

eNewsletters

E-mail newsletters (eNewsletters) are a valuable, cost-effective way to keep your school at the top of your target audience's mind. Having a quick and easy means of communicating with parents, community members, and donors on a regular basis will save you time, money, and trees. An eNewsletter service allows you to use templates; customize content; add social media links; and track views, opens, and forwards. Such services as Constant Contact and MailChimp simplify your eNewsletter strategy with tools for design, contact management, user tracking, eNewsletter archiving, and collecting e-mail addresses. Topics covered in this chapter include

- How eNewsletters work
- Ongoing social engagement with eNewsletters
- Common school tasks before and after eNewsletters

- Best practices for eNewsletters
- Getting started with eNewsletters

HOW ENEWSLETTERS WORK

Although you may be quite familiar with e-mail, you will find that eNewsletters work a bit differently than traditional e-mail. This section outlines six steps in the eNewsletter process, including collecting your contact list, writing the eNewsletter, sending the eNewsletter, tracking interactions, resending the eNewsletter, and archiving content. These steps are followed by a discussion of the advantages posed by eNewsletters over traditional paper-based newsletters.

1. **Collecting your contact list.** Collect the e-mail addresses and contact information of the people with whom you wish to communicate. When writing an eNewsletter, the more information you have about the recipient, the more customized your message can be. At the very least you should collect the first name, last name, e-mail address, and school name of your intended recipients.
2. **Writing the eNewsletter.** The second step when using eNewsletters is to write the content. Approach an eNewsletter more like a traditional newsletter than an e-mail, including short, targeted articles sharing specific information.
3. **Sending the eNewsletter.** Sending an eNewsletter entails a bit more than sending a traditional e-mail. You can schedule your eNewsletter to be sent at a specific time on a specific date. You could write several messages and have them automatically sent out over a few days. You can send one version of the eNewsletter to a subsection of your list, for example parents, and another version to the rest of your list. Some tools, such as MailChimp, even offer intelligent interaction testing; this measures the effectiveness of two versions of an eNewsletter and, after a short testing period, sends out the winning version to the majority of your list.
4. **Tracking interactions.** eNewsletters offer the ability to track recipients' interaction with your message. You'll be able to see which individuals have received the eNewsletter, who opened it, who clicked it, where they clicked, what they did after they clicked, and who forwarded your message.

5. **Resending the eNewsletter.** Based on the tracking features, eNewsletter services allow you to resend the content to your recipients who didn't open your e-mail the first time. As most people today are inundated with a massive number of e-mails, your message may have been lost in their inbox. Often simply sending the e-mail at a more opportune time can drastically increase your response rates. eNewsletter services even help you see when your e-mails are opened, allowing you to better schedule mailings in the future.
6. **Archiving content.** Another great feature of eNewsletters is the ability to archive messages. Your community will be able to read previously sent eNewsletters without your having to post them on your website. An eNewsletter archive can assist you in ensuring that your community has access to any information they may have missed.

eNewsletters feature several key advantages over traditional paper-based newsletters, or compared to standard e-mail programs. These advantages include that they are digital, customizable, and intelligent.

Digital

The first key advantage that eNewsletters have over traditional paper-based newsletters is that they are digital. eNewsletters save time and money by allowing for multiple authors and enabling reusable content. eNewsletters are sent digitally, saving you the cost of paper, copies, and stamps. Because they are scheduled and sent out automatically, you no longer need to worry about adhering address labels, stuffing envelopes, or handing packets out to classes. Multiple users at your school can log in to the eNewsletter service and update their section of the eNewsletter. This can help improve the work flow and ensures that all important information is shared in one single, unified communication from the school. You can also reuse and repurpose previously sent eNewsletters by simply updating the

Ron Koehler, president of the National School Public Relations Association, explains, "Consumer needs are changing. The backpack folder is no longer the primary source of information for parents. They want and prefer instant electronic information."

"National Survey Pinpoints Communication Preferences in School Communication," accessed December 3, 2011, www.nsprapro.org/files/docs/Release%20on%20CAP%20Survey.pdf.

content for a new mailing. Reusing sections of prior eNewsletters saves you time and helps to remind the community about upcoming events.

eNewsletter services are also simple to learn and to use. With a wealth of training materials, including screenshot videos, available online, learning how to navigate and use an eNewsletter service is easier than ever. Finally, eNewsletter services even offer mobile applications. For example, Constant Contact has an iPhone application. You can use the app to create and send eNewsletters, track the number of opens and clicks, and access contact information on the go.

Customizable

Another major advantage of eNewsletter services is that they are fully customizable. First, eNewsletter services provide professionally designed templates that you can customize. With simple drag-and-drop features, creating an attractive eNewsletter is effortless. Second, using built-in design tools, you can create beautifully designed, custom eNewsletters in only a few minutes with little computer experience. Adding pictures and changing fonts is very simple with modern eNewsletter tools. You can even embed video content into your eNewsletter to make it particularly engaging. Finally, eNewsletter services allow you to insert form fields that are automatically populated with user data in the final version of the message. For example, you would add the code <first name> to the welcome message, and when the recipient reads the e-mail, it says “Dear Jennifer” or “Dear Matthew.” eNewsletters offer a personalized experience, from built-in templates and design tools to the ability to use form fields, far superior to anything that a standard paper-based newsletter could offer.

Intelligent

The greatest advantage of eNewsletters is the data. There is power in understanding who your target audience is, how segments of your audience interact with your eNewsletter, and how your message is being received. You can target each segment of your intended audience by using the contact management features. Start by uploading your e-mail database as a custom list, categorizing your audience segments as parents, students, community volunteers, potential teachers, and so on. Target each group individually with a message that is relevant to them, and choose which list will receive which particular message.

Thanks to interaction tracking, when you send an eNewsletter to your school community you can see how people have interacted with it. With a traditional newsletter, you have no idea what happens to it. Was it read, thrown away, brought home, left in a backpack, or even handed out in class? An eNewsletter service reports data to you, allowing you to see exactly how many people received the eNewsletter, and how many people opened it, clicked it, deleted it, forwarded it, and unsubscribed from it. Understanding how your audience interacts with your eNewsletter is a powerful tool for engaging your school community. eNewsletter services offer intelligent interaction testing, whereby you can simultaneously test two eNewsletters to measure their effectiveness with a small group. The eNewsletter with the most opens or clicks will then be automatically sent out to the rest of the group. This helps ensure that the most effective message reaches the largest audience.

In terms of scheduling, you are able to specify the exact date and time that an eNewsletter is to be delivered. Being able to do this can dramatically increase open rates and click-through rates. From my experience, sending your eNewsletter at Tuesday at 9:00 a.m. and Thursday at 3:00 p.m. seems to yield the highest number of opens. Finally, eNewsletter services offer a customizable sign-up box for your website or blog, allowing your community members to simply add their information and automatically subscribe to your eNewsletter.

ONGOING SOCIAL ENGAGEMENT WITH ENEWSLETTERS

eNewsletters can help build ongoing social engagement online because they increase awareness, allow your school community to easily provide feedback, enable collaboration, and encourage people to advocate for your school (see Figure 1.1).

Awareness

By sending out relevant content about upcoming events, such as parent-teacher night, student showcase night, a sports game, or a school play, you can help build awareness across your school community. Features including an “add to my calendar” button allow your community to take your content and plug it into their existing scheduling system.

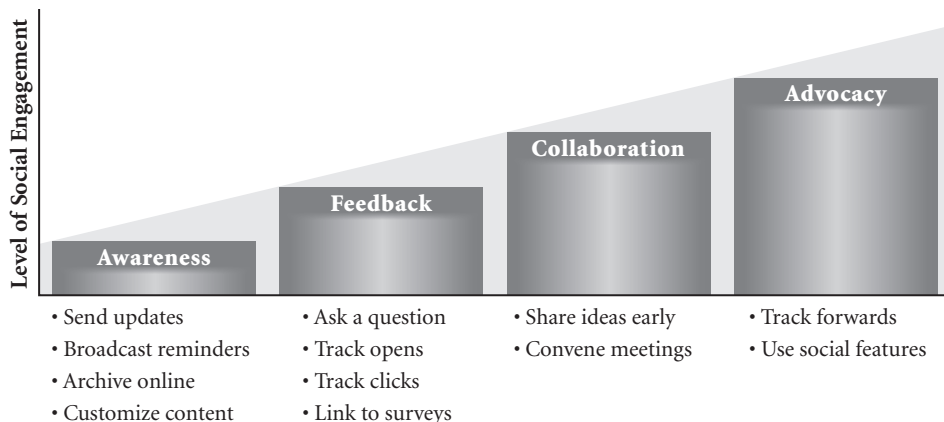


Figure 1.1 Social Engagement with eNewsletters

Kisu Kuroneko, a seventh- and eighth-grade teacher in Ontario, Canada, explains, “We publish the content of the newsletter as individual posts on the school website. This means that our school community can subscribe to our school website feed and automatically receive updates whenever we add information to the school site.”

“WordPress Plug-Ins We Use on Our School Website,” posted January 31, 2009, <http://blog.classroomteacher.ca/209/wordpress-plugins-we-use-on-our-school-website/#create-an-enewsletter-for-your-school>.

Feedback

eNewsletters also allow for feedback from your audience. When you ask a question in your eNewsletter, there are several ways to receive feedback. You could have a vote, asking a simple yes-no question. Readers click one link for “yes” or another link for “no.” You can track the number of clicks to see how many people agreed and how many people disagreed. You can have a link to a comment box, in which readers post a comment to send to you. You can also integrate an online survey platform, enabling readers to give authentic feedback.

Collaboration

eNewsletters provide an opportunity for collaboration with your school community. By sending out information or polling your community, you are inviting them to get involved by sending their feedback and their ideas. Allow this feedback to be the beginning of a conversation. Use your eNewsletter to keep parents engaged in that conversation by sharing progress on putting their ideas into action.

Advocacy

eNewsletters are a great tool to help facilitate advocacy in your school community and to help you empower your school to advocate for your cause. One method of doing this is to track forwards. This will enable you to see how people are sharing your content with their contacts. Many eNewsletter services also include social features, including Facebook and Twitter links, that allow your community to share the eNewsletter with their social media followers with just a few clicks.

COMMON SCHOOL TASKS BEFORE AND AFTER ENEWSLETTERS

Using eNewsletters can change the way you complete common school tasks. These include easily sending weekly newsletters, receiving targeted responses, and communicating information to specific groups.

Task or Goal	Traditional Method	Using eNewsletters
Sending weekly newsletters	Everyone would receive newsletters in the form of paper photocopies, which were handed out physically.	eNewsletters are automatically sent via an online program. You can track views and send the eNewsletter to a targeted list.
Receiving targeted responses	You would call individuals representative of a target demographic. Alternately, a specific group would be called for a meeting in which they were asked for their feedback in person.	The eNewsletter list can be segmented to enable communication specific to a target demographic. You can then track views and clicks from the targeted eNewsletter segment.
Communicating information to specific groups	You would host a special meeting to share information, or you might make personal phone calls to a targeted list.	The eNewsletter list is segmented to communicate to specific groups.

BEST PRACTICES FOR ENEWSLETTERS

Fully taking advantage of the dynamic features of eNewsletters involves implementing some best practices. These include writing relevant content, avoiding spam, and capturing e-mail addresses.

Writing Relevant Content

eNewsletters must provide valid content that the reader will want to read. Otherwise you will see low open rates and an increase in the number of readers unsubscribing. eNewsletters do not have to be stodgy, formal documents. They can be fun and lively. Consider including surprising facts about your faculty; notifications of recent awards and student achievements; reminders about inter-

esting events happening at the school and in the area; historical information about your school; games, contests, quizzes, and trivia; and inspirational quotes.

Remember that your eNewsletter is often viewed in an overflowing e-mail inbox. You have a short amount of time to get and keep the attention of your reader. Understanding some basic strategies that can increase your recipients' engagement with your eNewsletter will benefit your school by ensuring higher open and click-through rates.

According to Roberta Furger, contributing writer for Edutopia, "E-Newsletters skip the middleman and send the information directly to parents' e-mail accounts. They're quick, cheap, and reliable."

"How to Boost Parental Involvement," posted August 10, 2009, www.edutopia.org/parent-involvement-participation-education-tips.

- **Have a compelling e-mail subject line.** One way to help your eNewsletter stand out is to write a compelling subject line. Try using such phrases as "important news about your child" or "we need your feedback by Thursday." These subject lines inspire action.
- **Use pictures.** Use the first section of your eNewsletter to grab your audience's attention with relevant pictures and other visual elements.
- **Don't bury the headline.** Share the most important information first. If one of your articles in the eNewsletter focuses on the parent open house night, start with that information: "parent open house night on Thursday." Ensure that your content is "scannable," allowing readers to glance through the eNewsletter and quickly read the most important content.

- **Offer value.** Think about your content from the perspective of your readers, and consider how you can offer something of value to them. Go beyond just sharing information; provide clear strategies to assist your readers with the problems they face.
- **Call readers to action.** Every e-mail should include an invitation to respond or take action. Providing a method for readers to respond to your content, such as an RSVP link, survey question, or short quiz, will increase their feedback and engagement.

Avoiding Spam

One key when writing your eNewsletter is to avoid spam. The term *spam* refers to the percentage of e-mail messages you have sent that recipients have marked as unsolicited. To avoid sending spam, make sure that every recipient of your eNewsletter has given you permission to send e-mail to him or her. Ensuring your eNewsletter list is “permission based” also helps guarantee that your message will be delivered to the recipient’s e-mail inbox. Not only is unsolicited e-mail not read but also your eNewsletter service might block your account. There may even be strict fines imposed on people who send a large amount of unsolicited e-mail. You can avoid this by making sure that your school community has given you permission to send eNewsletters to their e-mail addresses.

Capturing E-Mail Addresses

Ensure that every visitor to your website is invited to sign up for your eNewsletter. Collecting e-mail addresses allows your school to continue the conversation with visitors once they have left your site. There are several methods for capturing new e-mail sign-ups.

- **Registration forms.** When a new student signs up for your school, or when parents sign up as volunteers, include a space on the registration form for e-mail addresses. Make sure that the space in which the e-mail address is written has a single cell for each character. E-mail addresses must be written legibly for someone to receive your e-mail. One mistake—a period or a “0” instead of an “o”—means that the intended recipient will not get your message. Below the e-mail entry box, write a disclaimer: “By entering your e-mail address, you will be added to our school eNewsletter.”

- **Contests.** Another way to collect e-mail addresses from parents is to have a contest. Have parents place their business card in a fish bowl for a prize drawing at a parent event. It must be stated near the fishbowl: “By entering your business card, you will be added to our eNewsletter list to receive information about our school and notices of school events. If you would not like to receive this eNewsletter, please write ‘no list’ on the back of your business card.”
- **Phone calls.** When parents call your school to find out more information or to check in on their child, personally invite them to subscribe to your eNewsletter. Empower your front office staff to ask parents about the latest eNewsletter. Ensure that your receptionist is asking parents, “Did you receive our eNewsletter on Thursday?” For every parent who says no (and there will be a lot), the follow-up response is, “Let me write down your e-mail address to make sure we have the right one.” In that context, it’s very difficult to turn the receptionist down. He or she will record the e-mail address and add it to the database immediately.
- **E-mail signatures.** Make sure that all of your faculty members have “To subscribe to your school eNewsletter, click here” in their e-mail signature. This will help spread awareness about your school eNewsletter, and increase the number of people signing up for it.

GETTING STARTED WITH ENEWSLETTERS

Question for Reflection: Track how many pieces of paper your school sends home in the course of a week. How might this same information be shared more intelligently with an eNewsletter?

First Steps

1. Consider how you might personalize a message you traditionally send to a group. Start with your teachers by adding their first name using a form field in your eNewsletter service. For example: “Alicia, I wanted to remind you about the faculty meeting on Thursday.”
2. Scan through your old e-mails to find any eNewsletters you have received from other schools or businesses. Read these over to discover what techniques capture your attention.