# Newsletters:
## Using Social Indicators to Assess their Role in Your NPS Project

Newsletters have become common communication tools for many agencies and organizations. But are newsletters the best choice for every communication or education need? How can you decide if newsletters are appropriate to use in your project? The purpose of this document is to help you understand what newsletters can do, the limitations of using newsletter, and ways to determine if your newsletter is effective.

### What a Newsletter Can Do

Newsletters can serve a number of purposes, such as increasing awareness, providing basic information, or creating a sense of project continuity and commitment. It is important to remember, though, that there are few situations where a newsletter alone will accomplish a project's education goals. In situations where target audiences are motivated and have the opportunity and ability to act, a newsletter may be all that is needed[a]. However, in most NPS projects, newsletters mainly serve to support and reinforce educational messages as part of a larger multi-faceted communication and outreach effort.

### Newsletter Limitations

While newsletters can be an effective part of a project's educational strategy, they do have certain limitations. Surveys show that people tend to scan newsletters for interesting information bites or local news, and don't usually give them a thorough read. So, although effective at conveying new ideas or general concepts, they are probably not the best vehicle for technical or highly detailed information. That type of information may be better presented in a bulletin, fact sheet, or a more intensive training activity, which could be mentioned in a newsletter as a source for further information. In addition, because of production schedule constraints for newsletters, they may not be the best medium for announcing upcoming events such as field days or demonstrations. An alternative is to announce those events via a simple flyer or postcard, which can be designed, printed, and mailed or distributed in a few days.

### Is My Newsletter Working?

How can you tell if your newsletter is really doing what you intended it to do? Before launching a full-blown evaluation effort, it is important to revisit your plan and think about what you are trying to accomplish. You could start by asking yourself these questions:

- What is this newsletter supposed to accomplish?
- Are these reasonable expectations?
- Is it reaching the right audience for its purpose?
- Does it adhere to good newsletter practices (see sidebar)
- Is this newsletter contributing to an educational strategy that supports the use or adoption of practices in locations that will protect or lead to improvements in water quality?
- Are there other more effective ways to convey this information to the appropriate audience?

Answering these questions may tell you what you need to know.

***Newsletter Tips***

- Know Your Audience:
  Who are they, and what is important to them?
  Is this information they need?
- Consider the Reader's Point of View:
  Address your audiences concerns from their point of view, not yours.
- Think About How You Present Yourself:
  The tone of the newsletter should be professional yet friendly.
- Make It Look Inviting:
  Create a User-friendly design, avoid small and overly ornate fonts, and include relevant images where possible.
- Take Advantage of Existing Material:
  Use existing materials as a reference and a foundation for presenting new ideas and information.

### Evaluation of Newsletters

How do you know if your newsletter is accomplishing its purpose? Many studies have been conducted that examine whether or not recipients actually read the newsletters they receive. Garton and others (2003) report that, indeed, as many as 75% of people who are sent newsletters read them. But is this all we want to know? There is little research that discusses the adoption of behaviors as a result of reading newsletters. Duram and Brown (1999) studied participation in watershed planning activities, and found that, while 81% of watershed groups surveyed used newsletters as communication tools, only 35% perceived them to be very effective in garnering participation. In fact, six percent perceived them to be not at all effective. However, this can differ by discipline. Garton and others (2003) found a majority of parents who received newsletters about effective parenting reported applying the skills that were discussed in the newsletters. This was assessed through a four-page mail survey that was sent to newsletter recipients.

Evaluation of newsletters to determine how readers utilize the information, if at all, is key. An alternative to a mail survey of the readership is to include a postage-paid postcard in a newsletter issue. The card could address a few specific questions, such as: How often do you apply the ideas in this newsletter to your business/farm/home/etc? Do you change any of your practices as a result of the information in these newsletters? How often?

Efforts designed to determine specific impacts of newsletters should be research projects in their own right. Simple approaches, such as including a tear-off card with a newsletter for readers to return, are not likely to produce a sufficient response to provide any meaningful information about the newsletter. Phone or mailed surveys pose additional challenges, can be expensive, consume staff resources, and require special expertise.

Even well-structured research studies face challenges in generating sufficient responses to making meaningful conclusions about a newsletter's impacts. For example, one study[b] surveyed recipients of a newsletter for new parents – an audience likely to be very motivated to act on new information – and received a 43% response to their query about the first five newsletters and a 33% response to their survey about the subsequent four newsletters. Generally, response rates above 60% are necessary to account for nonresponse bias.[c] Also, as with all self-reported data, there is a possibility that respondents could over- or under-estimate their knowledge or behaviors, and although surveys generally assure confidentiality, respondents may tend toward more socially acceptable responses.

Research about behavior change as a result of reading newsletters is limited. However, one study[d] queried watershed groups regarding their use of newsletters as communication tools in watershed planning activities. While 81% of the groups surveyed used newsletters, only 35% felt them to be effective for increasing participation in their activities.

## What Are My Options?

Rather than conducting a detailed study of your newsletter to determine its impacts, you could consider these approaches:

- Conduct a self-assessment. Compare the newsletter purpose to the information and education needs of your target audience. If you don't know what those needs are, you should first focus your efforts on conducting a needs assessment.
- Include a pre-paid tear-off survey with your newsletter to assess your newsletter's success.
- Evaluate your electronic newsletter by inviting recipients to participate in a web survey.
- Include questions about your newsletter as part of a more comprehensive end-of-project evaluation effort. For example:
  - Was the newsletter a useful resource for your target audience?
  - Did the newsletter increase reader knowledge of key issues and management practices?
  - What specifically did readers learn as a result of the newsletter?
  - What specifically did readers do as a result of the newsletter?

## In Conclusion

Although newsletters are a popular and potentially useful educational device, they may not always be the best choice for conveying a particular message. As a stand-alone educational device, the newsletter provides scant benefits in most situations. If a newsletter does fit an appropriate part of an educational program, evaluating its effectiveness presents its own set of difficulties and concerns. Newsletter effectiveness is best determined as part of a comprehensive project evaluation.

By focusing on the human dimension issues of NPS projects, the Region V Social Indicator Project provides a framework for assessing how your project activities will help lead to the adoption of critical practices and behaviors for water quality.

***For More Information:***

Bivins, T. H. (1992). Fundamentals of successful newsletters: Everything you need to write, design, and publish more effective newsletters. Chicago, IL: NTC Business Books.

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101 Newsletter Answers. http://www.101newsletteranswers.com/t_ritenl.htm. Accessed 5/10/06.

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***Notes & References:***

[a] Rothschild, M.L. (1999). Carrots, Sticks, and Promises: A Conceptual Framework for the Management of Public Health and Social Issue Behaviors. Journal of Marketing, Vol. 63: 24-37.

[b] Garton, M., Hicks, K., Leatherman, M., et al. (2003). Newsletters: treasures or trash? Parenting newsletter series results in positive behavior changes. Journal of Extension, 41. Available online at www.joe.org.

[c] Dillman, D. (2000). Mail and Internet Surveys: The Tailored Design Method. 2nd Edition. John Wiley & Sons.

[d] Duram, L.A. & Brown, K.G. (1999). Assessing public participation in U.S. watershed planning initiatives. Society and Natural Resources, 12, 455-467

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