Library Newsletters: Best Practices

A GUIDE TO
Connecting With Your Community Through Newsletters

NoveList

Newsletters are an effective way to make a meaningful connection with your library community. Even better — it's easy and convenient for them, as well as for you.

How to Create a Good e-Newsletter

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SIGN ME UP **4**

YOUR LIBRARY NAME
YOUR ADDRESS, ANYTOWN, USA | 000-000-0000 | www.library.com

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Anatomy of a Good e-Newsletter

1 Subject line – maximum 50 characters

2 Make it eye catching: Use a big image at the top to grab eyeballs! (And make sure the image is on brand and relevant.)

3 Keep the text short to allow your subscribers to skim & scan

4 CTA: Have a clear and concise call to action. What is it that you want your readers to do?

5 Signature/footer – this is a great place to have your library's branding

For more than a decade, NoveList has provided NextReads, an award-winning newsletter service for libraries; our LibraryAware newsletters are popular ways to keep patrons up to date on library programs and services.

These tips come from libraries big and small, urban and rural, in the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. We're sharing them in the hope that they will help you engage seniors, parents of young children, readers, job hunters — whomever you're trying to reach.

Keep these five steps in mind as you plan your newsletter:

1 Determine Your Goals

2 Gather Intelligence

3 Set up for Success

4 Establish Your Brand

5 Analyze Your Results

1. Determine Your Goals

What are your goals? What will make this an effective and successful newsletter? It's hard to know if your newsletter is working for your library if you've not yet determined what success looks like.

The first place to look for goals for your newsletter is your library's strategic plan. Your strategic plan probably has goals such as "support literacy in our community;" "encourage reading;" "increase attendance at programming;" "reach more adults without children," etc.

A newsletter can support all of these goals.

Don't have a strategic plan or currently in the process of creating a new one? You can develop goals for whatever you want to accomplish — including increasing circulation, higher attendance at book clubs, increasing cardholders, updating your community about new building projects, etc. — and consider how a regular newsletter will help support these goals.

Subject Line Best Practices:

Short, sweet, and to the point:

Email subject lines should communicate the content of the email. A tall order? Yes! But it should be clear what this email is before your patrons open it.

A few successful subject lines:

- Celebrate Women's History & Teen Tech!
- Books in the National Media: July 2021
- New Arrivals: July 2021
- Back to School: 4 Online Resources for Homework Help
- Monthly Newsletter: Artsy Affairs to Zombie Scares

Numbers get results:
Numbers in subject lines draw attention more than a descriptions do.

Questions do the trick, too:
Leading with a question that makes your readers think or stirs emotions will help open emails.

Avoid words that trigger spam filters:
Words like "free" or even "money" could potentially send your email to spam. Familiarize yourself with words and phrases that are likely to cause these triggers.

2. Set up for Success

☑ **How much time can you commit to your newsletter?** Before beginning your newsletter is a good time to ask yourself practical questions about the time you can dedicate to this newsletter. How often will you need to send out your newsletter? Are you creating a weekly programming newsletter? A monthly reading recommendations newsletter? Or perhaps a quarterly update on how various building projects are going?

☑ **Is your newsletter accessible?** Reaching subscribers includes creating emails that are accessible to everyone. This means considering best practices such as text size and color, using proper alt text for images, and meaningful link text. Include a plain-text version for subscribers who prefer this format.

☑ **Where will the content come from?** Knowing how often you plan to distribute and whether it will be an individual or group effort will help you evaluate how easy it will be to create content for your newsletter. If, for example, your library has the resources to offer storytimes every week, but not other children's programs, perhaps a monthly programming newsletter is a better option than a weekly one. If the building project is going gangbusters your community will want to see inspiring images and updates every month rather than quarterly.

☑ **Are you compliant?** Sending email requires knowledge and understanding of local and applicable email marketing laws: CAN-SPAM in the U.S., CASL in Canada, GDPR in Europe, ACMA in Australia, and EUMA in New Zealand. Familiarize yourself with these laws and stay compliant.

Three Steps to a Better CTA:

A "call-to-action" or CTA is a prompt in your email that asks your subscribers to take a next step. It is indicated by a line of text or image that instructs the next action to take and is often hyperlinked. "Learn more" is an example of a common CTA.

»» **Review these three steps as you think about the actions you might want your subscribers to take when reading your newsletter:**

1. **Consider the placement:** Is the CTA in a prominent spot in the email? Is there an image or graphic to draw attention?

2. **Use exciting language:** "Click here" may be the most common example that we all recognize, but it's no longer very exciting or effective. Change up the language when you can. If you're promoting an event, instead of "Register here" try something like "Sign me up!"

3. **Use the right colors:** What will stand out and draw attention but also look visually pleasing within your email and alongside your library's branding? Consider accessibility; backgrounds and text with high contrast are more easily seen by those with impaired vision.
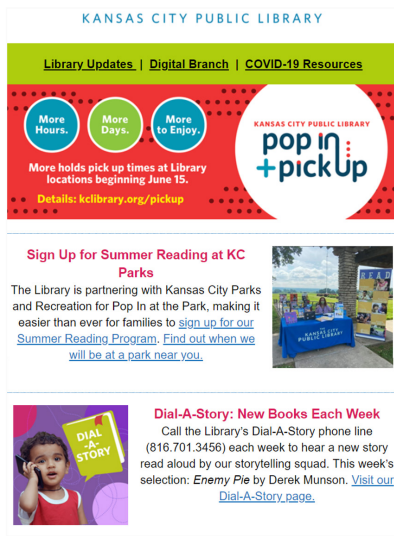
3. Gather Intelligence
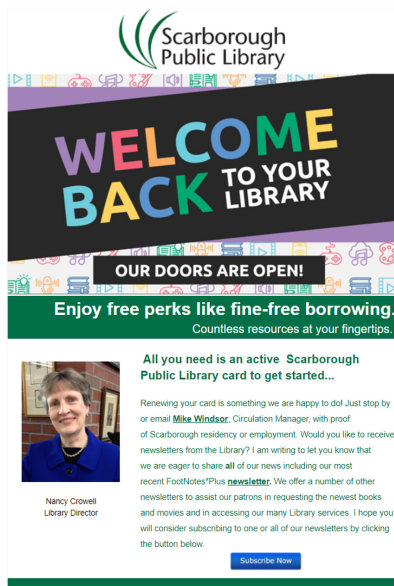
If you're already doing a newsletter, **identify what is and isn't working**. Ask your staff what they like about the newsletter. Consider a brief subscriber survey. Check open and click rates. Track what kind of links people are clicking. Evaluate if the tone of your newsletter matches the images you include and the audience you're trying to reach.

Identify the audience(s) you WANT to reach. If this is your first newsletter, you might want to start small. An excellent place to start is with an audience your library already has success reaching — think parents of young kids (storytimes, picture book collections, craft programs, etc.). Another way to determine your target audience is to go back to your goals and your strategic plan. Does your strategic plan include career guidance? Then job seekers would be an excellent target audience to identify. Do you have a growing number of entrepreneurs in your community? How will you reach them?

Did you know that the Library District provides free training, resources, career guidance, and small business support? We offer free access to computers and laptops, WiFi, printing, plus career success services, and online learning as well as thousands of skill-building resources to check out from our collection. Discover more about everything we offer here (en Español). Get started today!

Determine your audience segments. Asking yourself lots of questions about the people who make up your target audience will help you hone in on how to appeal to their needs. What are their interests? When are they likely to come to the library? What library resources do they like to use? You can get ideas from the private sector as well by looking at the brands and companies that might interest your audience. For example, if you're targeting a younger audience interested in subscription services, take a look at ads and emails for subscription services and incorporate similar designs, features, and language.

"We would definitely recommend other libraries have a go at making e-newsletters based on in-house book clubs. Once set up, the templates are super easy to use, and equally easy to distribute. The customers' recommendations then go further than just that session — they are shared to other like-minded readers, encouraging a much wider audience to expand their reading tastes."
SARAH JETHWA, TECHNOLOGY SUPPORT LIBRARIAN, HAMILTON CITY LIBRARIES, HAMILTON, NEW ZEALAND

4. Establish Your Brand

Your target audience and your goals will be the basis for helping you understand the tone of your email and the designs you include.

Branding: Consistency is key. When your community receives a communication from you, it should be recognizable and consistent. Is your logo included in the header or footer? Does the footer have key contact information? Is the color palette of your communication consistent with your website and branding guidelines?

Style: Is your audience looking for serious information or something a bit lighter? Parents of young children looking for programming and picture books will probably enjoy bright colors and illustrations, while job seekers will be looking for a design that includes more business-like images and text.

Tone: Will your audience connect with the tone? Emojis and memes can lighten up a newsletter, but your seniors may not appreciate the jokes. Similarly, references to "Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without" may be lost on a younger generation.

> One thing to keep in mind is to KEEP IT PERSONAL. It's a letter from you to a member of your community. Above all, don't forget where this whole thing started: **Connecting with your community.**

5. Analyze Your Results

The average open rate for nonprofits and educational sectors is roughly 21-24%. If your open rates are in that range, you are doing well. If they are higher than that, you're doing awesome!

Industry	Open Rate	CTR	Unsubscribe Rate	Bounce Rate
Education & Training	21.80%	2.48%	.20%	.37%
Entertainment and Events	20.41%	2.19%	.28%	.32%
Government	26.52%	3.65%	.13%	.34%
Nonprofit	24.11%	2.57%	.20%	.35%

LinchpinSEO: https://linchpinseo.com/email-marketing-benchmarks-industry/

Don't get *too* stuck on the numbers.

Though these might be helpful benchmarks and will perhaps help you pinpoint a long-term goal for metrics, don't get too hung up on the numbers. For now, focus on trends over time. Are you building your subscriber list? Is your unsubscribe rate low? Are you seeing increased attendance at programs promoted in your newsletter? Think back to the goals you determined for yourself at step one. Are you meeting or even exceeding those goals?

Glossary of Email Metrics	
Open Rate	Percentage of recipients that opened the email. This shows awareness of your email and interest in what you have to share.
Click Through Rate or CTR	Percentage of recipients that clicked on any link in your email. This shows engagement because an action was taken to learn more.
Unsubscribe Rate	Percentage of recipients who unsubscribed from the email message. This tells you who is not interested in your message. A few unsubscribes is normal; watch for trends over time. If this figure increases dramatically, it's time to assess whether your message is right for your audience.
Bounce Rate	Percentage of email addresses in subscriber lists that were returned by the recipient mail server. If this number is high, check to see if the majority of email domains are the same. That could indicate an issue with that provider. Or, you might need to scrub your list of incorrect or old emails.
A/B Testing	A method of comparing two versions of something (i.e., an email) against each other to determine which one performs better. Only one variable, such as a subject line, should be tested at a time.

5. Analyze Your Results (cont.)

If you've been at this for some time and are still seeing low numbers, perhaps it's time to analyze what is working and what is not. Some questions to ask yourself as you're reviewing your content, design, and voice:

- Is your newsletter **interesting**? Be honest with yourself — how's the writing? Could you make it better? Are your images eye-catching and relevant? Are your readers engaging with the emails? What kinds of links get the highest click rates, and which get the lowest? For example, you may find that you get high click rates on links to books in your collection versus links to databases? Knowing what links are clicked most often can help you make editorial decisions over time.

- Is your email providing **valuable** information subscribers can't easily find anywhere else? Is the information you're providing solving a problem? Or are you telling them the same thing every week?

- Is your newsletter **concise**? It's tempting to include all your information in the newsletter rather than keeping text brief and linking to places with further details such as blog posts, your website, and programming calendars, but all that makes newsletters long FAST. Keep your newsletters short and sweet and let your readers click to learn more if they want.

Connecting with your community today means bringing the information to them, wherever they are — at home, in a waiting room, at the ballpark — anywhere their mobile device will take them. Newsletters can serve as an essential outreach effort in new and effective ways.

Want to see more newsletters we love?
Go to http://bit.ly/NewslettersWeLove

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> "Newsletters are an easy and effective way for us to reach key audiences, like our Square One Small Business Services newsletter. We can target our message to a specific mailing list to promote the business resources, programs, and one-on-one service local entrepreneurs need — and might not know that our library provides."
>
> **TOMMY HARDIN**
> **ONLINE MARKETING COORDINATOR,**
> **MID-CONTINENT PUBLIC LIBRARY**

Eight Proven Ideas for Growing Your Subscriber List:

1 Make sure staff knows about the newsletter and get them signed up! They're patrons, too, and should be interested in what's happening at their library.

2 Ask people to subscribe when they get their library card

" "...we've added a checkbox on our library card application. That way customers can indicate they want to receive library emails. For our welcome email, we sent 24,280 emails; 78 people opted out. We got zero complaints and a handful of compliments."
**RHONDA MASSIE, BLOOMINGTON PUBLIC LIBRARY**

3 Sign up people at events

4 Mention your newsletter at programs ("To find out about programs like this, be sure to add your name and email address to our newsletter list.")

5 Add an opt-in link to your library's website

6 Set up a table near the checkout where people can sign up on the spot

7 Create a poster or sign letting patrons know about the newsletter and where they can subscribe

8 Post a message on social media about your newsletter with a link to your opt-in page
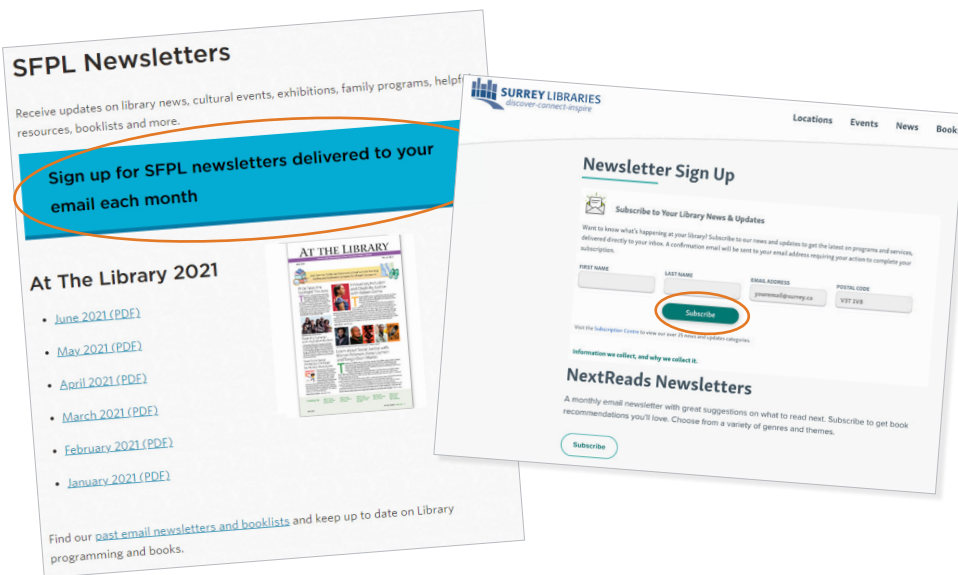
" "We received positive feedback from patrons thanking us for the hard work we do informing them of library resources."

**CARLA SARRATT
NEW HANOVER COUNTY
PUBLIC LIBRARY**
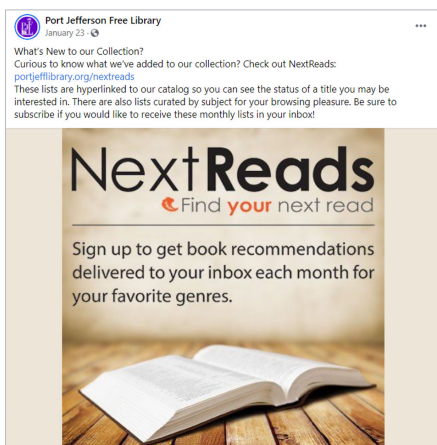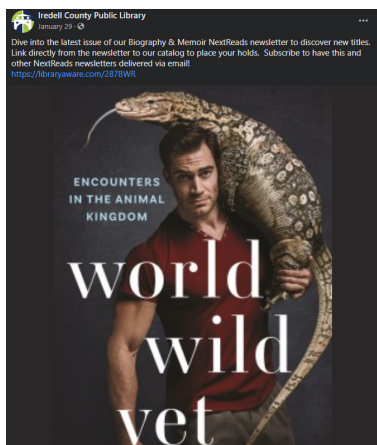
As you put these tips to use, the most important thing to keep in mind is that the way people engage with their community, specifically the library, is different from how they might engage with a store or a product. People *want* to hear from their library! Think about the crucial resources and services you provide. Consider the parent who brings their child to storytime. Consider the job seeker brushing up on skills. Consider the student seeking homework help. Consider the entrepreneur creating a new business in your community. How will you connect with them? No matter who you're serving, these best practices will help you reach more of them more effectively, keeping them interested and engaged in what the library offers, even if they can't always step inside your doors.

Ready to try newsletters to connect with your community?

LibraryAware offers an easy way for libraries to engage cardholders through email as well as social media, event flyers, bookmarks and more. We created LibraryAware especially for libraries, so you'll find thousands of library-specific templates and graphics. It also includes unlimited users and subscribers to meet your growing needs. To see a demo or get a quote visit us at www.ebsco.com/novelist.
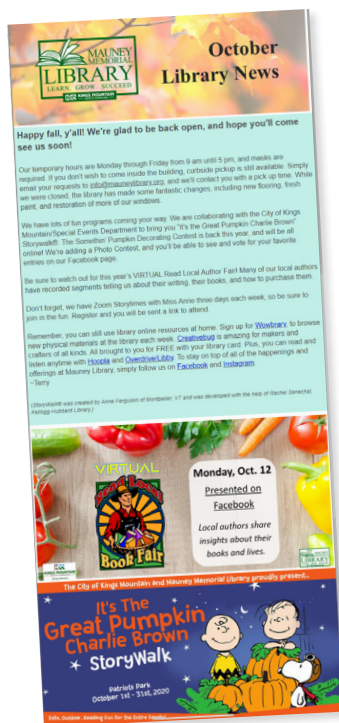
"Using LibraryAware E-blasts, our library is able to reach over 60% of our city's population, every month. Many library members are too busy to enter the building, preferring to use our electronic services, so this is a great way to retain them as users, and help them feel connected and valued. Program attendance has increased, as well. Our newsletter has the same basic form, so it is very easy to open last month's newsletter, save as the current month, then switch out images, text, and links."
TERRY BIVENS, MAUNEY MEMORIAL LIBRARY

About NoveList

NoveList is dedicated to transforming lives through reading. By helping libraries help readers, NoveList empowers libraries to engage and inspire their communities. NoveList has been helping readers find their next favorite book for more than 25 years and continues to develop innovative solutions for connecting readers, books, and libraries. As a division of EBSCO Information Services, NoveList specializes in readers' advisory tools for libraries that include book discovery, catalog enrichment, and outreach.