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# ONcall

ready-to-use NEWS

## The mechanics of launching your e-newsletter

Last month's issue included an article with tips for effective e-newsletters by the Bend-La Pine School District in Oregon. In "Meet your communications goals with an e-newsletter," the district shared an account of how the district uses their award-winning electronic publications to increase engagement for their targeted audiences, and why it is an important tool.

It was the "how" and "why" of digital news from an editorial content perspective. They shared how to create readable, engaging content for each of their audiences as part of their strategic communications goals. This is essential — publications are only effective if the members of your audience read them.

### You can (and should) have social media *and* e-news

If your district doesn't send e-newsletters, it might be time to look into starting one. Taking your news directly to your community, without the high cost of printing and mailing, is a great way to control your messages and build a relationship with stakeholders. An argument could be made that social media accomplishes the same goals, but there are good reasons for using both tools.

An e-newsletter can complement your social media without adding a whole new workload. You can repurpose content for social media channels, and vice versa. And you can ensure that you are communicating directly with your audience. Social media is a great tool, but you can't be sure you are reaching all of the people you need to reach.

Another benefit of adding e-news to your outreach is building a distribution list of people who are asking to receive district news — both the supporters and the curious followers. This list will be an asset that you can use when you need to build support for initiatives such as bond measures. Establishing regular communication will build trust that can help you when you need support.

### Best practices to help develop and distribute an e-newsletter

Starting a new electronic newsletter is a fairly simple process based on the same communications principles you would use for any new communication tool — consistency, brand alignment, targeting, etc.

Here are tips for launching an e-newsletter — from choosing an email marketing app to planning content to building an email newsletter list.

### Email platforms

Email marketing systems make this process fairly simple. Most have a wide variety of

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templates and allow you to customize for your brand. You can build a list and adapt a template in the same platform with help from built-in tutorials. Costs vary, starting at free for smaller lists and increasing as your list grows. Built-in list management will provide analytics for new subscribers, open rates and undeliverable addresses. Most systems also offer a range of other features, including landing pages, sign-up forms and survey options.

There are many options to choose from. Some of the well-known services include MailChimp ([www.mailchimp.com](http://www.mailchimp.com)), Emma ([www.myemma.com](http://www.myemma.com)) and Constant Contact ([www.constantcontact.com](http://www.constantcontact.com)). A web search of providers will yield lists of recommended sites and a comparison of features.

### **Editorial planning**

Last month's article included content guidance, such as tone, headlines, photos and more. As with any other communication tactic, it's important to keep your audience in mind. Know who you are talking to and customize for them. Are you sharing regular updates with staff? Are you talking to kindergarten parents? Are you updating subscribers who signed up to get school board notes after board meetings?

Also, consider when you are sending it. It may not matter when you push send — research has found that readers will go back to your message when they have time — but it is good practice to send at the same time each week. You can train your subscribers to know when to expect to hear from you. Try to stick to a regular distribution schedule.

### **Add accessibility**

Website accessibility requirements also apply to your email newsletter. Be sure to add features that help people with disabilities access and interact with your content. Recommended best practices include descriptive subject lines that are brief and convey an accurate idea of the content. Incidentally, this practice will increase overall reader engagement.

Use page elements like tables and headers for subscribers who use page readers and color contrast for those with color blindness. Add alt text for images. Consider producing a plain text version as well, which improves accessibility for people using text readers. Many email programs will offer a plain text feature that can be used with your formatted version.

### **Make it easy to sign up and unsubscribe**

After you plan your design and content, you need subscribers. You already have a natural audience of staff, parents and community members, but there are rules for sending unsolicited email, also known as spam or a cold email. The best practice for your relationship-building goals is to reach out to your audiences and offer them the opportunity to subscribe. Ask them to opt-in via a link to a form where they can include optional contact information and mark their specific areas of interest.

You can also send an introductory email that includes a clear opt-out option, such as an unsubscribe link or an email for an opt-out request. The ability to opt-out or unsubscribe is important, and those addresses must be removed from your list in a timely manner.

Continue building your email list by adding a sign-up form, box or pop-up to your website. The email program you are using should have an easy code generator for websites. Schools can include information in parent newsletters and registration materials. Educational partners

could share information through their channels, and you may also want to consider a Facebook ad with a sign-up link.

List management is a continuous process for any subscription-based publication, but it will be a useful resource for helping you understand and reach your followers.

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*Contributed by Marcia Latta, communications consultant*