

Designing a Newsletter

Residents Want to Read

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Township newsletters come in all shapes and sizes, and help to achieve many things. In their simplest form, newsletters keep your local residents informed of township activities. Additionally, they can promote your township to potential businesses, motivate volunteers, promote projects and services, and celebrate successes. And thanks to advances in technology, your township can now produce a newsletter using the most basic desktop publishing and word processing software.

Designing—or redesigning—your township newsletter can be a challenging and exciting process. You may have volunteered to design a newsletter for your township because it sounded like fun, or you may have been assigned the task because you have prior layout experience. No matter how the project fell into your lap, as the designer you will face a myriad of choices—fonts, graphics, color schemes, page sizes, column sizes, paper—and you must combine these elements to produce a design that reflects the personality of your township. This article explains the benefits of producing a township newsletter, and walks you through the basics of newsletter design.

Why Produce a Newsletter?

The township board is authorized by MCL 41.110c to appropriate and expend funds to maintain and circulate a publication to disseminate information regarding activities and functions. The act also allows the board to advertise the agricultural, industrial, commercial, educational or recreational advantages of the township and to promote tourism. While Michigan law allows it, why should a township undertake the work involved in distributing a newsletter?

You may find your township growing, with people moving in from urban areas and expecting the same services they received in the city. Or, you may find that state budget cuts are forcing your township to eliminate some of the services you provide. A township newsletter is an excellent opportunity to connect with your residents and explain exactly what is going on. It's also the easiest way to reach busy residents who can't make it to each township meeting or those people who think local government doesn't do anything for them.

Jeanie Neve, **Cascade Charter Township** (Kent Co.) deputy clerk, says their township newsletter, *Cascade Connections*, is one way the township can go the

extra mile for its citizens. “We feel communication is the number one priority toward better local government,” she said. “Publishing a newsletter helps our township build a better relationship with our citizens.”

In 1999, **Alpine Township** (Kent Co.) conducted a phone survey of 600 residents. One of the questions asked was the best way for the township to communicate with its residents. “Almost half noted that our township newsletter was their primary source of information,” said Supervisor **Cindy Heinbeck**. “We have taken that to heart.”

Added **Julie Coleman**, administrative assistant at **DeWitt Charter Township** (Clinton Co.), “Our quarterly newsletter is an extremely effective tool for relaying information to all residents in the township. They enjoy reading what is happening in the township. We actually receive comments if a resident *hasn't* seen a newsletter in awhile.”

With newsletters, you're on the way to giving your residents what they're looking for—news they can use. The benefits you will gain from having an informed public will offset any expenditure from your general fund.

Understanding Your Audience and Your Message

Although the main goal of your newsletter will undoubtedly be to keep your residents informed of township happenings, don't rule out other audiences that you can reach with your newsletter. As mentioned above, a township newsletter can be an effective vehicle to reach additional readers who are interested in your township, including the municipalities that surround your community, county officials, state legislators from your area, and the list goes on.

After you have determined the needs and interests of the audience with whom you want to communicate, ask yourself "what is the message I am trying to communicate?" If you can answer this question, you're well on your way to designing a newsletter with a strong message. Remember, the newsletters with the most impact or that create a lasting impression are those with which the reader makes a personal connection. Most of your residents lead busy lives and may quickly pick up your newsletter while going through a pile of mail. They may look at your newsletter, thinking "What's in it for me?" The message in your newsletter needs to have staying power in order to grab their attention—and keep it.

Also, don't assume your reader knows all about the functions of your township. According to **Thomas Township** (Saginaw Co.) Deputy Clerk **Stephanie Beyersdorf**, "It's a mistake to assume that everyone knows exactly what their township government can do for them. We use our newsletter to try to explain what we do for them, and sometimes, to let them know when an issue, such as road maintenance, is out of our control."

Coming Up with Ideas

Something every newsletter editor faces is the pressure of filling up the pages with news your readers can use. A simple start is to approach your fellow board members, township department heads, and board and commission members—everyone from public safety and assessing to planning and zoning and the library—to write articles for the newsletter.

Treasurer **Angela Weiss** puts together **Grand Rapids Charter Township's** (Kent Co.) quarterly newsletter, *Township in Touch*. She noted, "Each department writes and edits its own article because they have the most knowledge on their department's issues—which ensures accuracy of information."

Added Beyersdorf, who produces the township's quarterly newsletter *Thomas Township Today*, "We try to include general interest articles about different issues and situations, not just current events in each department."

There are very few legal constraints on what information can be included in a township newsletter. It is important to note that Michigan statutes prohibit the use of township funds to promote a position on an election, ballot proposal or millage proposal. You may discuss an election issue in a newsletter, but the article must

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All the News That's Fit to Print!

Here's a list of ideas that can be included in your newsletter:

- ✍ A directory of township officials and employees
- ✍ Office location, hours and phone numbers
- ✍ The addresses and phone numbers of local, state and federal legislators
- ✍ A directory of county offices and officials
- ✍ A profile, photo and job description of a township official, employee or resident
- ✍ Recycling center or rubbish pickup information
- ✍ Community calendar
- ✍ Community achievements
- ✍ "Where Your Tax Dollars Go"
- ✍ A township map
- ✍ Thank you messages to volunteers or donors
- ✍ Topics of public interest such as composting, fire safety, recycling or household toxic chemical disposal
- ✍ Feature articles on new area businesses
- ✍ Senior center news
- ✍ Local attractions or historical sites
- ✍ "Did You Know?" quiz on township size, population or history
- ✍ Tax collection information
- ✍ Election and voter registration information
- ✍ Ordinance information
- ✍ Building inspection and permit information
- ✍ Include a message from the supervisor, clerk, treasurer or township librarian in each issue
- ✍ Public service announcements
- ✍ Survey for suggestions on improving the newsletter or article ideas
- ✍ Fire department and emergency services news
- ✍ Board appointments
- ✍ A list of township committee members
- ✍ 9-1-1 news
- ✍ Information on community residents, such as awards received and special honors
- ✍ Cemetery rules and regulations
- ✍ Public works issues, such as road repairs or capital improvement projects
- ✍ Recreation programs
- ✍ Township budget information

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stick to factual, unbiased information. For a legal opinion on what can and cannot be included in a township newsletter, see below.

As your newsletter becomes more well-known, people may begin approaching you with article ideas—and you may even find your newsletter overflowing with information. Heinbeck said, “I usually wonder as I start writing a newsletter if I should have an eight or 12-page one. Will I have enough information? Then a few days later, I am usually wondering what I will need to cut back on, or make smaller print and borders.”

For a list of additional ideas on what to include in a township newsletter, refer to page 13.

Planning Ahead Can Save Time

Before you go any further in the planning process, gather as much information possible about the scope and look of

your newsletter. This will help you use your time wisely in case you were planning on designing an eight-page, full-color newsletter but the township’s budget only allows for a four-page, one-color newsletter.

You should consider the quantity to be printed, paper type, quality, weight, color and size, as well as any extras such as collating, stapling and folding. You should also give some thought as to how the newsletter will be processed before it is distributed. Will you copy it in-house, fold it and stuff it into an envelope yourself? Or can the township afford to send the layout to a printer who will print, fold and ship it off to a mailing house? All of these decisions will impact the final cost and determine how often your township can afford to send the newsletter out.

Since most board members may not know all of the factors involved in producing a township newsletter, it might be

best to price all of the elements out and present them to the board. Doing this work beforehand will allow the board to know almost exactly what elements the township can afford to outsource, and which may have to be done in-house. It is important to get buy-in from all members of the board, since they are ultimately responsible for the finished project.

The board should also consider adopting policies on advertising for the newsletter and determine who will be allowed to submit articles for publication. “Our newsletter is a general fund expenditure because communication is a high priority in our township,” said Heinbeck, who compiles Alpine Township’s bi-monthly newsletter, the *Alpine Harvester*. “At one time we considered allowing advertising, but we decided it wasn’t worth the hassle since we do the layout ourselves and because we didn’t want to be beholden to any one person or group.”

MTA Legal Opinion

What Can and Cannot be Published in a Township Newsletter?

Michigan statutory law allows a township to expend money to prepare and circulate a newsletter pursuant to MCL 41.110c. In relevant part, MCL 41.110c provides that: “The township board may appropriate money or expend funds for all of the following purposes: ... (d) To maintain and circulate a publication to disseminate information regarding township improvements, activities and functions.”

This statutory language sets the parameters of a township’s authority to have a newsletter, and what constitutes information regarding township improvements, activities and functions should be liberally construed in favor of the township pursuant to the Michigan Constitution of 1963 (Art. VII, Sec. 34). The township newsletter could contain information regarding water and sewer projects, street improvements and sidewalks, public building improvements, recreational programs, police and fire services, recycling and trash pick-up, township meeting dates and times, township committees, and other similar information. Overall, it appears that a township newsletter is a fairly safe endeavor as many townships have a newsletter and our research found no cases challenging the contents of a township newsletter.

Restrictions Do Apply

There is, however, one major pitfall to be avoided in publishing a township newsletter. While a township may expend funds on a newsletter, pursuant to the above-referenced statute, a township **may not** expend public funds to influence the outcome of an election or ballot proposal. In regard to this restriction, a township could provide unbiased information in a newsletter which would be relevant in helping township residents reach an informed judgment on a local election or ballot proposal. For example, the township could place the actual ballot language in a newsletter to better inform its residents.

This restriction on the expenditure of public funds establishes a fairly bright line, and it should not be too much trouble for the township to avoid crossing this line, as long as it keeps in mind that the contents of the newsletter should not reflect any intent to influence an election or ballot proposal.

A Good First Impression

A township newsletter is not an undertaking to be taken lightly. Always remember that every communication from your township is a communication of your image. A township newsletter is *not* “just a newsletter.” Whether published monthly, bi-monthly or quarterly, the impression it presents speaks volumes to your residents.

The initial graphic design of your newsletter should cause readers to believe that it contains something that they can use. A strong, positive first impression will keep readers interested and engaged in the rest of the document. As experts in the field know, good design takes time. That is why you should spend a great deal of time thinking about and designing the first issue.

Once you know the basic framework of time, space and budget that you have to work with, you can begin creating a basic overall design. Try not to get overwhelmed by the large task ahead of you. Try to look at designing your newsletter like putting together a puzzle. The various parts need to fit together in harmony. Remember that effective design consciously and consistently make a connection to the key message. Read on for tips that explain the “pieces” you need to create the whole picture.

Creating Eye-catching Design

The first principle in making your newsletter look professional is to keep each page uncluttered and appealing to the eye in order to get your message across. Choose the paper color with care. Pale, neutral shades such as buff, off-white, light blue or green are easier on the eye than white. Use only one color for each issue, and avoid bright-colored stock except for special uses. Some colors may actually repel readers—tests show mustard-colored stock is the worst “turnoff” with purple-red shades second.

Ink should always be very dark—black, dark brown or navy blue. At 100 percent, a navy blue will look almost black, providing easy-to-read body text; at lesser

percentages (for example, 10 or 50 percent), navy blue prints light blue. Because the 100 percent color is so dark, using percentage “screens” throughout the interior for text boxes and heading text provides a two-color feel with an economical single-color print. This can be an excellent option if you are working with a limited budget.

For a clean, uncluttered look, stick with the same typeface throughout the newsletter. Typeface should be chosen for readability. For large amounts of body copy, type with “serifs” (crossbars) are more readable than sans serif or script type (see diagram at right). The body copy should be no smaller than 10 point, and headlines should contain both upper and lower case letters for readability. Be sure to consider the age of your readers in determining the size of your font. If you have a great deal of senior citizens in your township, a 10 point font may be too small for them to read comfortably.

Page Layout

You don’t want your newsletter to have a crammed look, so remember to be generous with your space. The purpose of your newsletter is to communicate, not crowd as much information as possible on a page.

Good design begins with a good format. Most designers work with 8½ x 11-inch paper because it’s standard—the paper is readily available, and it fits into a file folder, three-ring binder and #10 envelope.

Once paper size is decided, you will need to consider how the text will look on the page. Columns are a fundamental part of this look as they organize text and visuals. Depending on the paper you have chosen, you can have up to seven columns. Two to three columns are standard on 8½ x 11-inch paper. As the number of columns on the page increases, the columns get narrower and the lines get shorter. Column width has a profound impact on readability; columns that are too narrow can be difficult to read, as the

reader’s eyes have to shift to the next line more often. On the other hand, wider columns make it more difficult for a reader’s eyes to make a smooth transition from the end of one line to the beginning of the next without getting lost.

In choosing the right amount of columns for your newsletter, pay particular attention to the “white space” between the columns. White space gives the reader’s eyes a chance to rest and makes the page more readable.



Text alignment can also affect readability. There are four basic types of alignment: justified, flush left with a ragged right margin, flush right

with a ragged left margin and centered. Studies have found flush left with a ragged right margin to be the easiest to read.

You may prefer the more formal look of justified alignment, which is used by most newspapers, books and magazines, including the *Michigan Township News (MTN)*. Because of the uniform line length, justified columns lack the white space created with ragged alignment and tend to darken the page. In addition, justified type is sometimes considered more difficult to read because more words are hyphenated and large gaps can appear between words. Whichever alignment you choose is up to you, but be sure to use it consistently throughout each issue.

Announce Your Newsletter’s Arrival in Style

The header on your newsletter, or “nameplate,” contains the name of the publication. You can also include additional information in this area such as the date, volume or issue, and a subtitle that identifies your target audience. For an example, check out *MTN*’s nameplate on the cover. Because your nameplate announces your township’s identity, be sure to think about the current image of your township. If you already have a township logo and are satisfied with the image it projects, try to incorporate it into the nameplate.

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As one of the newsletter's most important features, the nameplate not only identifies your newsletter and reinforces its purpose, it should also provide important issue-to-issue unity. It is very important to use the same nameplate in every issue as it is the first thing that captures the reader's eye and provides immediate visual identification of your newsletter. Your newsletter should present a consistent image that immediately differentiates it from other newsletters.

For example, Alpine Township's *Alpine Harvester* incorporates the name of the township and small pine trees into the creatively designed nameplate. A catchy subtitle, "A Crop of News and Views," is also featured, as are the date, township Web site address and volume number.

No matter what the nameplate looks like, be sure to tell readers who you are. *Thomas Township Today*, *Nelson Township News*, *The Gaines Charter Township Community Bulletin* and *The Convis Crier* are just a few creative ways to work the township name into the newsletter's nameplate. The ability to create a distinctive nameplate is enhanced by the ability to use a graphics program to combine text and graphics.

Using Graphics to Drive Your Message Home

Artwork in a newsletter can help to express ideas, convey a mood or image, and transmit information. Good graphics can make a newsletter more attractive and readable, and help reinforce your

Newsletter Checklist

Ask yourself these questions after you've completed the first draft of your newsletter. They will help you spot problem areas where you can direct your attention.

- Is your newsletter's nameplate distinctive? Does it identify your township?
- Are volume numbers, issue numbers and dates clearly identified?
- Do headlines compete with the nameplate or with each other?
- Will the reader know how to contact the township if he or she has questions or concerns? Is the address and phone number easy to find?
- If the newsletter is more than two pages, is there a table of contents to direct the reader's attention inside?
- Are the articles clearly separated from each other?
- Will it be possible to use the basic design for this newsletter in future issues?

message. It also helps break up blocks of print which otherwise might seem too heavy.

Copyright-free and camera-ready artwork is available from various "clipart" books. These books may be found in most libraries listed under art or advertising. They contain hundreds of art examples that are ready to use. You can also visit your local supply store, or go online, to find out what's available.

Remember to choose appropriate graphics; don't just put something in to fill up the page. White space helps to keep pages uncluttered, frames text and provides a more balanced look. Borders, boxes and rules should be used sparingly and to highlight important information. Graphics

should lead the reader's eye into the page and the copy, rather than off the page.

A Word about Headlines

Graphics aren't the only element to use to draw readers' attention. Headlines play a vital role by inviting the reader to become involved. Headlines will be more effective if they are clearly differentiated from the rest of the text. A larger type size is a good start, and additional emphasis can be added by setting them in a different typeface. For example, headlines set in sans serif type are often used with text set in a serif typeface.

If you don't want to switch typefaces for your headline, setting the text in a larger size and/or heavier weight will often provide sufficient contrast. Keep in mind that the greater the size difference between the headline and the text, the easier it is for readers to identify and read the headlines.

Try to limit headlines to three lines; headlines of four or more lines can look



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too wordy and complex to read at a glance. Also, avoid centering headlines that contain more than two lines. Long centered headlines slow down readers because they have to search for the beginning of each line. Flush-left headlines, on the other hand, let readers move directly down to the first words of the following paragraph.

Exercising Restraint

Restraint is probably the most difficult design principle to apply in a consistent manner. That's because desktop publishing presents you with unlimited options and tremendous power. With so much power just a mouse-click away, it's easy to forget that simplicity in design is a virtue. Overuse of graphic elements can result in a cluttered look that may turn off readers.

Remember that emphasis can be effective only within a stable framework. If every item on the page is clamoring for the reader's attention, the result will be

that nothing stands out. Excessive use of emphasis may weaken a newsletter to the point of losing all impact.

Attention to Detail

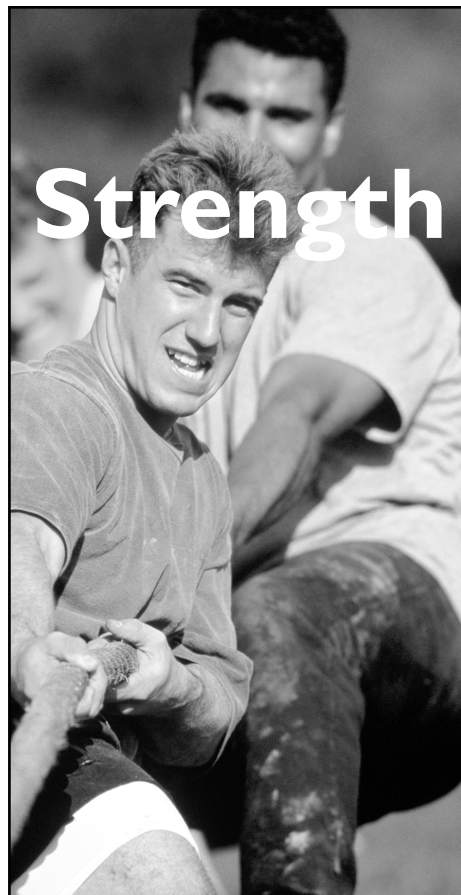
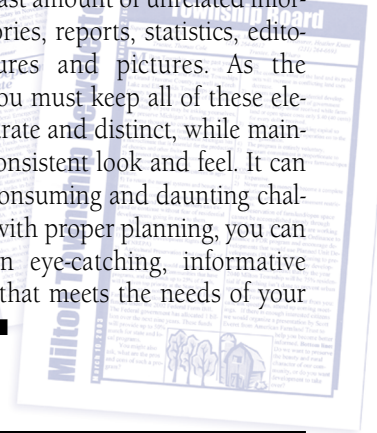
Just when you think you're almost done ... take another look. The old maxim holds true: The devil *is* in the details. The smallest detail can sabotage the appearance of your newsletter. Since you've been staring at your publication for hours—possibly days—have someone else take a look for misspellings, proper grammar usage and any other detail that seems out of place. Don't count on spell check to catch correctly spelled, but misused, words. Also, be sure to check that if the reader is directed to an article continued on page two, that the article actually continues on page two, *not* page four.

Also, double-check consistency in design elements like page numbering and justification. Since the township

board is ultimately responsible for the publication, it may be wise to have each board member review the newsletter prior to publication. For a checklist of key items, turn to page 16.

You're On Your Way!

Publishing a township newsletter may seem like a lot to handle, but if you keep your audience and your message firmly in mind while developing your design, you'll find that most of the concerns take care of themselves. Newsletters can often contain a vast amount of unrelated information—stories, reports, statistics, editorials, features and pictures. As the designer, you must keep all of these elements separate and distinct, while maintaining a consistent look and feel. It can be a time-consuming and daunting challenge, but with proper planning, you can produce an eye-catching, informative newsletter that meets the needs of your residents. ■



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