Do you sign up for e-newsletters with fear and trepidation? Maybe you’ve received far too many inbox abominations filled with blaring colors and un-readable fonts. Such mailings can make recipients wish that an organization’s contact wasn’t quite so constant.

When e-newsletters are presented in a professional format, however, they’re a handy — and welcomed — way to send updates and share opportunities to get involved. Effective e-newsletters aren’t just about an image or a look; they’re about giving readers what they need to know in a clear, immediate way.

Use these tips for e-newsletters that readers will anticipate and appreciate:

- **Clarify your goals.** Think about how often to send out an e-newsletter. Consider your congregation’s size, as well as most members’ e-mail habits. Some churches find that a monthly mailing is sufficient for keeping readers in the loop, while others opt for weekly delivery.

- **Use a simple template.** Start with a one-column template. Free designs are available from services such as MailChimp, and you can edit your template in a free program such as KompoZer. If you go with two columns, don’t jam a full-length article into the narrower column. Instead, use the side column for brief information, such as a list of upcoming events.

  The header, or top image, is the first thing readers will see, so don’t underestimate its importance. You can use your website’s header or a professional stock image that you’ve modified. If you can’t make a header, find a volunteer or professional designer who can create one.

  For more affordable resources, see “A low-cost guide to creating e-newsletters” in the March 2011 issue of The Newsletter Newsletter.

- **Limit colors.** Excessive use of colors can distract and overwhelm recipients. E-newsletters work fine with black text on a white background framed by a darker color. Larger fonts make article titles stand out, and those can be black or dark colors such as navy blue or forest green. One e-newsletter, for example, uses a dark gray frame around a white background, with black text and maroon titles.

- **Stick to easy-to-read fonts.** Focus on readability, letting the most important information stand out. If you think you’ve found a unique font, you’re probably giving people a reason to not read further.

  A readable black font (such as Arial) on a white background is effective. Yellow Chiller font on a red background is not. Common fonts such as Verdana, Arial, Helvetica, Georgia, Trebuchet and Palatino Linotype are excellent for on-screen viewing.

  Choose one font for the entire newsletter text and then possibly use another one for article titles. To ensure that important information stands out, use different sizes of your main font, make text bold or use one other dark color.

- **Use strong titles.** E-newsletter readers crave details and often...
must act based on what they read. So write headlines that state key facts, stir interest and point to action steps. For example, “Potluck Coming Soon” should become “What to Bring to the August 9 Potluck” and “Children’s Ministry Volunteer Needs” should become “How You Can Help Our Children’s Ministry.”

- Keep articles brief. People tend to skip over large blocks of text when reading on a computer screen. So try to limit most articles to four or five sentences. Offer teasers of longer pieces and then provide links to the full text on your church website or blog. If a topic warrants more information, break it into bullet points. Summarizing articles takes practice but filters out unnecessary information and leads to tighter articles.

- Optimize for visual scanning. Offer clues to help readers determine which articles they need to read. Use large, bold titles and bulleted lists. Adding an extra space in between each article can also help readers quickly grasp material. Thumbnail images at the start of each article can signal where to begin, but beware the layout difficulties that come with images. Always test your e-newsletters on multiple e-mail services before hitting “send.”

- Offer next steps. Prompting people to immediate action is one advantage of e-newsletters. Because readers are trying to find out how to respond, each article should end with contact or sign-up information, ways to learn more online and so on. An effective technique is using a bold font and an e-mail address coded as a hyperlink. In other words, when readers see jan@firstanychurch.org, they can click on the address to reply directly. Another good option is to insert a small image that says “Click Here to Sign Up.”

- Encourage subscribers. To build a reader base, make it easy for people to opt into receiving your e-newsletter. For churches, this is a gray area because most members have willingly shared their e-mail addresses for communication purposes.

  Begin by importing all the e-mail addresses into a subscriber list. Then send an official e-mail using your future e-newsletter template. Mention how often you plan to send out e-newsletters and include easy instructions for unsubscribing. Also provide a link to your church’s website, which should feature a sign-up form in case people would rather receive the e-newsletter at a different address.

  To encourage more people to sign up for your e-newsletter, use Sunday morning announcements, bulletin reminders and links on your church’s Facebook page. Design pew cards to request people’s e-mail addresses and encourage worshipers to drop the cards in the offering plate.

  Above all, emphasize your e-newsletter’s value and benefits, including cost savings for the church and quicker news delivery for recipients. If your e-newsletter will become a main communication source, let people know they’ll miss out if they aren’t signed up.

  Then, when your well-planned, reader-friendly e-newsletter arrives in people’s inboxes, their first reaction will be to open and read, rather than hit “delete.”

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