



Healthcare Marketing

Not your same old newsletter

Not too long ago, newsletters for hospitals and other healthcare organizations were considered throwaways to be glanced at quickly and tossed. Relevant, useful information was rarely included. The primary focus was on promotions, hirings, births, the latest equipment or perhaps a spotlight on a department or individual.

In today's competitive and cost conscious environment, most healthcare organizations realize that there is no longer the budget, staff nor interest for that type of newsletter. But does that mean the company newsletter has gone by the wayside? Is there still a place for company news?

Absolutely.

But to ensure maximum returns on the investment of the time of internal staff as well as for the budget, organizations must take a close look at their audience, objectives and strategies for a newsletter.

The Internal Newsletter Often one of the first line items to be deleted in times of financial difficulties is the company newsletter. Most people would claim not to miss the printed "mouthpiece" for the company. In reality, many employees want to know more about their colleagues. They like to hear about milestones and accomplishments. What's more, employees at healthcare organizations in particular need to hear about the issues, challenges and opportunities faced by their industry. Management needs to view the company newsletter as a tool to educate the people who can go out into the community and relay the organization's message. In addition, the ongoing use of a company newsletter ensures that in times of crisis, or when management needs to reach out to employees, a ready-made tool will be available.

Here are five strategies to develop a successful company newsletter:

1. Strive to educate and offer insights into key issues and challenges. Healthcare is changing daily. From the potential implications of HIPAA, to the impact of rising costs, there are myriad issues that employees want and need to better understand. Using the company newsletter to educate employees helps to ensure they are better able to meet the challenges of the industry today. More importantly, it can create employees who feel vested in the organization's actions and who want to help their friends, colleagues and neighbors (think of them as potential clients, patients or advocates) understand the issues facing the industry.
2. Provide a forum to honestly and openly discuss problems and address questions. Why did we enter into that partnership? Why are you laying off employees? Why won't you listen to our recommendations? These are all questions the average healthcare company manager hears routinely. How these questions are answered may mean the difference between supportive

- and engaged employees and those who view management as the "enemy." Not all questions are suitable for all employees, but clearly there are questions that are of universal interest. Identify those questions and use the newsletter as a forum to openly and honestly address them. This approach can pay dividends down the road by helping to better manage potential crisis situations in the future. While other companies might scramble to find ways to communicate with employees, those with a newsletter will have a ready forum.
3. Stimulate improved performance by recognizing accomplishments. Some accomplishments may be work related such as an employee being awarded a grant. Others may be personal, such as an employee who was recognized for community service. Whatever the accomplishment, ultimately people want to know about their colleagues. This type of recognition has been shown to help stimulate performance (e.g., improvements in sales and quality).
 4. Get employees involved. Don't let one to two individuals in corporate communications write the entire company newsletter. Bring in other departments and areas. Get them to write about the issues they think would be of interest to their colleagues. For example, the compliance officer could write a section on the latest HIPAA guidelines and the importance of following the guidelines. The CIO could discuss the latest technology and how it will help the organization better meet the needs of customers and/or patients. Keep in mind these sections don't need to be long. Less is often more when it comes to company newsletters.
 5. Be interesting and entertaining. No one said a company newsletter had to be boring. Talk to employees and find ways to make reading the newsletter an enjoyable experience. For example, try a David Letterman-style Top Ten list. Provide a section where humorous stories can be relayed. Think about what you would like to read and what would get you to pick up the company newsletter for a few minutes.

External Newsletters

Internal newsletters play a role for many organizations' communication objectives and so can external newsletters. While many companies in the technology industry have so-called "user group" newsletters that update customers on the latest upgrades or technology, few healthcare organizations reach out to clients in such a manner.

Once again, here is a ready audience that wants and needs to find out about what you are doing and how it impacts them. While existing clients can be a key audience for newsletters, other audiences could also be targeted. For example, health plans might want to target brokers or consultants. Or they may feel a need to reach out to physicians or other healthcare providers.

Developing a distribution list for an external e-mail newsletter can be challenging. Today's privacy regulations prevent companies from using anyone's e-mail address unless they are given the option to get off the list. However, organizations can build an opt-in list from sales, Web site visitors, customers, resellers, etc.

As with the company newsletter, the key is providing a newsletter that is informative, relevant and entertaining. Clients and consultants likely get considerable information and if your newsletter doesn't meet their needs, it will just become

another document for File 13.

Consider these strategies for external newsletters:

Determine the audience you most need to reach. Will you be better able to sell your products and services if you reach out to existing customers? Do you need to reach out to third parties such as consultants to communicate your organization's strengths? Should you communicate with healthcare providers in your network? Answer these questions to determine whether or not a newsletter to an external audience is a viable marketing strategy.

Provide information that will benefit your readers. Whoever your audience is, due to other obligations, they will likely not read a newsletter that is simply a promotional piece for your organization. They will read material that gives them information that can help them in their job. For example: insights into how the latest legislation might impact their industry or a quick summary of recent industry news, specific and relevant to their job. In particular, larger healthcare organizations may have the internal resources (e.g., government affairs staff) to help provide this kind of information.

Address the questions they have about you. If you are writing a newsletter for clients or partners, they will likely want to know about aspects of your operations that might impact them. For example, an acquisition of a new company will be newsworthy, particularly if it will enable you to expand products and services. Likewise, there may be times when you need to communicate about negative news such as a pending lawsuit. The fact is, you can allow trusted and needed customers and partners to read about your news in the trades through someone else's communication filter, or you can provide the complete story and your own perspective complete with messages you think are important for that audience to know and understand.

Keep it short and simple. How much time do you have to spend on activities not directly related to your daily job. Five minutes? Ten? Ensure that your newsletter respects the time your target audience has to spend. Most people won't read a 1,500-word article at a sitting, but many will pursue a newsletter that includes brief headlines and a quick overview of the issues.

How Technology Can Shape Distribution One of the newest debates facing organizations regarding their newsletter is whether or not to send a traditional print newsletter or an online version. Print newsletters can be expensive. Depending on length, graphics, color and quantity, they can average up to \$1.50 apiece for design and production alone. Online versions are much less expensive to produce. It's a simple matter of developing a design and distributing it to your database. Many audiences, however, may not read an e-mail version either because they don't yet use e-mail on a routine basis or they get so many e-mails that they can't read them all. These individuals may be more apt to read a printed newsletter, particularly if it was mailed to their attention. Do some research about your audience and conduct a quick survey to find out what method best meets their needs.

Many organizations are also making their company newsletters available on their Web sites, thus giving employees, customers and other interested parties a chance to find out more about the company. Some organizations even offer a section for posting questions and answers. This can be a great communication strategy. But it must be carefully monitored to ensure the appropriateness of comments posted.

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