

WISCONSIN YOUTH FUTURES

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Youth Futures Newsletters: Do They Pay?



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Youth Futures Newsletters: Do They Pay?

by

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Some counties have started Youth Futures newsletters. Most Extension agents who have dabbled in newsletters end up asking themselves, "Is a newsletter worth my time and effort?" To help you answer that question, this paper will briefly review the evidence on the effectiveness of newsletters, criteria to assess whether a newsletter is an appropriate avenue for reaching the intended audience, and strategies for making newsletters more effective.

Evidence on the Effectiveness of Newsletters

When people in Wisconsin are asked how they prefer to receive information, far more prefer reading than attending meetings. About 6 out of 10 prefer to get information from written materials; furthermore, these results hold for both men and women and for rural and nonrural residents (Steele, n.d.). An Extension study in Racine county of couples married less than 15 years found a 3 to 1 margin in favor of reading materials over discussing with others and a 10 to 1 margin over meetings. In a recent publication, Dave Riley and colleagues review a series of studies that provide strong evidence that most modern parents seek child-rearing advice from printed materials (Riley, Meinhardt, Nelson, Salisbury, and Winnett, 1991).

So the evidence indicates that reading is preferred, but are newsletters among people's favorite sources of written information? Perhaps the most relevant data comes from a 1992 study of a newsletter developed by the Bloomington Youth Futures Committee for parents, school personnel, business owners, and other community members (Schmitz, Lewis, and Stoutenborough, 1992). About 7 out of 10 mothers found them to be somewhat or very useful, while about a third of fathers found them to be somewhat or very useful. About a third of the mothers reported sharing the newsletter with a spouse or a friend as did a fourth of the fathers. Also, 37 percent of the mothers and 16 percent of the fathers reported discussing the newsletter with friends or family.

In another Wisconsin study of 200 readers of four newsletters written by Extension Home Economists, the following results were reported (Bogenschneider, n.d.):

- 44 to 66 percent of the readers tried an idea or made a change because they read the newsletter
- 90 to 98 percent find a new and timely idea frequently or in every issue
- 2/3 to 3/4 discuss the content of the newsletter with friends
- 76 to 88 percent of the people receiving newsletters find them usually quite useful
- An average 77 percent save past issues

A Wisconsin study of the effectiveness of an age-paced parent education newsletter report changes in the behaviors we know to be important to competent parenting (Riley, et al., 1991). Almost two-thirds of the readers reported that reading the newsletter caused them to provide a more stimulating environment for their baby and almost two-thirds reported being less angry when the baby is difficult. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds rated the newsletter very useful, more useful than other sources of parenting information including books, relatives, child care providers, and public health providers; it comes as no surprise, then, that two-thirds reported that they read all the articles in an issue. In over half the families, the spouse or husband had also read the newsletter.

A study by Dave Riley provides evidence that the "Parenting the First Year" newsletter series prevented half a million instances of physical punishment among Wisconsin babies last year (Riley, 1992); on average, the newsletter prevented 26 slaps or spanks per family. Not only are these results astounding, but they seem most beneficial to those parents at highest risk of child abuse--single parents, teens, families facing the stress of limited income, low education or social isolation. Dave has been able to document this impressive impact at a cost of less than \$5 per family.

Do these findings mean that all newsletters will be widely read and that the readers will adopt practices or change behaviors? Certainly not. From these findings, however, and other studies of readership, criteria can be established to help assess whether a newsletter is an appropriate educational tool.

1. Can I Clearly Identify the Audience and My Intended Objectives?

A newsletter is, as its name implies, a newsy, informal letter written to a clearly defined audience. As an agent, I wrote newsletters to several clientele—some that I could identify quite precisely and some that were much more ambiguous. For example, I wrote a newsletter for anyone that took out a marriage license in the county, which I dubbed the "Young Marrieds" newsletter. I was certain that the newsletter recipient was married but I was not certain that he/she was young (older people also get married), whether this was a first or subsequent marriage, and whether the couple had children. As I wrote each issue, it was difficult to form a clear picture of the reader in my mind and even more difficult to identify the objectives of the newsletter.

On the other hand, I wrote an age-paced newsletter for parents; the "three-month issue" was written for parents with a baby just that age and I could identify with greater certainty the types of information that might be most important and meaningful at this time. I also could have more assurance that the information would reach parents when they were motivated to learn and most ready to use it.

As you read this, it is probably apparent which newsletter was more effective. You can probably guess which of the readers were most likely to stop me in the local grocery store and thank me for the information. Carefully identifying your objectives makes it easier to define the audience. If your objective is promoting Youth Futures, for example, who would be the appropriate audience? If your objective is helping parents delay initiation into alcohol use, which parents would you focus on? If your intent is to motivate Youth Futures volunteers, who would you target?

2. Can I Keep the Mailing List Up-to-Date?

Sometimes we get so wrapped up in the content of the newsletter that we overlook the mechanics. A newsletter is no more effective than its mailing list. Will you be able to develop and maintain the mailing list? For example, a newsletter geared to the parents of a baby one month old is not as useful if it doesn't reach the family until the baby is two months old.

3. Will I Be Able to Provide Timely Information?

The more carefully you can identify the audience, the easier it is to provide relevant information at the time it is most likely to be used. A couple examples will highlight the importance of timeliness.

Back in the mid '70s, a number of Extension Home Economists were writing young married newsletters. We decided that it would be more efficient to band together and produce one high quality young married newsletter that we could produce in large numbers at low cost. Upon reflection, however, it became apparent that it would be much more difficult to provide timely information on a state level than a county level. For example, a chemical spill may be of high interest to residents in northern Wisconsin but of less concern to people living in southern Wisconsin. Information on drinking and driving may be more timely in a community where a recent automobile accident has focused public attention on the issue.

Dave Riley's impressive data of preventing child abuse via a newsletter provides strong evidence of the importance of timeliness. Each newsletter is geared to a specific month in a baby's first year; in this way, the information reaches parents when they are most ready to use it and when they have the greatest motivation to learn; the birth of a new baby is a "critical period" when parents are more apt to change their behavior.

Further support for the importance of timeliness and targeting your audience comes from a study by Cudaback (1986) of age-paced newsletters. She reported greater improvements in parenting practices when the parents received the issues monthly rather than three or more issues at one time.

Puberty may be another "critical period" when parents are receptive to learning; parenting practices may not yet be well-established, and thus, more easily changed. Since puberty is a process that occurs at different times in different adolescents, it will be more difficult to gear a newsletter to the timing of puberty than the time of birth. At a minimum, though, parents of early adolescents (ages 10 to 13) may have different needs and concerns than parents of middle adolescents (ages 14 to 17) or parents of late adolescents (18 to 21).

4. Will the information be perceived as coming from a respected and trusted information source?

From reading the evidence, I suspect that a newsletter can gain a reputation as being trustworthy in a couple different ways. Sometimes this trust is built because the writer is a recognized authority such as a UW-Extension Child Development Specialist. Or the writer carefully selects newsletter material that we can have confidence in and clearly identifies the sources. Sometimes this trust is built because the audience has a personal relationship with the writer or a feeling of being close to the writer and other recipients. For example, a newsletter coming from an Extension agent that lives and works in a community may have more credibility with local residents than a newsletter written by an expert miles away.

Enhancing the Effectiveness of Newsletters

1. Catch the reader's interest.

The newsletter writer has two main thresholds to overcome; the first is getting the reader to pick up the newsletter. Using a recognizable format with the same name or illustration but perhaps a different color helps the reader identify it from junk mail. Often important lessons can be learned from magazines that list the most interesting articles on the cover in large letters.

The second threshold to overcome is getting the reader to read past the first page. The first page should be the most exciting, timely, new, money-saving, time-saving, worthwhile item in the newsletter.

One of the primary reasons people don't read newsletters is they're not interesting. Strong readership is built on two kinds of stories, those with strong interest to a subgroup (information on single parenting, father's role in parenting) or those of moderate to high interest to a large share of the readers (normal growth and development, determining family rules on alcohol use). Use only a limited number of articles of only moderate interest to a small group of readers such as buying life insurance.

2. Maintain a consistent high level of relevance, usefulness and quality.

Based upon learning theory, we know that attention to a newsletter is a habit, reinforced by satisfied expectations or discouraged by disappointment. These three questions used by *The Farm Journal* may be helpful in deciding upon newsletter content:

- Is it tested?
- Is it available in educational sources?
- Is it widely available?

3. Keep it short and snappy.

Another major reason people don't read newsletter is they are too busy. Studies of newsletter readership indicate that most people spend about 20 minutes reading a newsletter. Most people spend take about 5 minutes to attentively read a page of copy—which suggest that 4 pages in long enough for most newsletters.

4. Save the busy reader time.

A simple formula to keep in mind to save the busy reader time is:

$$\text{Attention} = \frac{\text{Reward}}{\text{Effort}}$$

To increase attention of the reader, you can either increase the reward or decrease the effort. Newsletters writers can increase the reward through such measures as providing timely, interesting articles from authoritative sources. You can decrease the effort by using simple straightforward writing; writing that's easy to read need not be dull. Use short sentences and paragraphs, contractions when they fit in, and active voice. Also, you can guide the reader through the material with aids such as frequent paragraphing, a table of contents, clear descriptive titles, subheads for long articles, and clear, legible print.

5. Include material on how to learn.

Research on learning indicates that up to 80 percent of an adult's learning is self-directed and takes place outside the formal education system. Most learners underestimate what they are able to learn and seldom evaluate their progress.

To aid the learner, a specific section can be included to encourage reflection on what has been learned, call other learning opportunities to the reader's attention, to encourage contact with other learners, and suggest actions that might result from the learning.

6. Evaluate as you write.

Colleagues and other professionals often can provide helpful insights. Phone surveys of readers are quick and dirty and may provide valuable feedback, even if you have time to conduct only a small number.

Summary

The evidence suggests that newsletters can be effective but we know they are not effective in every situation. Effectiveness depends upon several factors including a careful assessment of whether a newsletter is an appropriate avenue for reaching the intended audience and objectives. We can increase our chances of reaching our intended objectives by taking into account some lessons from research on readership and adult learning.

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