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Promoting Your School Library's Services with an E-mail Newsletter

Roxanne Myers Spencer

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In this age of competing services and resources, school libraries constantly look for ways to promote their services and engender excitement among students. From book fairs to literature circles to guest lecturers, the evolving school library media center must continually showcase its services. Librarians have often been hesitant to promote their services, but necessity has forced us all to become more marketing oriented. Bush and Kwielford explain this seeming reticence among teacher-librarians:

Teacher-librarians are often their own worst enemies in the marketing department. When we think of marketing, our service-oriented hackles are raised as we consider ourselves to be above the marketing mindset. We do good work, we know that it has lasting value, that it benefits our schools, and we do not see the need to make a nuisance of ourselves getting the point across.¹

The library newsletter offers one inexpensive, non-aggressive, but effective way to reach out to fellow teachers, administrators, and students and parents. Baule and Bertani recommend developing a library newsletter because it will “remind readers of your programs and the fact that you are a vital, integral member of the educational community.”²

To keep costs down (and possibly save a few reams of precious paper!), consider developing a

library e-mail newsletter, rather than a print format. Wilson considers e-mail a simple but powerful tool:

Simple tools and techniques available in e-mail software offer just one more way of connecting customers with the library and its services and collections. The universal acceptance of e-mail has enabled librarians to use it as not only as a simple way to communicate, but also as a powerful, robust reference and promotional tool.³

Benefits of an E-mail Newsletter

E-mail newsletters may require time, effort, and planning, but cost very little in materials. Reach a large audience without large paper, printing, or mailing expenses, and use an e-mail newsletter to:

- Alert members of the school community to new materials, special programs and events, and guest speakers
- Promote library services and collections inexpensively to a large group
- Send time-sensitive information, which is delivered immediately
- Raise the profile of the library media center within the school, governing district, and local community.

¹Bush, Gail and Merrilee Andersen Kwielford. 2001. “Marketing Reflections: Advocacy in Action.” *Teacher-Librarian* 28 (5) (June): n.p. http://www.teacherlibrarian.com/timag/v_28/v_28_5_feature.html

²Baule, Steven M. and Laura Blair Bertani. 2000. “How to Gain Support from Your Board and Administration: Marketing 101 for Your Library Media Program.” *Book Report* 19 (3) (November-December): 47-9. <http://hwwilson-web.com>

³Wilson, A. Paula. 2004. “Connecting Customers with Collections Using E-mail.” *Public Libraries* 43 (5) (September-October): 273-4. <http://hwwilson-web.com>

- Encourage participation by fellow teachers, who can work collaboratively with the school media specialist on developing and promoting lesson and unit plans
- Provide an opportunity to engage students, who can contribute reviews of their favorite books, movies, websites, or other school-related electronic resources
- Improve technology and literacy skills in the design, conception, and writing of each issue

Considerations in Developing an E-mail Newsletter

Various issues to consider in putting together an e-newsletter are:

Formatting: Differences in e-mail software programs and computer platforms affect how the newsletter looks to each recipient. Unusual fonts and special graphics may not translate as intended to all recipients.

Distribution: Allotted bandwidth per document and security settings for attachments vary from school to school. Protocols for including attachments and size requirements of documents allowed through individual e-mail servers must be considered when developing the newsletter.

Guidelines for Producing an E-mail Newsletter

Design and content are the meat and potatoes of any newsletter, and e-mail newsletters are no exception. Acceptable formats for ease of delivery across programs and platforms are also important considerations. Keep in mind several factors while planning the look and readability of an e-mail newsletter. Here are some ideas for making this project attractive, engaging, and easy to send.

Design and Format

The school library media center e-mail newsletter can be as simple or elaborate as time and software capabilities allow. Depending on the school's web browser, library media specialists can create an effective e-mail newsletter using Netscape Mail or Netscape Composer 4.73 or

better. Other web design programs, such as Microsoft's FrontPage or similar basic web design programs can be used, but be careful of compatibility issues. Due to differences in e-mail software, such as Microsoft Outlook, Netscape Mail Messenger, Eudora, and similar programs, the newsletter layout, fonts, and graphics may not appear the same in each browser. Consider creating an e-mail newsletter in a simple text format and add graphics to enhance the look. It is possible to key in the contents in a Microsoft Word or WordPad document, then copy and paste into the school's e-mail program. Select typefaces and sizes in Word or the e-mail program, as long as the e-mail is configured for variable-width fonts (usually set in Preferences or Options to display in html).

As a design rule of thumb, remember to differentiate between display fonts for short, but big, splashy information, such as the newsletter title and headlines, and fonts for maximum readability, for body text and captions. Alternate type fonts using serif (such as Times New Roman or Century Schoolbook) and sans-serif (such as Arial or Helvetica) fonts, but try not to use more than three to four fonts per issue. Stick to the most popular fonts for body text, such as Times New Roman, Palatino, Helvetica, or Arial) and consider saving more elaborate fonts in small graphics (or Word Art) files.

Display typefaces, colors, and graphics enhance the look of the newsletter, but take up more space. Such embellishments tend to eat up kilobytes and bandwidth. Considering using spot color and small, free clipart in GIF format to occasionally highlight the text. Use "thumbnail" images that enhance rather than dominate content. You can use Adobe Photoshop, or a similar photo-editing program to reduce the size of most graphics and to decrease the amount of pixels required for a clear, bright picture. Keep images to a minimum, and try to avoid adding graphics just to make the e-mail newsletter "pretty." Added images waste bandwidth without providing useful information.

Simple text may take up less space but is less eye-catching. If the school's e-mail program is text-based only, consider creating a simple, but

nicely designed Microsoft Word document and sending the newsletter as an e-mail attachment. While it may be loads of fun to sprinkle a newsletter with fonts such as Jokerman or Brush Script, not all fonts can be correctly displayed on all computers. Differences in software versions, printers, Mac or PC platforms, and operating systems may affect which fonts display properly. Saving the Word file in Rich Text Format (RTF) may preserve some fonts and colors across computer platforms and software versions. Another format option would be to create the newsletter as a PDF file. If the school has the full Adobe Acrobat Professional program, you can create the newsletter as a Word document and save it as a PDF file.

Format and Delivery Concerns

File size, including graphics and unusual type fonts, make a difference in how e-mail newsletters can be sent. Check with the school's technology coordinator about bandwidth restrictions and protocols regarding e-mail attachments. If the school server is already overloaded (and whose is not?), this means a large file may be rejected by the server or will take a long time to load. Does the school's e-mail server permit transmission of e-mails with attachments? Some security programs block the receipt of e-mail attachments. In some e-mail programs, graphics and fonts must be added after the basic text, and sometimes are treated by default in the e-mail program as attachments. If computer viruses and worms have bombarded the school, security settings may be high, preventing any or all attachments from being sent or opened. Should graphics are included in an HTML format newsletter, and if graphics are treated by the e-mail program as attachments, it is possible that only a plain-text version of the newsletter will be transmitted.

Content Considerations

Some may prefer to map out what to include in each library e-mail newsletter, while others may prefer a more serendipitous approach. In either case, a basic contents outline will help in planning an effective issue. Initial brainstorming sessions with students or colleagues are fun and generate lots of creative approaches. Once all the

ideas are on the table, organize them into columns or features for each issue.

When developing an e-mail newsletter, plan the publication as if it were a print newsletter or a promotional brochure. How many features, or what sorts of news items will you include? What will you incorporate about other departments? To enhance collaboration, solicit news from each subject area, but avoid overstepping library-related topics. Unless the library e-mail newsletter expands to become the school's only newsletter or an e-zine, do not include stories about intramural sports or the debate club. It is fine to endorse teams to build school spirit and show support, but leave the longer details to the school newspaper or magazine. Baule and Bertani offer these suggestions:

Focus on the services your library has to offer. Use your newsletter as a teaching tool. Provide information that teachers can use now. Plug a new technology service, feature a teacher who has used library services to create an interesting lesson, or provide tips on "where to find what" in the library. Consider quoting a student or staff member in each issue to help publicize your services. Your customers' words carry great credibility.⁴

Engage students by soliciting capsule reviews of their favorite books, movies, or websites. Collaborate with other teachers by promoting literature across the curriculum, literature circles, interdisciplinary lesson and unit plans. Promote library services such as photocopying, scanning, research and homework assistance, and special events. Do you want to include the same kind of material for each issue? Vary information by format and by using catchy subheadings.

Do not become overwhelmed by too many choices. With rising enthusiasm, you may find yourself overwhelmed with ideas on what to include and how to format it. As you experiment with type and images, be careful not to lose sight of your goal: to make the e-mail newsletter legible, well designed, enjoyable reading. Boykin and Kross

⁴Baule and Bertani, *Book Report*.

suggest following John Maxymuk's advice for developing an Internet newsletter that can create a streamlined e-mail newsletter design as well. Maxymuk's five basic recommendations are:

1. Keep the text clear and legible.
2. Give prominence to the most important features/information.
3. White space should be ample; the page shouldn't look cluttered.
4. Graphics should be large enough to be seen but not so large that they overwhelm the screen/text.
5. The mix of text, white space and graphics should be balanced, consistent and pleasing.⁵

Make this a collaborative project. As you develop the ideas and implementation of a library e-mail newsletter, you may find the project is contagious. Students and teachers may clamor to submit columns, reviews, "favorites" lists, and websites. If busy library media specialists do not have the time or inclination to develop the look of an e-mail newsletter, consider enlisting the help of students or colleagues may have talents in web or publication design. Such cooperation can help create an imaginative, user-friendly product.

If you've planned your e-mail newsletter for regular distribution, you can pick and choose appropriate contributions to each issue, without overwhelming the school server or your potential audience with too much information. Decide on three or four sections per issue, and designate some months for special issues, such as Black History Month or Women's History Month, where all selections enrich the specific theme.

Make it interactive. You can imbed hyperlinks to jump from your newsletter to other webpages, such as the school homepage, library catalog, subscription databases, and other educational websites, so your e-mail newsletter can become

an entertaining, information-rich promotional and learning resource for teachers and students. Wilson notes a basic point about electronic content: "Embedding links in your e-mail messages saves the reader the time and effort of retyping or cutting and pasting URLs to visit a recommended Web site."⁶ Consider differently-abled readers by providing not just the hotlinks, but by typing in the actual URLs for any hyperlinks included. Additionally, be sure to label any graphics with a brief description (i.e., a photograph of a recent book fair should be labeled "book fair visitors, Fall 2004" in the alt-text function as you imbed the graphic).

Perhaps the most fun, and agonizing, component of any publishing effort is finding a memorable name for the publication. Oram⁷ advocates making "your newsletter name an attention grabber" by not using the school's name in the title. He says, "Name it something that fits your style and personality"⁸. Oram chose Bookman Buddy as a descriptive and alliterative title for his school library's print newsletter.

An Example of an E-mail Newsletter: ERC Bookends

Soon after taking the position of Coordinator of Western Kentucky University Libraries' Educational Resources Center (ERC), I created an e-mail newsletter. *ERC Bookends* was developed in January 2002 to showcase the collection and services of the ERC, a campus branch library that primarily serves the College of Education and Behavioral Sciences. To create *Bookends*, I used the University's e-mail program, Netscape Mail 4.73, or Netscape Composer. My early attempts at "design" were free form, to say the least. I experimented wildly with format in early issues, incorporating a variety of fonts as attention-grabbers, with text displayed in long, colorful tables. I copied and pasted from Composer into Netscape Mail and made a few color and table-width adjustments. Recent issues are more uniform in color, type, and format. (See the index at http://llyfrgell.tripod.com/ERC_Bookends/erc_bookends_index.html for examples of the evolution of *ERC Bookends*.)

⁵Maxymuk, John. *Using Desktop Publishing to Create Newsletters, Handouts and Web Pages*, 168. New York: Neal-Schuman, 1997. Quoted in Amy W. Boykin and Andrea Kross. 1999. "Creating library newsletters on the World Wide Web at Christopher Newport University." *Virginia Libraries* 45 (2) (April/May/June): 14-15. <http://hwwilsonweb.com>

⁶Wilson, *Public Libraries*.

⁷Oram, Geoffrey. 2004. "The Bookman Buddy: A School Librarian's Secret Weapon." *LMC: Library Media Connection* 22 (5) (February): 34-5.

⁸Oram, *LMC*.

I continually refine *Bookends* to promote my library's collection and services. *Bookends* is e-mailed to all WKU faculty and staff. I also post each new issue to my online classes of graduate students in Library Media Education. Each issue is a collaborative effort: I include my staff and student workers' choices and brief annotations for fiction and nonfiction books and multimedia items from the ERC's collection. We promote bibliographic/research instruction classes; WKU Libraries' databases and research guides and other ERC services, such as the Ellison machine die-cuts, photocopiers, lamination, and reserve readings. In addition, we compile a list of new titles, staff and student selections of children's or young adult books and multimedia titles to be featured. For teacher resources, in each issue we focus on a broad education topic, such as classroom management, assessment and evaluation, lesson plans, or reading and literacy, and annotate a few relevant titles. To highlight WKU Libraries' subscription databases, I often select a popular education topic, such as reluctant readers, emotional and behavior disorders, or year-round school, which I search in a featured database, then cite a few relevant full-text articles. These brief bibliographies demonstrate, on a rotating basis, our education-related subscription databases.

From January 2002 through April 2004, I used Netscape Composer, v. 4.73, which was the university's browser and e-mail client, to create a colorful, lively e-mail newsletter. WKU has since collaborated with Mozilla to produce a more cur-

rent, customized e-mail client for faculty and staff. Size of messages sent to large groups on campus is restricted, so I use thumbnail images, and keep fonts fairly simple. I have been experimenting with Mozilla's Composer web design program, which is similar to Netscape Composer, with a few more features. For the present, I create a simpler newsletter than before (but still colorful!). I usually write the text in Microsoft Word, which I then copy and paste into a Mozilla e-mail. With a little additional formatting, and adding and tagging thumbnails (to comply with ADA requirements for webpages), I still have an attractive and informative e-mail newsletter that I send to all WKU staff and faculty.

Conclusion

The library e-mail newsletter can be part e-zine, part webpage, part blog, part news, and full-tilt promotional tool for the school library, limited only by time, skill, and bandwidth. This project promotes collaboration among fellow teachers and encourages students to become involved in a school project that builds writing and web skills. Gustafson says The Occasional Library Newsletter, which she e-mails to her "staff and a growing list of teachers and library media specialists from other schools" has become "an important communication and collaboration tool."⁹ Use your imagination to develop a vital, newsy, easy-to-navigate marketing vehicle for your school library media center. Oram asserts that "by promoting your library's services, you become a leader at your school."¹⁰

⁹Gustafson, Chris. 2004. "The Occasional Library Newsletter." LMC: *Library Media Connection* 23 (3) (November/December): 44.

¹⁰Oram, LMC.

Selected Library Newsletter Websites:

ERC Bookends: http://llyfrgell.tripod.com/ERC_Bookends/erc_bookends_index.html

Public Libraries:

Queens Borough (New York) Public Library:

<http://www.queens.lib.ny.us/email/subscribe.asp>

Prince William County (Virginia) Library:

<http://www.pwcgov.org/default.aspx?topic=040034001820001268>

Madison (Wisconsin) Public Library:

<http://www.madisonpubliclibrary.org/enewsletters.html>

School Libraries:

American School in Sao Paulo, Brazil (PDF file): <http://www.graded.br/files/libraries/newsletterq1.pdf>

Deer Lakes (Pennsylvania) Middle School:

<http://www.deerlakes.net/modules.php?name=ms&file=lnews>

Versailles (Ohio) High School (January 2002-October 2003):

<http://www.versailles.k12.oh.us/highschool/Library/Librarynews.htm>