Influence your readers and improve results. A Manager's Guide to Newsletters shows you how to publish effective newsletters.

A Manager's Guide to Newsletters: Communicating for Results

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Chapter 5
Selecting content

In this chapter…

When we select content for our newsletter, we want subject matter that does two things at the same time: It influences the ways readers think or act, and, it provides information that readers find helpful or interesting. We call this common ground the shared environment. Some subjects automatically emerge from the shared environment:

- Employees (readers) and their employers (publishers) share an organization and industry
- Product users (readers) and suppliers (publishers) share a product or service
- Members (readers) and associations (publishers) share an issue or a common cause

Subjects from the shared environment will be relevant to both reader and publisher, because both have something to gain from addressing them. And the reader knows enough about these subjects to judge the credibility of the material or the sources.

If we stay within the shared environment, both reader and publisher will be helped toward their objectives. And while the range of subjects we can cover may seem restricted, this is not true. If the boundaries of the shared environment do seem too narrow, the problem lies in the objectives you've set for the newsletter, and not with the scope of available content.

Further, we can take a micro approach to content, a macro approach, or both. These represent methodical ways of expanding the number of subjects within the shared environment.

A strategic approach to content

If you've been involved with a newsletter, you've probably heard the question, "What should we write about?" many times. You've probably asked it yourself a time or two. And it's a good question. Finding the right content can take more time and effort than any other single aspect of newsletter planning. It's also the single most important editorial factor in publishing a successful newsletter.

To some extent, we've already started defining the nature of appropriate content for newsletters through our discussions in earlier chapters. And in Chapter 12 we'll look at some very specific sources and methods. In this chapter, though, we deal with a critical issue – a framework for our ideas about content, and a set of criteria for selecting subjects.

We deal with this framework strategically. That is, we want subjects that help us (the publishers) achieve our objectives, by influencing reader actions or attitudes. And, keeping in mind our discussion in Chapter 3, we'll also make a point of serving readers with content they want or need.

Is it possible to do both – to satisfy both readers and publisher – at the same time? Yes! Indeed, that's the essential challenge of non-subscription newsletters. It's easy enough to publish brochures, which deal with just the publisher's needs, or subscription newsletters, which deal with just reader needs. Finding common ground – to serve both reader and publisher at the same time – may present a unique set of challenges or demands, but it also offers opportunities for effective communication.

A shared environment

This common ground that we've called the shared environment can be visualized with a simple Venn diagram, as in Figure 5–1.
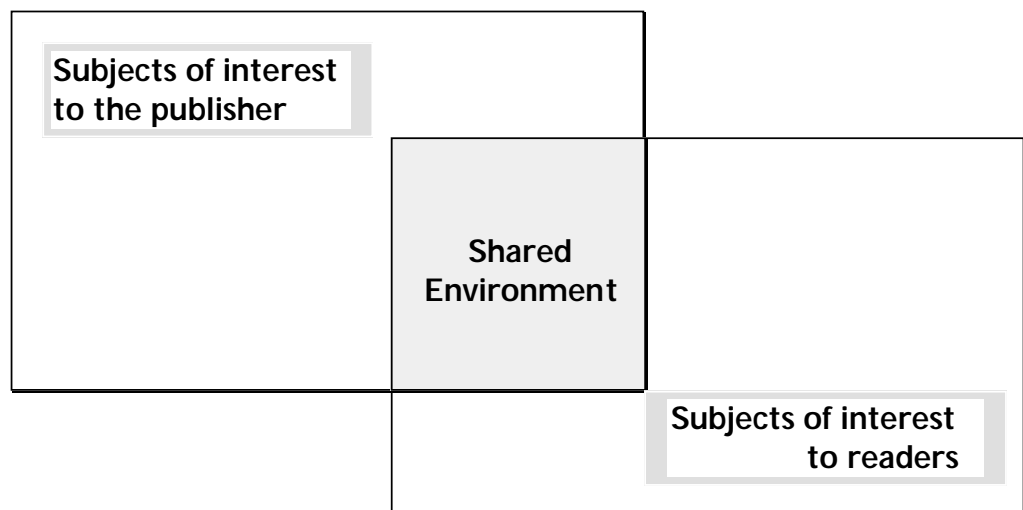

Figure 5–1

You probably recognize that subjects in one environment relate to the needs of the publisher, and that subjects in the other relate to needs of the reader. The first set of subjects helps the publisher get the reader to respond in a particular way; the second set helps the reader move toward her goals. What's new in this chapter is the overlap between the two – the shared environment.

Let's consider some examples. In the case of an employee newsletter, the shared environment would certainly include the organization. The publisher is usually management, which has an obvious stake in the organization's health and prosperity. But employees have an important stake, too. The organization provides them with a wage or salary and perhaps even a sense of purpose in their lives. Of course, employees and management may disagree about issues pertaining to the organization. But they still have a very strong shared interest in it.

For a marketing newsletter, the product that the one uses and the other sells can be found in the shared environment. If you're the publisher, you probably publish the newsletter because you want more people to buy your product or service. If you are the user (or buyer), your productivity may depend on obtaining and getting the most out of the product. The product makes up a critical part of your shared environment.

For a membership newsletter, the shared environment will include the issue or cause that prompted you to become a member, or to publish the newsletter. Associations formed to fight diseases, for example, publish newsletters because they want to help fellow sufferers cope with the disease, and they want a cure. Individual members want that help, and in turn want to help others.

These three examples point to issues at the center of the shared environment. But they're not alone in it. For members and membership organizations, secondary but important issues include fund raising and alliances with other organizations. For employees and managers, the shared environment also includes industry issues and national trends in the consumption of the product or service they sell. Every shared environment includes many issues – some obvious, some not so obvious. As a publisher, it's your job to identify them.

Note, though, that while publisher and reader share an environment, they experience it differently. If it's an employee newsletter, for example, we expect management (for whom the publisher speaks) to have one view and employees (readers) to have another. Think of salaries and wages, in which both parties share an interest. The parties often, and quite naturally, have different views about what amounts are appropriate.

Relevance and credibility

In discussing the shared environment, you may see a connection to relevance and credibility, as we presented them in Chapter 4. A subject relevant to both readers and the publisher falls within the shared environment, and would be considered a good subject for the newsletter. In other words, both reader and publisher have something to gain by exploring this subject (and perhaps something to lose by not addressing it).

And, if the subject comes from the shared environment, we expect both reader and publisher to have some knowledge of it. The publisher may have more in-depth knowledge of it than most of the readers, but the readers have at least enough knowledge to determine whether the information is credible, or comes from a credible source.

You may find relevance and credibility helpful in determining whether subjects fit within the shared environment. The idea of a shared environment, obviously, is somewhat abstract. Relevance and credibility, on the other hand, are more concrete and more easily established when assessing content ideas. You can filter content proposals with these two questions:

- Is this subject relevant to both publisher and reader?
- Are we a credible source, in the eyes of readers, when we discuss this subject?

Setting the boundaries

In each of the three types of newsletters examined we've seen a shared environment. For employee newsletters, it centers on the organization they share. Readers and publishers of marketing newsletters share a product or service. And, for membership newsletters, there are core issues or causes, and organizational structures shared by officers and members.

To define the boundaries of any shared environment, then, we need to identify what it is the publisher shares with the reader, and what she does not share with them. In effect, this exercise integrates the main issues we've discussed in the first four chapters.

In Chapter 1, we discussed supply and demand factors that led to the growth of newsletters as a prominent medium. Three demand factors – expectations among stakeholders, explaining complex issues, and niche audiences – also help us relate the boundaries to specific issues and audiences. What are the expectations, what are the issues, and who is included within that niche audience?

Chapter 2 introduced our objectives in terms of reader responses. Now we're ready to determine the area or areas within which we want to influence

or persuade. Employers should want to influence the attitudes or actions of employees only about issues that involve their work. Sellers should want to influence the behavior of buyers only in areas where they have something to sell.

Reader needs were emphasized in Chapter 3, as we discussed the ways in which people use media in general, and newsletters in particular, to help them achieve their goals. A member of an advocacy association, for example, would expect to use a newsletter from this organization to address issues related to the shared cause. So, reader needs and interests are another element in setting the boundaries.

In Chapter 4, we looked at reader willingness and ability. As we saw, a publisher can use two key elements of willingness – relevance and credibility – to help establish boundaries. The same is true of ability – when we stay within the boundaries of the shared environment, the reader is much more likely to understand the language and context without assistance. And that's another clue for publishers.

Setting the boundaries of the shared environment, then, should not require guesswork. Instead, it should flow, almost automatically, out of decisions discussed in the previous chapters of this book. And, by staying within the shared environment, the publisher remains focused on what she wants readers to do, and on what she has a mandate to ask of them.

What doesn't fit?

Recipes, a staple of many newsletters, come to mind as an example of poor choice. Unless the publishing organization is in the food business, recipes are irrelevant, and in addition, the publisher has no perceived expertise in this area, and hence no credibility. Similarly, when publishers of marketing newsletters talk about their organizations, not their products, readers are not likely to find the content relevant.

You can add bowling scores to that list. The achievements of the company bowling team may interest a few other employees, but the tournament scoresheet is not likely to interest management, and it's certainly not likely to help other employees fulfill their needs or achieve their goals.

Personal announcements such as notices of births and marriages, may fit, however, in an employee newsletter. These may be relevant to other employees because, for instance, the news may help explain absences or the changed behavior of co-workers.

A good general rule is to avoid subjects whose presence in the newsletter needs explaining. If we need to explain why a subject is being included, we're probably straying outside the shared environment.

This general rule must be broken or stretched at times, but if you do break it, you should be able to articulate the reasons for doing so. And sometimes the correct approach, when we want to include a seemingly irrelevant subject, is to make it relevant by providing appropriate context.

Narrow straits?

Once we've defined the boundaries of our shared environment, we may begin to feel that we've drawn them in too tightly, and that there's too narrow a range of subjects from which to choose. But that isn't true. Remember, the newsletter exists to serve the objectives of the publishing organization. To achieve those objectives, the newsletter must affect the attitudes or behaviors of readers, whether by reinforcing or changing them. And those attitudes and behaviors will be part of that same shared environment.

A marketing newsletter can reasonably expect to influence behavior involving its product, but not behavior involving something from a different realm of the reader's life. An employee newsletter can legitimately aim to influence behavior on the job, but not behavior on the employees' own time.

Remember, too, that while our shared environment may seem tightly constrained, we shouldn't run out of subjects in an issue or two. The publisher can take a micro approach and look at narrowly-defined subjects in detail, or she can take a macro approach and work through broadly-defined issues and external influences that include or affect the subject.

Micro/macro

The micro approach to content means looking inward. For a marketing newsletter that might mean dealing with one product feature in great detail. An article might explain how the feature benefits the user, how it can be used, and how it differs from a similar or previous feature. For a membership newsletter, it could be an article explaining why the executive committee has decided to change the annual dues.

A macro approach, on the other hand, means looking outward. For an employee newsletter, it may mean an article on technological changes that affect all companies in the industry. For a membership newsletter, news about a lobbying alliance with another organization that shares the same principles, but not the same causes, would be an example. For a marketing newsletter, it

may be a report on how a product is changing in response to new environmental regulations.

If, after considering both the micro and macro approaches, the range of subjects still seems too limited, then we need to think about enlarging the focus of the newsletter. That, of course, means revisiting the objective or strategy.

Another voice

A study on employee newsletters conducted for *Industry Week* magazine ("The Real Scoop," June 17, 1991) found what it called "a strong mismatch of CEO wants, employee interests, and actual content." Turning to what employees did want, *Industry Week* said, "Employees […] want information that helps them understand their work environment and their relationship to it. They want to read about:

- The company's future.
- The competition.
- Reasons for important organizational actions and decisions.
- The organization's goals and direction.
- Opportunities for career advancement.
- Product development.
- Employee benefits.
- The organization's strength and stability.
- Product-quality and quality-improvement efforts.
- The organization's financial results."

You'll note that each of these issues fits within the shared environment for an employee newsletter. Other reader surveys with which I have been involved over the past several years have generated results similar to those in this *Industry Week* survey.

For example

Membership newsletter: *Calgary Quality Council Faxletter*

The shared environment of an association or not-for-profit organization starts with the issue or cause that prompted members to join. For the Calgary Quality Council and its members the issue was Quality, in the form of Total Quality Management and Quality Assurance.

Consequently, as long as this newsletter provided information linked to either of these subjects, the content remained relevant. The incentive for membership, or for readers to ask to be put on the Council's newsletter distribution

list, was the opportunity to learn more about these subjects. In some cases, that's an opportunity to learn directly, while in others it's a way to find other sources of information that can be tapped.

The *Faxletter* emphasized the latter approach: It provided information about sources. In taking this approach, it needed to ask whether the referrals it provided were significant in themselves, or there was something new about them that would keep them relevant. For the publisher (the association), these issues were relevant because the investigation and adoption of Quality represented its purpose.

The *Faxletter*'s credibility can be attributed to its place as a communication vehicle for the executive members of the association. Members of the executive were leading members of the 'Quality community.' And the readers had at least a basic understanding of Quality, which enabled them to judge credibility.

In the same vein, we note that this newsletter often pointed readers to other organizations and sources of information. In this case, the credibility of the newsletter, and of the Council, depended on the integrity and usefulness of the organizations to which it made referrals. Generally, readers would assume the sources to be credible, because they had been listed by the Council. However, that credibility would be lost if readers discovered that the sources were not useful or reliable.

Marketing newsletter: *The Sovereign Report*

For *The Sovereign Report*, the shared environment comprises two sets of subjects: the marketing of property or casualty insurance, and business management.

Relevant content includes subjects like these:

- How-to articles on marketing, whether generically, or in insurance agency-specific terms
- Case studies on individual insurance agencies, explaining what they've done and how
- Interviews with successful salespersons, or reports on the philosophy and techniques of sales leaders
- Reports on emerging management strategies
- Investigations of challenges and opportunities deriving from new technologies or trends
- Explanations of how ideas can be applied

These topics can be divided into micro and macro categories. For example, a case study article profiling an individual agency would be considered micro,

since it deals with a very specific aspect of agency management. On the other hand, reports on emerging management strategies would fit the criteria for macro, since they deal with external forces that might affect any business or insurance agency.

There are several reasons why articles in *The Sovereign Report* are considered credible by targeted readers:

- The company has an excellent reputation in the industry, and consequently the newsletter has credibility by association
- There is constant interaction between the agencies and the company, so agency people generally expect people at The Sovereign to understand and respect their needs
- The ideas come from established, reputable publications
- The newsletter has been published regularly and continuously over a number of years

An aside

Since its inception, *The Sovereign Report* has included a letter from a senior manager on Page 4. Traditionally, letters from the president or a senior officer have been one of the scourges of newsletters, primarily because they often deal with subjects relevant to the publisher only. In this newsletter, though, the letters deal with subjects that are also relevant to the readers, and the source has credibility. That means they stay within the shared environment, and consequently make good content.

Employee newsletter: *Inside News*

The company, Transcontinental Printing, is what management shares with employees, but the company, of course, does not exist independently. It's part of a larger industry, and it works with other industries that are customers (retailing) and suppliers (such as the paper and chemicals industries). It also has vested interests in the well-being and job satisfaction of its employees and in the rewarding of its shareholders. In other words, even if the shared environment is just one company, the company has extensive linkages beyond its own walls.

Consider these content ideas:

- Employee benefits that affect employees and the company directly
- New equipment that has consequences and implications for both the company (managers) and for employees
- Health and safety issues. The well-being of staff has direct consequences for both employees and employers

- Social events. Though these are often on the borderline between relevance and irrelevance, in the case of *Inside News*, they add variety and a human touch to generally technical subject matter

Those issues, by and large, fit within the walls of the plants, and can be considered micro subjects. But there are also macro subjects that fit within the shared environment:

- Industry trends, whether technological, managerial, or environmental, affect everyone within this shared environment, and they affect other industries as well.
- Changing management practices, such as strategic alliances, partnerships, and Total Quality Management. Such practices usually develop outside the industry, then find their way into it as companies find value in their application.
- Issues such as career development and job satisfaction also come in to the newsletter from outside, first as abstract ideas, then as leading industry practices, and finally as common practices adopted throughout the industry.

When the newsletter deals with issues like these, the content is assumed to be credible, since part of the job of management (and, by extension, the editorial staff) is to identify and research these issues. And the newsletter increases its credibility in these and other areas by interviewing employees or managers who are experts on company or industry issues.

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