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E-newsletters: Worth More Than You Know

E-newsletters are pervasive—marketers, businesses, politicians, civic organizations, and physicians, among many others, prize them for the content they deliver. Churches have also embraced e-newsletters because information can be easily shared with members. But they're worth more—much more.

Whether your congregation is new to e-newsletters or a long-time user, the vast majority of congregations do not fully mine the reader information that e-newsletter companies make available. Many people are aware that e-newsletters provide "open" and "click" rates; however, this overlooks 90 percent of what makes e-newsletters such a powerful tool for building community, empowering your staff, and reaching out to others.

Using E-newsletters Effectively

In an age where social media (Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, etc.) and mobile technology represent the cutting edges of communications, e-newsletters are a bit old-school. What sets e-newsletters apart from any other form of electronic communication?

- *They provide a true look into readers' reactions to what your church is supporting.* While social media allows for feedback and reaction, those writing are aware that everyone is seeing what they're saying and reacting to, so they self-screen what they say. They may "like" something not because they really like it, but because a friend—or the minister—put it up. E-newsletter subscribers, however, do no such self-screening. Most are unaware that others are tracking what they open and click (though this is beginning to change), and in the comfort of their home or office they feel no compunction to engage something for reasons other than genuine interest.

- *They provide unparalleled granular detail about who reads your material.* E-newsletter data allow you to track readers' reading histories, who they have shared the information with, and how many times any given piece is read over time and by who.

- *They can help develop a stronger sense of community.* E-newsletters require a great deal of work. Some congregations are finding that in this work there is an opportunity to create community by turning members into profile-writers, book reviewers, designers, and editors. The e-newsletter goes beyond sharing information; it develops community.

Best Approaches

Developing healthy approaches to working with e-newsletters ensures that you remain flexible in your work. Done right, e-newsletters should constantly be changing as you use them to experiment with new ideas and adapt to what your members show interest in.

- *Think and Learn.* E-newsletters are popular tools for sharing and promoting activities and programs. In reality, pushing information is among the *least* effective uses of this tool. When building your e-newsletter, think first about what you want to learn, not what you need to communicate. Are your education programs connecting with people? Do you understand how people connect with one another? What are the big ideas your congregation wrestles

...AND YOU'RE SURE THE PASTOR SAID IT WOULD COME TO ALL THE MEMBERS?

EVEN THE MOST CAREFULLY DESIGNED E-NEWSLETTER WILL NOT REACH EVERYONE.

with? Are people's spiritual needs being met? Are they growing spiritually? Are there undiscovered volunteers you don't know about? Running articles that test these ideas will yield rich results.

- *Track, Track, Track.* It's not enough to know how many times something was opened, or how many clicks it received. Alone, this data tells you little. However, placed in context, and measured over time, you will begin to understand the habits and interests of your congregation. Are people on mobile or desktops? Do they read in the morning, afternoon, or evening? Are they sharing the information on social media? If they are, which channels? Do certain members read everything? Who are they? Do certain members just lurk? Why? What time of year do people respond to which topics? Tracking can tell you all this, and raise hundreds of additional questions.
- *Embrace Being Wrong.* The desire to be right all the time will impede your ability to learn what your e-newsletter is teaching you. Pieces that receive few clicks and opens aren't failures but important lessons in what people respond to. Maybe it was poorly written. Poorly timed. Poorly placed. Ask the hard question: Why did this fail to engage congregational readers? Then search for the answers.

Mistakes to Avoid

We expect a lot out of our church communications. And although most of us know that no one way of communicating will reach everyone, we want to believe that we can develop that one channel that most people in the congregation will depend on for information. And while carefully designed e-newsletters will tell you a lot, they are not a panacea anymore than social media, print newsletters, bulletin boards, phone trees, or public announcements. But to get the most out of this communication tool, here are five practices to avoid:

- *Don't send a PDF of your existing print newsletter.* Most people don't read print newsletters. Putting your print piece in e-newsletter format won't change that. An e-newsletter represents a whole other way of communicating, so wrapping it up in an online format won't make the print version more appetizing, or the electronic communication exciting.
- *Don't expect everyone to get on board.* As noted above, e-newsletters can be great community builders. But not everyone is going to share your excitement. Don't expect or force them to. If you do, those who resist will feel left out and unheard.
- *Don't expect instant results.* Building a readership takes time. Many church leaders expect half or more of the congregation will read the e-newsletter in the beginning. They're shocked when they realize that only 10 percent of subscribers (and not everyone subscribes) will read what you write at first. Time, patience, and a willingness to be wrong and to learn will change this.
- *Don't abandon other communication channels.* On average, you can only expect 10 percent of *subscribers* to click through and read your e-newsletter early on. Most congregations are fortunate to get 30 percent of members to subscribe initially. If you drop other communication channels right away, you're effectively cutting off 60-70 percent of your congregation. Allow the e-newsletter to blossom and work in tandem with other ways of communicating.
- *Don't ignore the tracking.* The ability to track what every reader reads, and doesn't read, over long periods is what sets e-newsletters apart from social media, the website, and print publications. If you choose to ignore it, you have effectively nullified all the positives that e-newsletters bring to a congregation.

So What Do I Use?

There are many good e-newsletter programs on the market. The oldest, and probably best known, is Constant Contact, which features robust analytics, easy design, and a full range of exceptional templates. Many other programs share the program's one drawback—it costs. Not much at first, but Constant Contact and others charge for every little feature.

MailChimp is an excellent alternative. Analytics, photos, and basic templates are all free, as are sending the emails—so long as your list doesn't exceed 2,000 people and you don't send more than 12,000 individual emails per month. Most churches will never come close to this.

Final Thoughts

E-newsletters offer a communication learning experience that no other tool can match. With careful tracking, you can learn what your congregation reacts to, improve the way you communicate with them, and test new ideas. The results? Empowered staff, a more connected congregation, and unprecedented insight into your members' lives.

About the Writer: Martin Davis owns Sacred Language Communications, formerly directed Alban's Congregational Resource Guide, and has 20 years of experience working with congregations (www.sacredlanguagecommunications.com).