

Newsletters, Blogs, or RSS:

How Does Your Library Spread the News?

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Conference Program Abstract: Learn how promoting your library increases your visibility, usage, and credibility. Get the scoop on effective newsletter layout and design. Sharpen your writing skill set. Discover the benefits of implementing RSS. Explore how adding a blog can transform a medium of “one-way” communication into a venue for vibrant discussion.

Quick, Economical Newsletters

Dr. Pam Dennis, Director of the Luther L. Gobbel Library at Lambuth University, opened the session with an overview of newsletters in general.

Pam used PowerPoint to demonstrate how newsletters serve multiple purposes, including:

- acquainting faculty with library staff;
- advertising library services and programs,
- posting hours of operation during vacations and other breaks, and
- promoting activities of the library and its staff members.

Newsletters are a very high-visibility/low-risk venue for communication with your constituents, and they do not have to drain your budget.

There are a number of decisions to make about a newsletter. One of the first is the matter of format: Will it be in paper? .pdf? HTML? A recent survey of ACRL libraries ([Robinson, Mack and Dennis](#) 2005) suggests that 40% of library newsletters are in paper format, 32% in .pdf, and 20% in HTML.

The second decision is: How frequently should your library's newsletter come out? That answer depends on who is writing the newsletter and the amount of time and resources available. Of those surveyed in the aforementioned ACRL study, 29% produce semi-annual newsletters; 25% produce monthly issues. None of the libraries surveyed publishes a weekly edition; a small percentage create an annual issue.

Once you have decided on format and frequency, what will you include in the newsletter? Promoting library resources is one of the most effective ways to use a newsletter. Include full titles and authors and provide call numbers. Most faculty are too busy to browse the collection. But if they have the call number in hand, they can go straight to the shelves and have the book by the next class period. Eighty-nine percent of newsletters are used to promote new equipment; 88% provide instructional information on resources. It is very easy to include screen shots or photos of new equipment, and the more information you can provide ahead of time, the more comfortable your patrons are using the new equipment. Providing clickable Internet links saves your readers time and effort.

In addition to library resources, newsletters may be used to promote new features (anyone else “gone wireless” recently?), discuss library issues (such as Google Book Search), and introduce library staff—who they are and what they do. Most faculty do not know what others are doing outside their own fields. Often, library staff have degrees that can be used to assist faculty in classroom team teaching as well as in bibliographic instruction. Ninety-eight percent of the libraries that responded to the survey also promote library services.

Newsletters may be used to network with other groups. Partner with the public library, and your events can be publicized through their newsletter and vice versa. Include information on all your library events—book reviews, book signings, demonstrations and workshops, speakers, exhibits, etc. Include photos of these events. If the events were important enough to plan and execute, they are important enough to advertise and brag about.

Finally—it is never too late to start. Of the libraries surveyed, only about 10% had published newsletters more than 15 years. The largest percentage (23%) had produced newsletters for fewer than five years. So, go for it—toot your horn—no one else is going to! What do you have to lose?

Newsletter Layout and Design

Chrissie Anderson Peters, Librarian at Northeast State Community College (NSCC) and editor of several newsletters, discussed ways of tailoring a publication to make it unique to its respective organization and audience. Using three of the newsletters that she has edited as examples, Chrissie described how layout, design, graphics, tone, and language can be used to create a unique “feel” for readers.

[*Turn The Page* \(TTP\)](#) is the monthly newsletter that has promoted Basler Library and its workers since shortly after Chrissie joined the Northeast State staff in Fall 2001. Published in paper, it is disseminated to all faculty (including adjunct faculty) and staff through campus mail, and made available in hard copy via several physical pick-up points on campus. Additionally, it is posted to the [Basler Library webpages](#) under the section entitled “Activities & News.”

According to Chrissie, the layout of *TTP* generally remains the same for each two-page issue. The front page of the current layout includes:

- a brief lead article highlighting major activities pertaining to the library and its services;
- upcoming programs/events;
- an update on the implementation of the new TBR-wide Banner program that is distributed to all “media” sources on the campus to keep faculty, staff, and students abreast of progress and potential snags; and,
- special accomplishments by Library staff members (marriages, children, grades, professional appointments/elections, new pets, awards, etc.).

The back page features:

- a short book review submitted by a staff or faculty member from anywhere in the college;
- a sampling of new materials (typically books), categorized as fiction or non-fiction; and,
- a recipe submitted by a staff or faculty member from anywhere in the college.

Graphics typically include clip art from Microsoft Publisher, but .jpg files might also be used to show off special events such as new babies, for example. Tone and language are such that most anyone could read most of the newsletter and understand what is going on with little or no problem (the Banner updates are probably an exception to this rule, but something that the Library Dean, Duncan Parsons, wants to make certain is included in as many outlets as possible to permit everyone affiliated with the campus to know what progress has been made).

Spoonful of Sugar (SOS) was a newsletter that Chrissie designed and published monthly while the Basler Library and Northeast State's Early Childhood Education department were affiliated with the federal Child Care Access Means Parents In School (CCAMPIS) grant. As part of the partnership between NSCC and five local child care providers, she delivered monthly storytimes to children in these five facilities and mailed paper copies of the newsletter to each center monthly.

SOS used a larger font, more colorful/cartoonish clip art, more simplistic language, and a consistently light tone. Each two-page issue's front page featured:

- basic information about the CCAMPIS grant;
- contact information for the person overseeing the grant on the campus;
- dates for storytimes at each center for that month;
- the month's theme;
- a very brief book review; and
- web sites of possible interest to parents/caregivers and/or young children.

The back page was fairly static, and included:

- more details about the CCAMPIS grant, the Basler Library, and NSCC in the upper portion of the page;

- an "Author Spotlight" on the bottom portion of the page—complete with Web links and an illustration (typically a jpg of one of the author's better-known books).

Using the *TLA Newsletter (TLAN)* as an example, Chrissie contrasted these two shorter, monthly publications with newsletters of greater content. A longer publication offers the paradoxical combination of more freedom and more restriction. It is freer in terms of how much can be included and has a wider audience range. However, it is more restrictive, for example, in terms of deciding what is included, because there is a wider audience and the materials must span a wider interest range. Many times, the content is more broadly professional than personal in tone and language.

Only a few features in the [TLA Newsletter](#) remain static in terms of placement, such as the "Editor's Edge" on the front page, and the "President's Point of View" and the "Executive Director's Dialogue" on page 2. Therefore, most articles or news items shift places from newsletter to newsletter, even if coming from the same sources. For example, TENN-SHARE news/updates may appear on page 4 in one issue (particularly if there is a noteworthy event taking place within TENN-SHARE) but on page 12 in another issue. The number of pages likewise changes, typically ranging from 12-16 pages, occasionally coming in shorter; more frequently coming in longer. More jpg files may be utilized in a newsletter like this because people want to see actual people and snapshots from the events being reported on/promoted.

Chrissie wrapped up by observing that any newsletter can be designed to cater to any audience, even if doing so sometimes requires trial-and-error attempts by the editor/editorial staff. A layout that "clicks" may prompt the publication to stick with a more static layout. Remembering the intended audience and the scope/focus of the publication is necessary to keep interest in the publication high.

Writing for Newsletters

Bess Robinson, Reference/Instruction Librarian at the University of Memphis, suggested four rules for newsletter writers.

1. Know your audience and write for that group as though you're having a conversation with them. Keep your words and sentences short and simple. (*Reader's Digest* and *TV Guide* are written at the 9th grade level; the *New York Times* and *USA Today*, at the 10th.)
2. Be consistent in your writing style. Get a good style manual. *Library Journal* gives *The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage* a good review. For whatever manual you use, get the most recent revised and expanded edition. It's arranged like a dictionary and covers such style and usage topics as abbreviations, capitalization, numbers, and language preferences. You can find great bargains on copies at half.com.

Consider creating a personal style sheet—something to glance at for that one word you can never remember how to spell or whether to capitalize, or “rules” unique to your particular newsletter (7 April 2006 or April 7, 2006?). A more general style sheet is helpful when the editor is away and the newsletter needs to be done. Anyone can look at the general style sheet and know the font style(s) and sizes; which words to capitalize in headlines, etc.

Third—watch your grammar, spelling, and punctuation. Even before William Safire's “Rules for Writers”—a list of funny examples of how NOT to write—was published in the *New York Times* in 1979, George L. Trigg wrote an editorial in *Physical Review Letters* that included a similar list, such as “Verbs has to agree in number with their subjects,” “Don't use no double negatives,” and “Check to see if you any words out.”

Finally, have at least three other people read your newsletter before uploading or printing it. No matter how careful you are, you're going to miss something—grammar, spelling, punctuation—something. Also, no matter how clear what you've written seems to *you*, someone else could read your words and get an entirely different meaning from them. Several other pairs of eyes could really save you—and your institution—from embarrassment!

Using a Blog to Communicate News about Your Library

Donna Braquet, Life Sciences Librarian at the University of Tennessee Knoxville, spoke to the use of blogging as a way to continuously and

instantaneously promote libraries' resources, services, and events. Through a PowerPoint presentation, Donna demonstrated the basics of blogging and how blogs may be used on their own, or in addition to a newsletter, and the many ways in which users may benefit from these publications.

We've all heard of blogs, almost ad nauseam. What usually comes to mind are political pundits testifying for their side, people obsessively logging details of their hobbies, or teenagers telling the world about their latest indiscretion. But blogs, short for web logs, have made their way into the mainstream media, academe, and yes, even libraries.

Some of the many advantages to using blog technology as a way to communicate with your library patrons are:

- Blog entries are form based, so you do not need to know HTML.
- The workload may be shared among multiple blog authors.
- Content is archived and searchable.
- An optional comments feature allows two-way communication.
- RSS feeds allow you to reach those using newsreaders.
- Blogs provide a way to continuously promote your library and post information 'just in time.'
- Blog software and hosting is inexpensive and sometimes free.
- Content and design are independent, so aesthetic changes do not affect content.

Factors to consider before creating a library blog include:

- determining the purpose of the blog;
- deciding who will author and who will monitor the entries;
- weighing your needs vs. features vs. cost when choosing software;
- exploring the amount of time the blog will take and the possibility of burn-out;
- weighing your needs vs. features vs. cost when choosing software; and
- creating buy-in from your staff or supervisors.

To get the audience thinking about blogging, Donna posed the following questions:

- How do you currently inform your patrons about library news, events, and resources?
 - What is a recent event that you would like to promote on your library's homepage?
 - Have you ever needed to find information about one of your library's past events?
 - Do you often wish you had a way for your patrons to tell you what THEY think?
 - If you had a blog, what would it be about?
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Implementing an RSS Feed

Kanneese Woods, Web Services Librarian at the University of Memphis, explained RSS and how this service may enhance communication about libraries events.

RSS, an information delivery format that's been around in one form or another since the 1990's, is alternately defined as “**R**eally **S**imple **S**yndication,” “**R**ich **S**ite **S**ummary,” and “**R**DF (Resource Data Framework) **S**ite **S**ummary.” RSS allows content providers to deliver up-to-date news and announcements to users without having to wait for the next monthly/quarterly/yearly newsletter issue. End-users can view the most recent news and announcements from their favorite sites in one location.

There are many RSS versions available (some obsolete). All are based on the XML (eXtensible Markup Language) format. The most common is version 2.0. RSS 2.0 is known for its simplicity. However, RSS 1.0, based on the Resource Description Framework (RDF), allows for more sophisticated metadata constructs and is more extensible.

RSS uses an XML file called a “feed” to deliver content to users. A feed can contain a list of links (sometimes followed by a brief description) and/or images. End-users must subscribe to feeds on a Web site to access the content. Usually Web sites identify their feeds with a graphic link titled “RSS.”

Kanneese enumerated some of the many benefits to using RSS feeds. An RSS feed can:

- work well with both frequently and infrequently updated sites,
 - serve as an additional resource for promoting and registering new subscribers,
 - provide up-to-date news and information, and
 - be used to publish a variety of information on a library's Web site.
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References

[Robinson](#), Bess, Pam Dennis, and Thura Mack. 2005. "Connecting People with the Library: The Effective Academic Library Newsletter," presented at the 12th national ACRL Conference, April 7-10.