

E-ZINE ESSENTIALS: *Web-based electronic newsletters can be an effective way to reach your target audience*

BY SUSANNA OPPER

Who *doesn't* need an e-zine?

Plumbers, home-maintenance workers and anyone else who has so much business they can barely return phone calls. Teenagers – they have IMs, blogs and pod casts. Any retiree who only plays golf and watches TV.

For everyone else there's...

Okay, let's backup a bit. What is an e-zine? It's a permission-based electronic newsletter designed to enable you to communicate with your audience on a regular basis. It's not SPAM. People opt-in – or subscribe – to this email. It's inexpensive, easy and very powerful.

Suppose you sell real estate, prepare taxes or have a retail store. Maybe you head a group of volunteers who deliver food to home-bound senior citizens. Or you practice law, are planning a high-school reunion or run a small business. Perhaps you want to give away some nice plants that have volunteered to grow in the wrong part of your garden. Maybe you – fill in the blank with what you do for a living, your favorite charity work or leisure-time project.

Whatever it is, you need an e-zine.

E-zines are children of the 21st century – part Internet dependent, part in the time-honored print tradition.

Like the generations of print communications that came before, electronic newsletters should be published regularly for maximum impact. They should look appealing, provide useful and entertaining information and be well written. They must be carefully scrutinized for mistakes. Once you send out 500 copies, there's no taking them back. Just like print.

But e-zines are of today's generation, too. They are viral, meaning that they can be forwarded to other readers who, in turn, forward them to other readers. And they are intimately connected to your website. Promotional e-zines drive traffic to your website. Your site, in turn, attracts new subscribers to the newsletter.

Options to consider

Ah, now you're getting interested. "How can I have one of these?" you ask. Well, you can publish a regular communication from your own computer with your email client (such as Outlook) using addresses you have in your system. But you'll be missing some key elements – cool graphics and ease of sending, for example.

Still more compelling, you won't get reports about bounces (the emails that don't make it to their destination), opt-outs (folks who don't want future issues), clicks (who clicks through to your website) and forwards (who sends your e-zine to their friends and business associates).

And, most importantly, you won't know who opens your email. A professional email marketing service provider will give you an updated report on who opens your emails. True, just because someone opened your email doesn't mean that they read your e-zine. But it is an indicator that they at least know it's there.

These so-called "opens" are a key industry indicator of e-zine success. The norm is around 30 percent – so, if yours reaches 50 percent, it's safe to assume that you're doing something right.

And what might that be? An attractive appearance, for openers. And excellent content. That means you're writing about something your audience is interested in, and your content is information that readers can't easily get elsewhere. Tips are popular as are provocative topics that make people think. Advanced e-zine publishers include a blog (web log) with their e-zine so readers can share thoughts online about interesting topics.

Decisions about frequency and style depend on your audience. Who are you trying to reach? And why? Do you want people to buy your product from your website? Visit your store? Or do you simply want to establish yourself as knowledgeable in your field?

But you also need to publish with the right frequency for your purpose, audience and resources. Commit to a weekly schedule and publish it once a quarter and you've lost your credibility. Some very successful publishers get an e-zine out every week; others opt for every other week. Monthly is the most common, but busy professionals might find four publications a year to be just the right amount.

All of this depends on your purpose. What exactly are you trying to accomplish with your electronic publication? Most businesses are simply trying to attain one of the most common adages of sales. They seek to be on the customer's mind when the customer is ready to buy. Since you never know when that will be, you keep in front of them as much as you can without being excessive.

Michael and Kathleen Cleary's monthly e-zine *Illuminating Ideas* is a case in point. "In just three months, our newsletter has created a lot of interest in our store, our lighting promotions and the fact that our sales associate Lois DeWitt makes house calls," says Kathleen. They pick up additional subscribers through their monthly raffle that can be entered at their store on Main Street in Great Barrington or online at www.BerkshireLampLighter.com.

Target audience

Decisions about frequency and style depend on your audience. Who are you trying to reach? And why? Do you want people to buy your product from your website? Visit your store? Or do you simply want to establish yourself as knowledgeable in your field? Once you have selected your audience and analyzed their needs, you can consider your content. What are you actually going to write about? Will your tone be formal or informal, personal or professional?

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And while we're on the subject of audience, who specifically is going to get your newsletter? Do you have their email address? Is it current? And do you have permission to send them an e-zine in the first place?

This is a very tricky question that can send professional marketers into hours of heated dialogue. You can't buy a list or send to everyone in the Yellow Pages. That's SPAM and is frowned on by electronic marketing service firms because it's actually illegal.

The rule of thumb is that you've had some business or personal connection with the recipient. They may have shopped at your store or spoken to you at a networking event. If you see a name on your list that you don't recognize, chances are they won't recognize your name either. Best to take a pass on sending them your e-zine.

There's actually more to creating a winning e-zine, like selecting a great title and a compelling tag line. But let's stop here and suppose that you're really interested in this idea, but you can see you don't want to do it alone.

Professional help

Well, you don't have to. You can call in professional help.

One popular e-zine service for small businesses is available from Constant Contact, a Boston-area company that provides templates, securely stores your address lists and issues the reports we discussed earlier.

Another option is Main Street MAIL (www.mainstreetmail.com), a product of Lenox Softworks in Lenox. Take a look at the next e-zine that shows up in your mailbox. It might be from one or the other of these two services.

In addition to the provider who takes care of the back end – templates, mailing and tracking – there are all those other complicated questions you need to answer. Since an e-zine is an ongoing process, you may not want to hire help to handle it on a regular basis, but you will benefit from some up-front consulting on the thorny details of getting started. Marketing communications experts can help you over the early hurdles, write your publication on a regular basis or provide advice as needed.

So, if you're still looking for customers, or think you might be tomorrow, consider jumping on the electronic newsletter bandwagon. If a full-blown newsletter seems too daunting to begin with, consider a less rigorous promotion such as a flyer or electronic postcard. Then stand back and watch your business grow. ♦