) and on web site (white)

The options for splitting content between e-newsletter and site are:

(a). *Minimise content in e-mail, full content on web site in multiple pages.* Here the e-newsletter contain the links and a very short summary of article, linking through to the full article on the web site. This is the approach used by WNIM.

This has the benefit that the newsletter can be scanned very rapidly by the recipient for articles of interest. It is less likely that the other articles will be read, which can be useful for cross-selling.

(b). *Minimise content in e-mail, full content on web site in a single page.* As in the previous case, the e-mail has limited information, but on clicking through to the web site, a single page newsletter is presented containing all the articles. This has the benefit that the interested reader can rapidly find the information in all articles.

(c) *Some content in e-mail, full content on web site (multiple pages).* This is similar to the approach of (a), but here the e-mail newsletter is longer since it contains a short extract from each article.

This makes it easier for the reader to decide whether the content is relevant to them.

(d) *Some content in e-mail, full-content on web site (single pages).* This is similar to (b), but again has the advantage that an idea of the relevance of the content is given in the e-mail and it is easier to find other content from the same newsletter on the web site.

(e) *All content in e-mail.* Here a clickthrough is not required to the site at all. This has some niche applications, but it is impossible to track which items are of interest.

This decision is difficult since the preference on length varies according to the individual. For many of us, part of the power of e-mail newsletters is to be able to get a rapid briefing on developments about a particular topic. If you have to clickthrough to a web site and then understand the navigation and structure of the web site, then this slows down the experience.

Decision 18. How do we gain subscribers?

Once we have fully developed our proposition, we can think through our strategy for gaining subscribers.

As explained in WNIM 18 (<http://wnim.com/issue18/pages/DaveChaffey.htm>), this means maximising our use of online and offline touchpoints with our audiences to explain the proposition, and offer the opportunity to opt-in without building too many barriers.

On the web site, we need to ask these three questions to maximise sign-up:

1. **Is our opt-in given enough prominence?**
Is it on the home page? Is it above the fold? Is there enough screen-real estate devoted to it? Is our archive and proposition indexed by search engines? Is it prominent throughout the site?
2. **Is our proposition clear?**
Does the messaging say more than 'opt-in to our e-newsletter'? Does the sign-up page highlight the benefits? Are the benefits for different audiences clearly described? Is the quality of content demonstrated through an archive or example newsletter
3. **Can we overcome barriers to subscription?** Reassure that you will not be overloading the subscriber with e-mail. Show how the newsletter will be relevant and targeted. Reassure that details will not be passed onto third parties by using those five magic words "we will not share your information".

This is a great example from IBM of how to explain the proposition (<https://isource.ibm.com/world>), and this is an example of how not to (<http://www.landsend.com/cgi-bin/newsletter.cgi>).

Remember also that the launch or re-launch of a newsletter gives a great opportunity to use offline or online PR to create a small buzz, particularly if you can show that your newsletter does offer something different from the incumbents.

Decision 19 – Tracking

Once we have implemented the all of decisions we have reviewed in these two articles, how do we decide how well our e-newsletter is working?

If you are relaunching a newsletter, you will be able to baseline against the previous incarnation of your e-newsletter.

You will probably have been tracking the following in each time period such as month or quarter:

- **New subscribers** – Number of opt-ins in the period.
- **Unsubscribes** – Number of opt-outs in the period.
- **Bounces** – hard bounces where the address is invalid should be removed from the list, with a process setup for contacting the subscriber if they are a high-value customer.
- **Subscriber change** – Calculated by subtracting the unsubscribes and the bounces from the new subscribers for the time period.
- **Open rate (%)** – for HTML e-mails we can tell the proportion of recipients who open the e-mail through the number of images downloaded from opened e-mails.
- **Total click rate (%)** – we can divide the total number of clickthroughs from each newsletter through to the microsite or other sites.
- **Unique click rate (%)** – it is also useful to know the unique number of individuals who click-through since this gives us a better estimate of our total active audience size. Each person may potentially click on several links, but unique clicks just records each person who has clicked.
- **Individual content click rate (%)** – tracking clickthroughs of individual content links such as news, articles and offers, shows the most powerful content. It may be useful to group total clicks from related content such as news, ads and offers.
- **Outcomes (%)** – depending on the type of e-mail, conversion to particular actions such as sales, subscriptions or clickthrough to offers can be monitored.
- **Referrals (%)** – some tools offer the capability to track e-mails forwarded to colleagues.

While many e-mail broadcast tools will track these variables, it is essential to view how they vary through time as a time-series graph. This may involve exporting data from each month into a separate spreadsheet since not all tools give views of how campaigns vary through time.

What in particular should you watch out for on the time-series? I would say the trends of the key measures such as open rate, unique click rate and outcomes.

Open rate tells us how effective the subject line is in encouraging open. If this is low relative to other months, there may be a problem with how the e-newsletter is themed, or there may be a problem with the offer or timing.

Unique click rate give us an overall idea of the value of the content of the newsletter – how many subscribers are actively clicking through?

Outcomes will vary for different types of e-newsletters, but we will want to achieve consistently high numbers of outcomes.

Unsubscribes should be tracked, but are not a reliable indicator of interest. The Quris (2003) survey of US e-mail subscribers showed that 92% of consumers say that they “just delete them myself by hand without reading them” when they get e-mails which don’t interest them. So open rate and unique click rate are a more reliable method of tracking interest in our e-newsletters.

Decision 20 – Listening

While we can use the clickthrough and web site outcome data to second guess how well our e-newsletter is working and what our customers think of us, there is no substitute for asking the question: ‘what do you think?’ Either face to face or through a structured survey with recruitment of respondents through the e-newsletter or in a separate e-mail.

Since e-newsletters can become a large element of how your brand is perceived, it is important to know what people really think. We can see that online brands such as Tesco.com and Lastminute.com poll their audiences regularly to find this out. An indication

of the health of an e-newsletter can be built up using a mixture of 'watching and asking'. The Tesco.com e-newsletter seems to be in good shape judging by these 'watching and asking' metrics (Parekh (2003):

- 80% of customers rated as excellent
- 65% open rate (ind avg of <20%)
- 50% read the entire e-mail
- 20% purchase due to e-mail
- Additional 37% considering purchase
- 13% forward to friends/family
- 5-10% average clickthrough rates
- <1% unsubscribe

In next months article

Next month, it's viral marketing. We will ask whether viral has had its heyday or whether it remains a relevant choice as an online marketing tool. We will explore the success factors to make an idea 'go viral' and ask how it can be used as a practical tool for business-to-business marketers.

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