National Journal Communications Council

# Media University

AMU/414

# Building a Better E-Newsletter Part 1

November 19, 2015

# **Our Time Together**

Setting the Foundation: Why Everyone's (Still) Talking About Newsletters

→ The Fundamental Question: Standalone Product, Or Marketing Tool?

→ Prototyping as a Tool to Improve Engagement

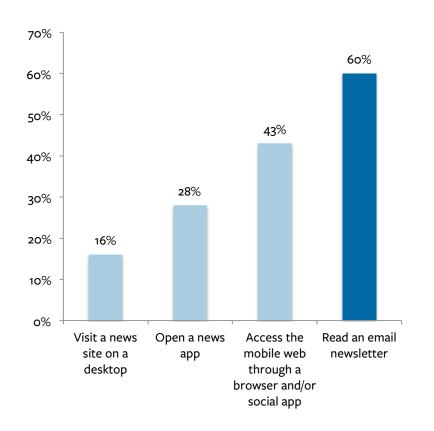
 $\rightarrow$  Basics of Content, Tone, Design, and Process

 $\rightarrow$  What's Next in Newsletters?

# **E-Newsletters Remain Business Influentials' Informers of Choice**

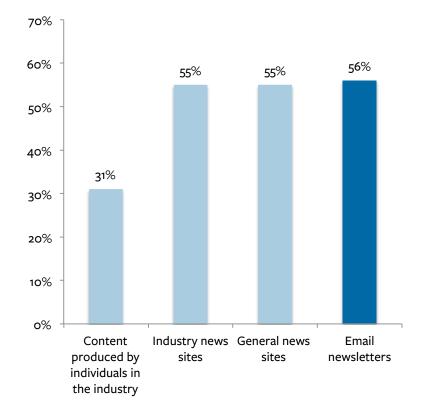
Newsletters are Content that Resonates with Professionals Across the Career Ladder

Global Executive News Source, Among First Three Checked in Morning Percentage of Respondents, n=940



Top Sources of Industry-Specific News

Percentage of Respondents, n=940

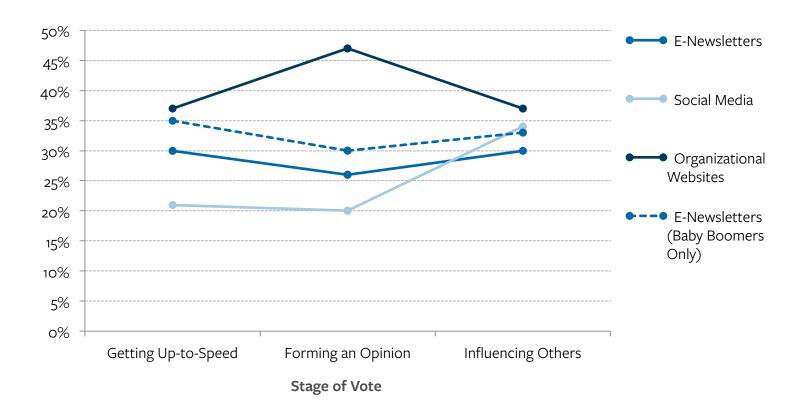


Source: Quartz Insights Global Executive Study, National Journal Communications Council research and analysis.

# ...And Hold Their Own as a Tool for Policy Decision-Making

Among Top Owned Channels, Second Only to Organizational Websites During Most Phases— And Stronger Among Older Demographics

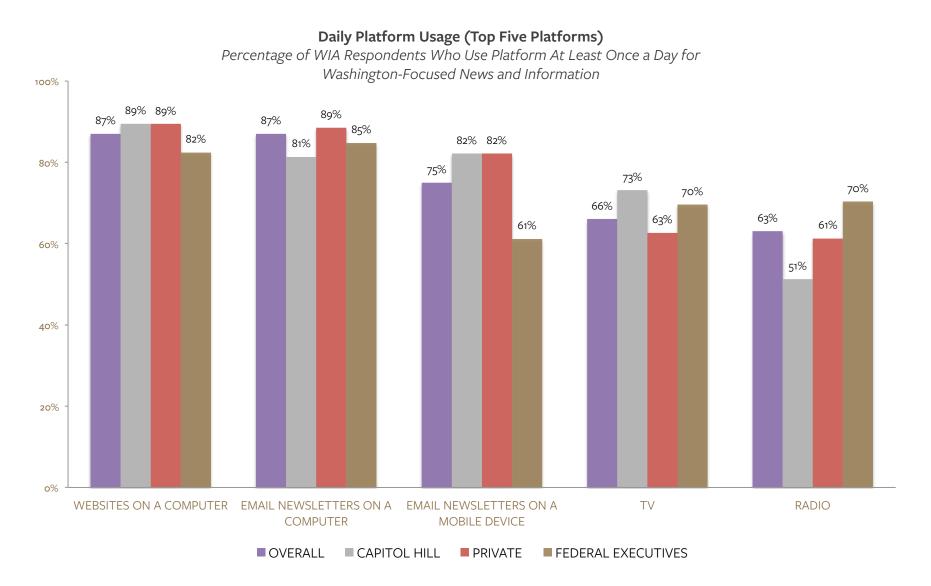
> Digital Channels Used During Three Phases of Preparing for a Critical Vote Percentage of WIA Respondents



E-Newsletters hold their own against social media and even organizational websites in being key sources of policy information throughout the stages of a critical vote. In particular, their use to influence others is almost as high as that of social media, a more typical channel for sharing content.

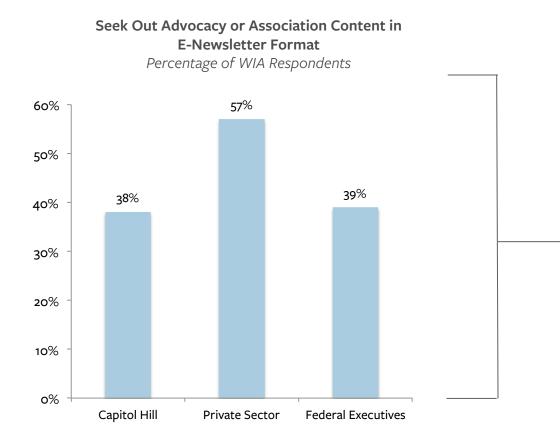
# **Daily Consumption of Newsletters is Strong Across Sectors**

On Desktop and Mobile, Among Top 3 Platforms Insiders Use Once a Day for Information Seeking



# The Private Sector Values Advocacy Newsletters at Highest Levels

Newsletters Break From Other Trends to Highlight a More Engaged Private Sector





Democratic respondents were nine percentage points more likely to turn to advocacy newsletters compared to Republicans, at 54% versus 45%, respectively

# **Considering the Benefits of an Advocacy Newsletter**

A Newsletter Condenses Your Organizational Objectives, Giving "Order" to "Chaos"

#### **Loyalty Driven**

Delivers organizational updates at a pre-determined interval, building an audience niche that relies on your regularly produced newsletter Audience Building Newsletters exist separate from your website while still building your brand's name recognition in digital communications

#### **Cross-Topical Informer**

Unlike white papers, which offer an indepth take on a singular issue, newsletters are produced regularly covering several issues in each publication and offering a quick rundown of meaningful issues for your constituency

"Newsletters are clicking because readers have grown tired of the endless stream of information on the internet, and having something finite and recognizable show up in your inbox can impose order on all that chaos." -David Carr, former media columnist, New York Times

# Weighing the Constraints of Newsletter Publication

Managing Expectations for Newsletters in an Information-Saturated Washington

#### **Finding Balance**



# When crafting content and measuring success, keep in mind:

- Newsletters are by their nature a serial product; building relationships and setting expectations with readers takes time
- Your own internal benchmarks may take time to develop, but are the best marker of your success

#### The Downside



"...If your emails are not good, you're in a pretty important space and **people kick you out**." - Dan Oshinsky, Buzzfeed

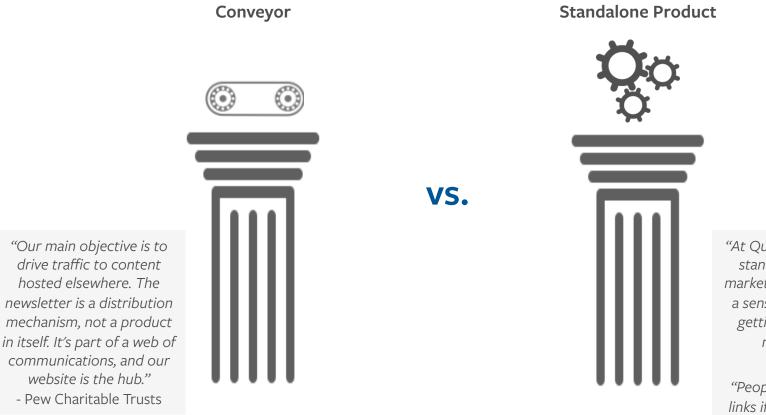
The Upside



"What's exciting about email is, **people invite you into this space** and you get the opportunity to make a good first impression." - Dan Oshinsky, Buzzfeed

# **The Most Important Choice**

Your Philosophical Approach to Your Newsletter Will Dictate Content, Format, and Measurement

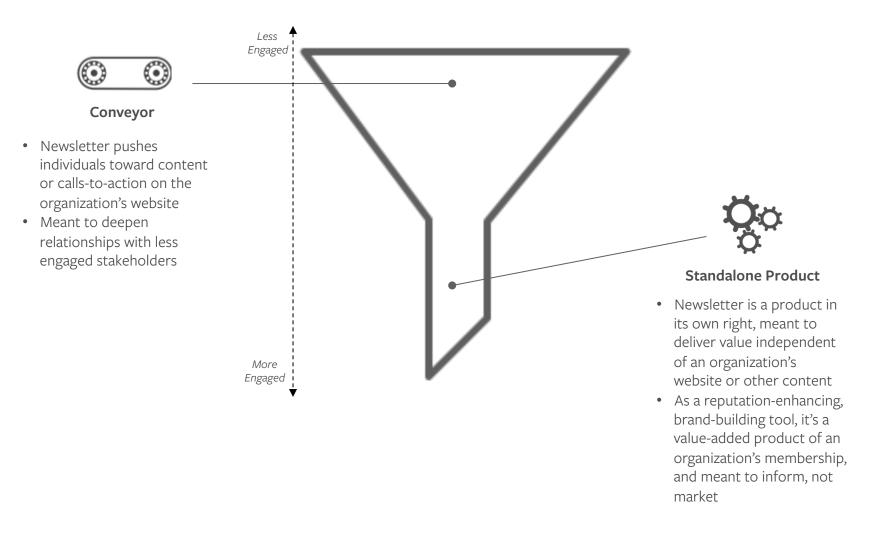


"At Quartz, our newsletter stands alone. It's not a marketing channel. There's a sense of satisfaction in getting everything you need to know." - Quartz

"People should only click links if they want to know more, or find it really interesting--not because we left something out." -Buzzfeed

# **Determining Where It Fits In Your Marketing Funnel**

Goals, Audience Loyalty Drive Whether Newsletter Stands Alone or Directs Traffic Elsewhere



# **Conveyor Function Drives Content and Form**

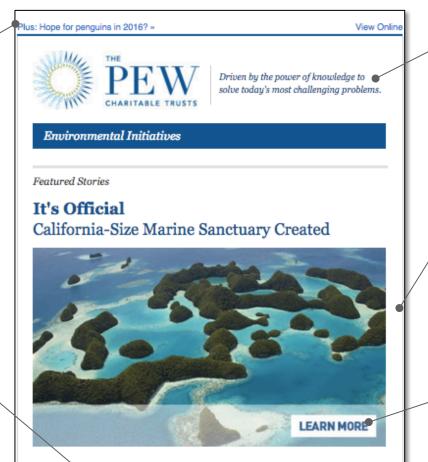
Text Creates Curiosity Gaps, While Strong Visuals Inspire Engagement

Unrelated Content Suggestion

Teases other content on website for hyperengaged readers

#### **Summarized Content**

Hyperlinked text gives a brief topical rundown but suggests the reader take closer look



Last week, Palau made history by fully protecting 83 percent of its ocean territory—more than any other country. The decision follows marine victories in Chile and New Zealand, helping to make 2015 an unprecedented year for ocean protection. Map and facts »

# Organizational Brand at the Forefront

Recurring header features organizational mission to reinforce brand

#### **Sweeping Visuals**

Better as an initial eyecatching statement rather than a factual informer, used heavily because Pew's audience opens primarily on desktop

#### **Calls to Action**

Custom overlaid visual callsto-action implore the reader to go back to the website and call attention to additional content; Pew has seen significant increases in clickthroughs than images or text alone

# When Clicks are Goals, Consider Incorporating Multimedia

Signaling Content and Setting Expectations Key to Garnering Engagement

Each weekly NUL newsletter features a link to a short, 6-7 minute video greeting from its Executive Director. Videos highlight current policy happenings and organizational developments, focusing on "what does it mean?" A service with a Smile-A Salute to Our Country's Ceterans

from the movement.

Read more »

#### Try This At Home

- ★ Add a screengrab from your video with a fake "play" button overlaid; data from Pew has shown that this increases clickthroughs and video views.
- ★ Try using animated gifs to share a sneak peak of the video content—but, use this tactic sparingly for maximum effectiveness.

### National Urban League

#### Case in Brief

**Profiled Content:** National Urban League's Newsletter **Organization Type:** Think Tank

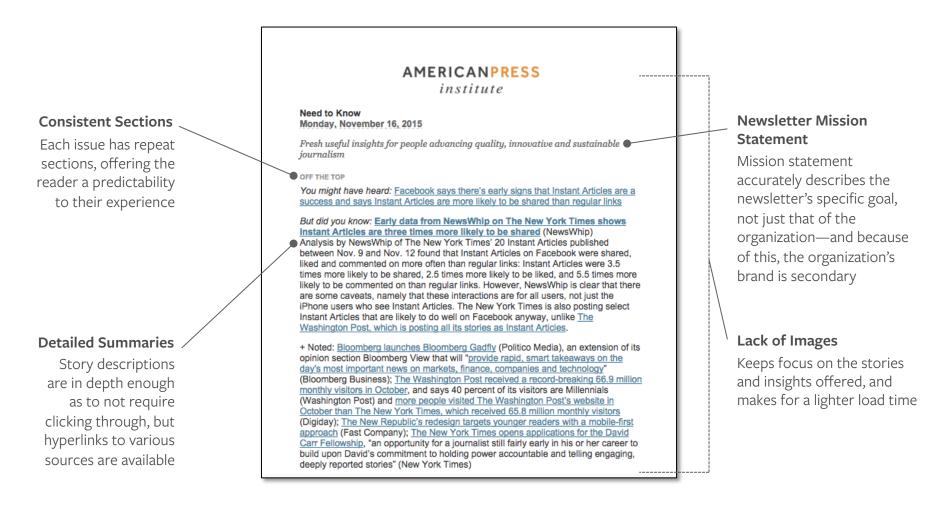
support working families, in a two-part discussion; omnibus legislation voted on

in the Senate, as well as the latest updates

**Results:** Featuring vlogs in the newsletter led to an increase in readership as well as opportunities for speaking engagements and radio spots for the organization.

# Standalone Newsletters are Rich In Content, Less About Visuals

Largely Self Contained Products that Encourage, But Do Not Require, Leaving the Platform



#### How APi's Goals Translate to a Standalone Product

When re-thinking their newsletter last year, APi wanted it to be "unique and actionable," and for readers to "apply that-day practices." This specific vision translates into their plan for content, which each day includes both basic information for a story but lots of options for readers to dig deeper.

# **Metric-Driven Success Should Reflect Overall Philosophy**

Clear Differences in What's Worth Tracking When the Newsletter is a Product vs. a Marketing Channel



Sample Conveyor Metrics

#### Start With These...

#### ...And Then Try These

- Open Rates: The number of people receiving your email who open
- Click Rates: Proportion of individuals who open your newsletter who proceed to click on a link which directs them to external content
- ★ Web Engagement: How long do individuals spend on the website when accessing it through the newsletter vs. accessing it via web browser or social, and are they taking different actions?
- ★ Call-to-Action Success: How often do people follow through on sharing, watching, or learning more?
- Audience Subsets: Do targeted segments of the audience perform better or worse, and do you value them equally?



Sample Standalone Metrics

#### Start With These...

- Open Rates
- List Growth: Increases in your subscriber base can indicate that forwarded emails and social shares are propelling new engagement; patterns in decreases can indicate reasons for unsubscribes
- Screen Time: The amount of time someone spends on your newsletter, demonstrating its strength as a standalone product

#### ...And Then Try These

- Return Engagement: How many readers are repeatedly opening newsletter days or weeks later?
- Reader Loyalty: Are the same people consistently reading your newsletter or are opens coming from inconsistent sources?

★ And always consider qualitative feedback from readers, as well as device- and platform-specific open rates

Source: Noun Project, National Journal Communications Council research and analysis.

# Approaches to Prototyping a Newsletter

Should You Demo the Finished Product or Go Piecemeal? Start in Private or Go Public?



**AMERICANPRESS** 

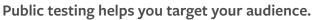
# AudiencePrivate testing improves the product without disruptingTesting:an existing audience.

APi wanted to launch a completely new product to replace an existing newsletter. They presented the newsletter to 5 to 10 core members of their target audience for feedback.



# Product"The whole enchilada" – one launch, less confusion.Testing:Since they had previously relied on an aggregation service,<br/>APi wanted to test the new work-flow of working in-house on<br/>a newsletter. They worked privately for two weeks until they<br/>were comfortable with the process. The final launch piece<br/>included an introduction note about the changes.





BuzzFeedNews was launching a new venture. They approached their newsletter as an opportunity to learn about their potential audience, sharing their work with groups on social media.



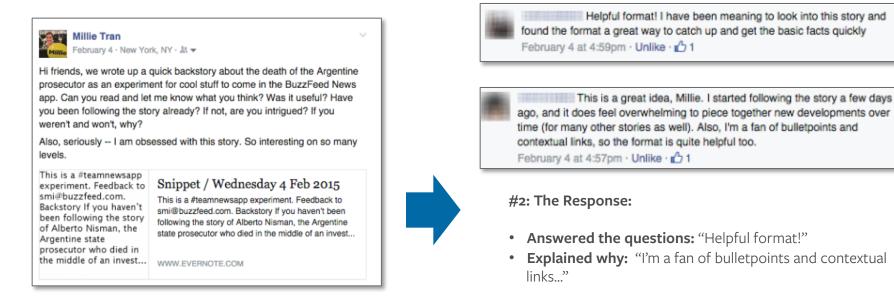
**"Snackable" – more opportunities to get it right.** BuzzFeedNews had about a month to develop a finished product. Releasing prototypes of the newsletter section by section allowed them to work quickly and focus their testers' feedback.

How you test your newsletter will depend on:

- Audience: Are you starting a new product or do you have a loyal following?
- Deadlines: How quickly will you need a finished product?
- Product: Are you replacing an old product? Supplementing it? Or starting fresh?

# **Approaches to Prototyping a Newsletter**

How Buzzfeed Knew When to Listen to Audience Feedback



#### #3: The Result:

BuzzfeedNews added "Backdrop" to the newsletter.

#### Backdrop

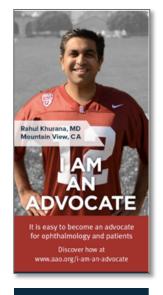
Houthi insurgents — not al-Qaeda — recently toppled the Yemeni government, which had supported American drone strikes against al-Qaeda in the country. The Houthis are anti-American members of a Shiite sect. "The same group that has waged six brutal wars against the Yemeni state over the past decade is now the state," writes BuzzFeed News foreign correspondent Gregory Johnsen.

#### #1: The Ask:

- Specific questions: "Was it Useful?"
- **Narrow focus:** "a quick backstory about the death of the Argentine prosecutor"
- A little encouragement: "Also seriously I am obsessed with this story."

# Don't Just Push Out Information; Pull Subscribers In

Build a Loyal Subscriber Base by Integrating Member Activities in the Newsletter





#### **Feature Members**

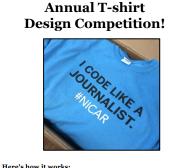
The American Academy of Ophthalmology includes member profiles in their newsletter and on their blog. Participants enjoy sharing advice with other members while readers are curious to see who will be featured each month.



MailChimp

#### **Embed Short Surveys**

MailChimp and other services allow users to embed survey questions into an email. Users are encouraged to share their opinions and can click through to a fuller survey if they are interested. Organizations can use the service to get a fuller picture of the membership.



#### re's how it works:

Jan 22-31: Submit you designs by emailing them to shirts@ire.org. We'll take just about any high-resolution format.

**Feb. 1-7:** Vote for your favorite designs. We'll have links on the homepage and CAR Conference page.

Feb. 10: Winning designs announced on the IRE website.



#### **Include Contests**

Before the annual conference, members of Investigative Reporters and Editors submit designs for t-shirts to be sold at the conference. Members vote on a winning design, fostering friendly competition – even campaigning – among members.

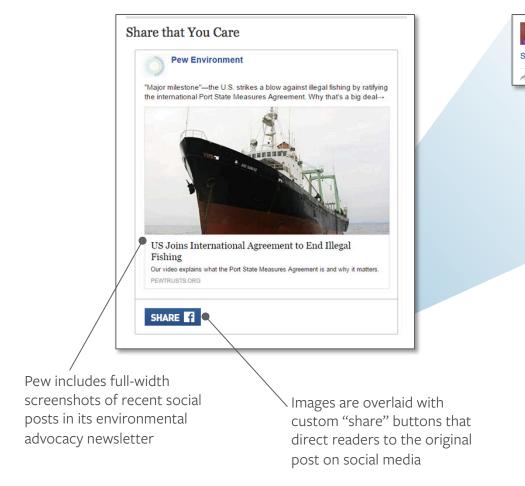
# **Integrate Opportunities for Engagement**

Newsletter Can Be a Strategic Vehicle for Amplifying Social Content

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#### **Pews Integrates Specific Social Content** into Weekly Newsletters...



#### ...and Posts See Regular Boosts in Engagement



# Don't Be Afraid of Personality

Providing a Personal Touch Is More Engaging, Can Still Be Professional

### THE HILL

#### GOOD EVENING EVERYONE AND WELCOME TO OVERNIGHT FINANCE

where I have emerged from a brief state of panic after looking at my watch and realizing that I never changed it to sithlord-black-hole time.

Now on to the news and the marathon federal highway spending bill...

#### The Memorable Voice

Kevin Cirilli, a former reporter for The Hill, was known for his personal introductions to the "Overnight Finance" newsletter. These included humorous segues into content or commentary on life in D.C. They often demonstrated his knack for creative writing.

 Encourage a strong writer on staff to begin each newsletter. Don't worry about staying on-point if commentary is relatable.

### The New York Times

#### Stuff We Liked: Prussian Cavalrymen and Congressional Excuses

Our dear friend and former colleague Derek Willis, now at ProPublica, compiled data on absentee members of Congress. The best part was a <u>database of the excuses</u> they made for missing votes, like "because the Capitol Hill police would not let my vehicle enter the grounds due to a security 'event' regarding the escort of a foreign dignitary."

#### **The Professional Recommendation**

The New York Times' "The Upshot," includes a "Stuff We Liked" section. While less warm than other newsletters, "The Upshot" still has an editorial voice. "Stuff We Liked" highlights amusing data and interesting reporting from across the web.

★ Make recommendations, include small details about why staff members like a website or article.





#### **The Commentator**

Ann Friedman is a freelance journalist who writes a weekly column for NYMag.com. She's established herself as a frank and humorous writer and pie-charter of contemporary culture, including in her newsletter, "The Ann Friedman Weekly."

★ Have a doodling staffer? Ask them to include an editorial cartoon or graph.

# **Email is Fundamentally a Mobile Product**

**Primary Uses for Email and Smart Phones Coincide** 



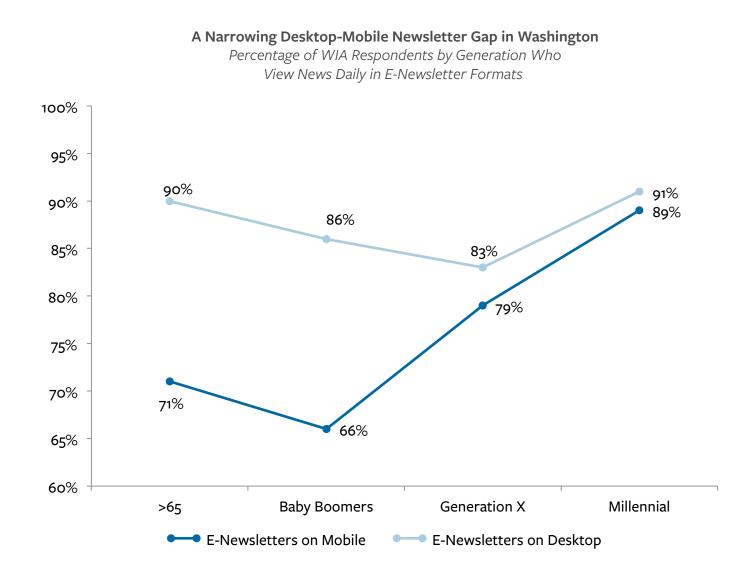
#### Mobile and Email Interlinked

According to Pew Research Center, in 2013 (the most recent year of measurement) 52% of adult cell phone owners used their phone to send or receive email. That percentage has gone up every year since 2009. Meanwhile, Adobe found that 88% of Millennials regularly check email on their phones.

Source: National Journal Communications Council research and analysis

# A Convergence in Viewing Platforms

Multi-Platform View Rates Reinforce Importance of Thinking Mobile-First, and Scaling Up



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# **Keys to Successful Mobile Optimization**

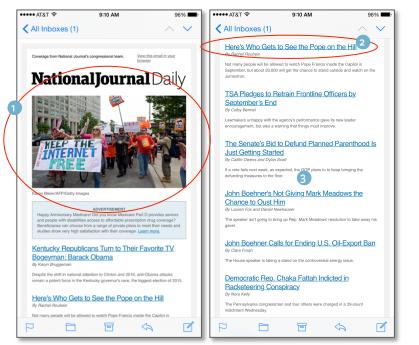
Tips from E-Newsletter Writers, Managers, and Strategists

	••••• T-Mobile LTE 3:56 PM		
<b>Make text "scannable."</b> Break up text with plenty of white space. Use bold or	✓ Inbox (13)		
larger text to indicate importance. Fonts should be easy to read on a small	POWER PLAYERS IN THE NEWS:		
screen.	<ul> <li>Fox News reported that the FBI is widening its investigation of Clinton's emails, specifically looking into whether false</li> </ul>		
Important information should be at			
<b>the top.</b> Less important information should occur further down. This is true	statements were given as its classification review continues.		
for each section within the email, too.	2. Hillary rolled out a \$30 billion plan		
Make sure links are distinct from the rest of the text. Underline the text or	to help coal miners adjust if the <b>EPA</b> closes several coal plants. (New		
use a different font color to make sure	 <ul> <li>York Times)</li> <li>3. Trump reiterated his calls for a</li> </ul>		
links pop.	boycott of <b>Macy's</b> , which he says turned on him because of his "strong		
Links should be at least as large as a	stance on illegal immigration."		
<b>key on the keyboard.</b> Anything smaller becomes difficult to click.	<ul> <li>(Sarah Halzack)</li> <li>4. Scott Walker's ex-campaign manager, Rick Wiley, is back on the</li> </ul>		
	NRSC's payroll as a voter contacts consultant.		

# **Practicing What We Preach**

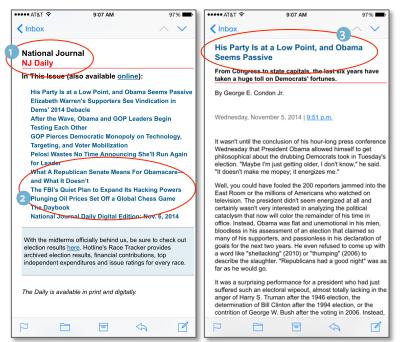
How NJ Daily Was Redesigned to Provide a More Fluid, On-Brand Mobile Experience

#### The New and Improved



- Attractive image and bold publication title at the top situates reader in both the brand and key topics
- 2 Clear hyperlinks with larger font connect back to main articles of interest without taking up significant space
- 3 Streamlined interface highlights only the most important stories and ideas for quick consumption (whole newsletter can be snapped in three images)

#### The Original



- Smaller header and inconsistent subject line makes newsletter feel more spammy than the product of a high-end brand
- 2 Article hyperlinks bunched at the top of the page, linking to full-length articles as the user scrolls down
- 3 Entire newsletter would need to be snapped in 10+ images; unwieldy and blocky interface doesn't seem to encapsulate key news of the day

# After Starting With Mobile, Think Platform Optimization

A Timeline of Best Practices Any Newsletter Should Follow



Before launch:





Be sure newsletter displays properly on different-sized screens.



Often:

WHOA!!!! CHECK THIS OUT - Sent from my iPho
Your Week in Membership and Webinar: Levera
The Paris attacks: what we know so far - It's the

Do not use ALL CAPS or cute fonts. Check fonts for readability.



Make sure links open in new browser.

Fox News reported that the FBI is widening its investigation of Clinton's emails, specifically looking into whether false statements were given as its classification review continues.

Be clear about where your news is sourced.



Occasionally:

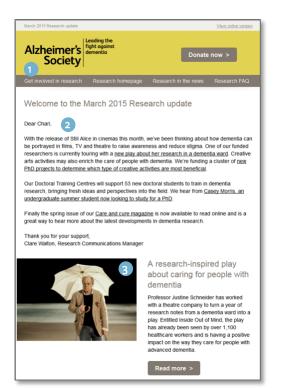


Test load times. Remember many users check email on phones, which may not have strong signals. Multiracial? - 36.4% of young women lived with parents or relatives in 2014. Email not displaying correctly? View it in your browser. November 12, 2015 The U

Update the text that will display in the preview window in subscribers' inbox. Make sure it is relevant to the content within the email. Avoid lines like "Email not displaying correctly?"

# **Newsletter in Action: Alzheimer's Society**

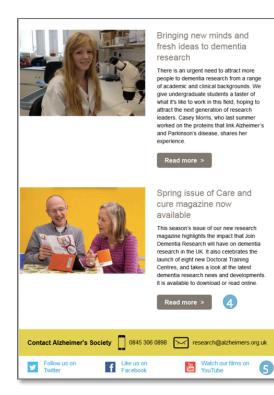
Is it a Newsletter? Or a Webpage? Layout Confuses the Role of a Newsletter



Header is too similar to a webpage. It's unlikely most readers use the menu bar along the top of the page to navigate to the website.

The letter starts off personalized, but it stops there. It's a lengthy recap of what's in the newsletter without any added value.

Images add a human element to the newsletter, but they aren't clickable.



- The buttons are unnecessary. Readers know to click the headline or the image to continue reading.
- Social media icons are great; however, these do not allow users to share the newsletter. It's a missed opportunity to gain subscribers.

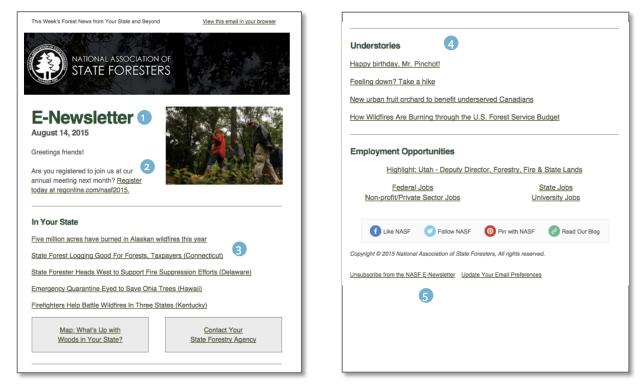
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# **Newsletter in Action: National Association of State Foresters**

Wonderfully Simple Works, But Room for Incremental Improvements



NASF does not need to announce in bold that the email is an "E-NEWSLETTER."

- <sup>2</sup> Instead, important information, like the reminder to register for the annual meeting, belongs at the top.
  - "In Your State" is a great idea for a section, but it's hard to scan. NASF could move the state to the beginning of each headline or they could personalize it based on subscriber information.

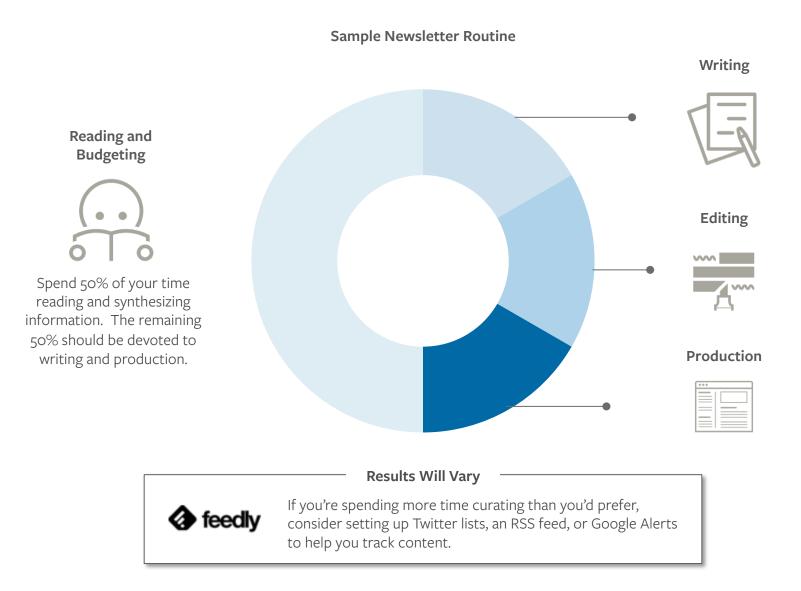
- The "Understories" headlines are unclear. NASF could add sources, so readers know where they are clicking. They could also add short descriptions to save readers from clicking through to stories they may not find interesting.
- The newsletter has clear "unsubscribe" and "preference" options.

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# **The Proper Procedures: Curated Newsletter**

How long should it take to produce a newsletter? What does it entail?



Source: National Journal Communications Council research and analysis, the Noun Project

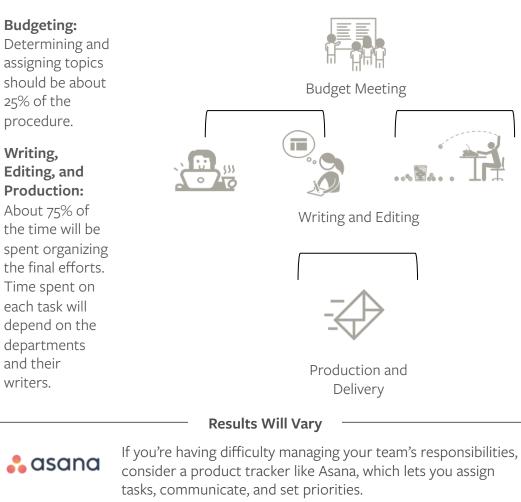
# **The Proper Procedures: Editorial Newsletter**

How long should it take to produce a newsletter? What does it entail?





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#### Sample Newsletter Routine

# What's Next? Unconventional Curation

The Atlantic Daily's Unusual Sections Make News Memorable



#### QUOTED

Flora Desprats-Colonna, a filmmaker who lives near the site of one of the Paris attacks: "I think the terrorists attacked here because we are all mixing together. They don't like that."

Daniel Hamermesh, a labor economics professor, on increased wages: "You're not going to get this for free."

David Karol, a political scientist, on why presidential polls aren't reliable: "The media don't always report the numbers that say 'not sure' or 'don't know enough."

A Paris cafégoer: "I never thought having a drink on a café terrace would be an act of resistance. But I could get used to it."

# 1) A common but quirky element can enliven issue coverage.

The "Quoted" segment shares unconventional takes on topical news. It introduces new perspectives on issues in brief, thought-provoking ways.

NEWS QUIZ	
1. Consuming can alter humans' gut microbiomes for up to a y	ear.
(See answer or scroll to the bottom.)	
2. The oldest stars in the universe are composed almost entirely of	·
(See answer or scroll to the bottom.)	
<ol> <li>New research suggests that gourds, pumpkins, and squashes have survive the past several millennia only because of</li> </ol>	ed
(See answer or scroll to the bottom.)	

#### 1) Consider the one-way interaction.

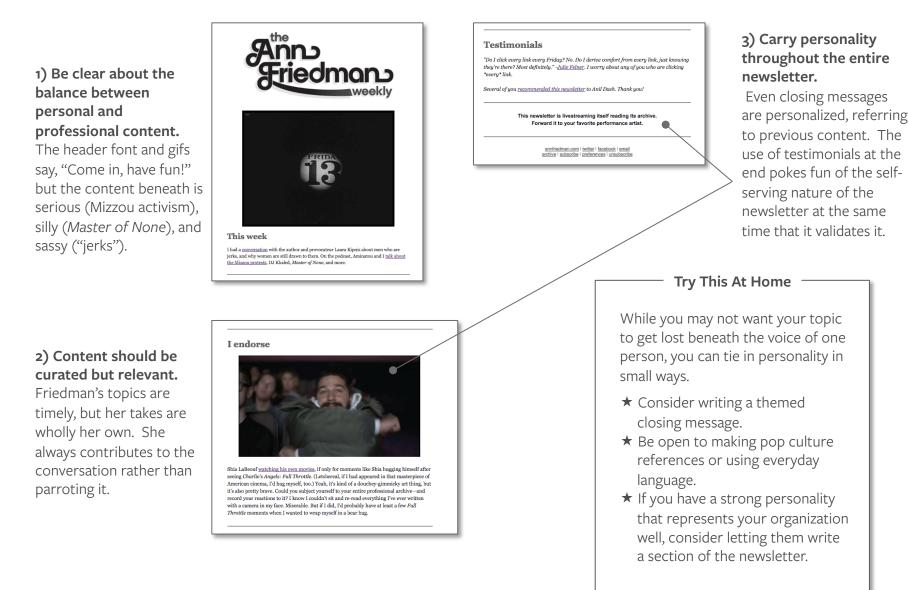
Engagement doesn't have to happen on social media. The Daily's News Quiz doesn't ask subscribers to submit answers. Instead, readers can puzzle over them in private, or scroll to the bottom to learn more.

#### **Try This At Home**

★ You can create your own version of "Quoted" or "News Quiz" by borrowing from interviews and articles you already feature. Consider using "Quoted" for interesting or divisive topics. "News Quiz" is useful for complicated but curious topics.

# What's Next? Get Personal

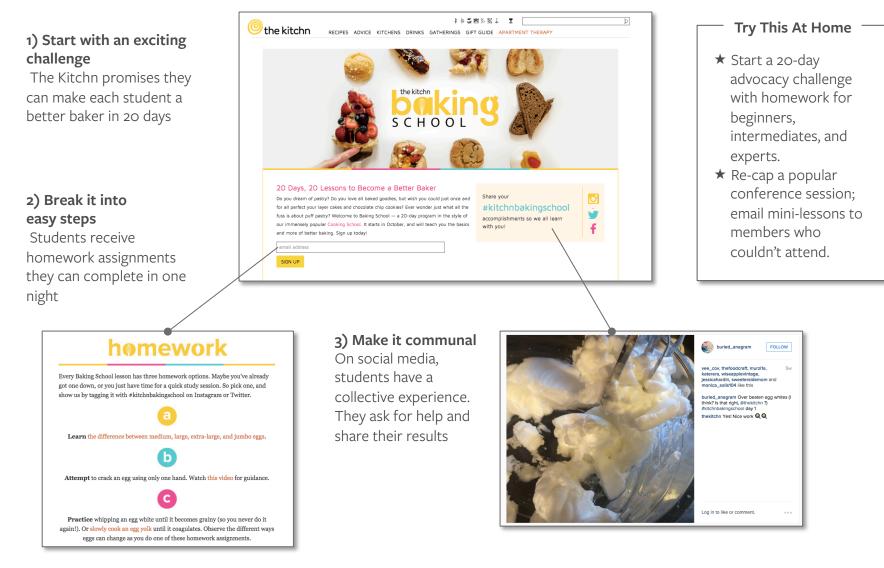
"The Ann Friedman Weekly" Lets the Freak Flag Fly - to Critical Acclaim



Source: National Journal Communications Council research and analysis

# What's Next? Start a Newsletter Challenge

The Kitchn's 20-day Baking Series Educated, Engaged and Entertained



**National Journal Communications Council** 

# Media University

AMU/414

# Building a Better E-Newsletter Part 1

November 19, 2015