



**NEWS
LETTERING**
CREATING EFFECTIVE
NEWSLETTERS WITH LOVE

BY BRENT MANKE

WELCOME.

When I joined Youth With A Mission in 2002, I realized that one of my most important tasks, though not in the “missionary” job description, was communicating with friends, family and supporters about what I was up to. Because partnerships were essential - in finances, prayer, and encouragement - communication was also essential.

Though many dread this kind of communication, I, as a public speaker and graphic designer by trade, enjoyed creating newsletters and other forms of communication.

This eBook is my attempt at sharing what I’ve learned through my experience of creating newsletters, as well as my study on the subject of communication and many conversations with friends and supporters.

This is not a “Biblical basic for fundraising” or a comprehensive look at communication to supporters, but a look at the process of mass communication, primarily through written email newsletters. I think that if we apply God’s principles and creativity to our process of communication we’ll produce some cool things, and express his heartbeat through the very process of writing and designing a newsletter.

If you’re new to “newslettering”, or have been at this gig for years, I hope that you find the following pages encouraging, inspiring and challenging. I wish you many years of effective and fun communication with those that care about you.

Enjoy.

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** Note: This ebook is best viewed in Adobe Acrobat.*

YOU

"Today you are You,
that is truer than true.
There is no one alive
who is Youer than You."

Dr. Seuss



My favorite newsletters to read as a kid weren't the pretty glossy ones, but a particular black-and-white with cut-and-pasted-photos newsletter from a relative living in Mongolia. The newsletters weren't professional or polished, but it was him. Honest and personal, he drew me into his world.

A friend and long-time non-missionary told me recently that,

"The biggest threat in ministry is the threat of not being yourself."

While this can be true in many areas of life where many people have many different (and often unrealistic) expectations of you, it is also true of your communication. I always had competing expectations talking to me. One (like my mom) saying, "Your newsletters are too short! We want to hear more about how you're doing!" The other saying, "I love short newsletters. Get to the point, I don't have all day." Whom to please?

When you're communicating with family, friends and supporters, the most important thing you're communicating is *you*. At the end of the day, it's who you are that people will love hearing from, along with your "tone of voice" and your personality.

Consider the following ideas about communicating *you*.

BE PERSONAL.

Personally ;-), when I sit down to write a newsletter I often feel the pressure to err on the side of being professional rather than personal. After all, I'm writing to partners who pay our bills, surely they'll want to know that we're busy doing good things, making good "return" on their investment! And while it's true that we must be accountable, I often find that people care more about how my family and I are really doing as opposed to a hearing a bunch of stats about our good work.

Seth Godin, in his book *Linchpin*, talks about the growing importance of bringing humanity to your work. As part of a ministry or non-profit, much of your work is probably human and personal by nature. Don't lose that! We don't need investing in people, changing lives and caring for people's needs to start sounding like a job or a task, it must be personal! People will be drawn to you as you be yourself.

YOUR LIFE IS FASCINATING.

While you may be staring at your keyboard scrounging for anything interesting to include in your newsletters, realize that your life is fascinating for the outsider. Assume that your readers are asking, “What is it like being you?”

Malcolm Gladwell, in *What the Dog Saw* says regarding writing stories,

“The trick to finding ideas [for stories] is to convince yourself that everyone and everything has a story to tell. I say trick but what I really mean is challenge, because it's a very hard thing to do. Our instinct as humans, after all, is to assume that most things are not interesting.”

Don't assume that your life is boring. Find the stories in your life and in those around you that need to be shared.

BE HONEST.

It's easy, especially when doing "the work of the Lord", to beat around the bush, especially when it comes to finances. Hopefully you're writing to people that care about you (check out [Ask Permission](#) in the following section if they don't), and they'll appreciate the clear communication. If you're asking people to support you with finances, don't say, "Pray for me, cause I need money." Say what you mean.

I used to have well-intentioned people ask, "How are you doing with finances?" And I, trying to sound grateful, would say, "Great!" or, "I always have what I need." These were people wanting to help out and I denied the chance to give.

At the same time, don't always be asking for money. Make your supporters feel valued for their relationships, not just their wallets.

CLARIFY YOUR MISSION.

If you're like me, even if you make communication a priority, you'll often hear the question, "So what is it that you do exactly?" Before communicating this with other, it's important that this is clarified in your own mind before communicating it with others.

A couple years ago we received many of these questions from some of our supporters. We realized that they had been receiving sound bytes from our lives and work, but had trouble understanding how all these pieces fit together. This was an issue of communication. It forced us to narrow down our mission and make an effort to communicate it more simply and clearly.

Your audience will find it easier to partner with you when they understand your essential mission.

FIND YOUR VOICE.

Technology is a beautiful thing, but it must always serve your message, not the other way around. With all the technology available, it's easy to get caught up in making fancy videos or HTML newsletters, but if you're best at writing plain text emails, then for goodness sake, bless your readers with an amazing plain text email!

For example, one of my friends is playing with creating an audio podcast to communicate with friends, because his most comfortable mode of communication is verbal.

Though you may find it intimidating, technology is constantly becoming more user-friendly and within reach for most people. For example, Mail Chimp, with its fresh and simple approach to HTML newsletters, makes sending cool-looking newsletters easier than ever. But we'll talk more about the chimp later...

Of course, when considering your method of communication, you must always consider your audience's language. Considering your audience's language and your own often presents some tension, but that's a good thing as we consider honoring our audience and communicating effectively. We'll talk about that more in the next section.

PERFECTION NOT REQUIRED.

If you wait for the perfect newsletter before sending it out, you'll never send out a newsletter. Writing, design and communication are all learning processes. Allow yourself to fail and just call it learning. The key to creativity and good newsletters is just doing it.

"One of the difficult lessons every artist must learn is that even the failed pieces are essential."

David Bayles & Ted Orland, Art & Fear

Don't apologize or make excuses, put yourself out there. You may surprise yourself with your results when imperfection becomes acceptable.

TRY THIS.

One of the keys of developing your writing ability and your written “personality” is PRACTICE.

Try journaling. You can practice unedited communication and putting your thoughts on paper.

Start a blog. There’s something about blogging, publishing your thoughts for the world to see, that helps define your writing, develop a habit of written communication, and build your personal confidence. Try it out! [Wordpress.com](https://www.wordpress.com) is a good place to start.

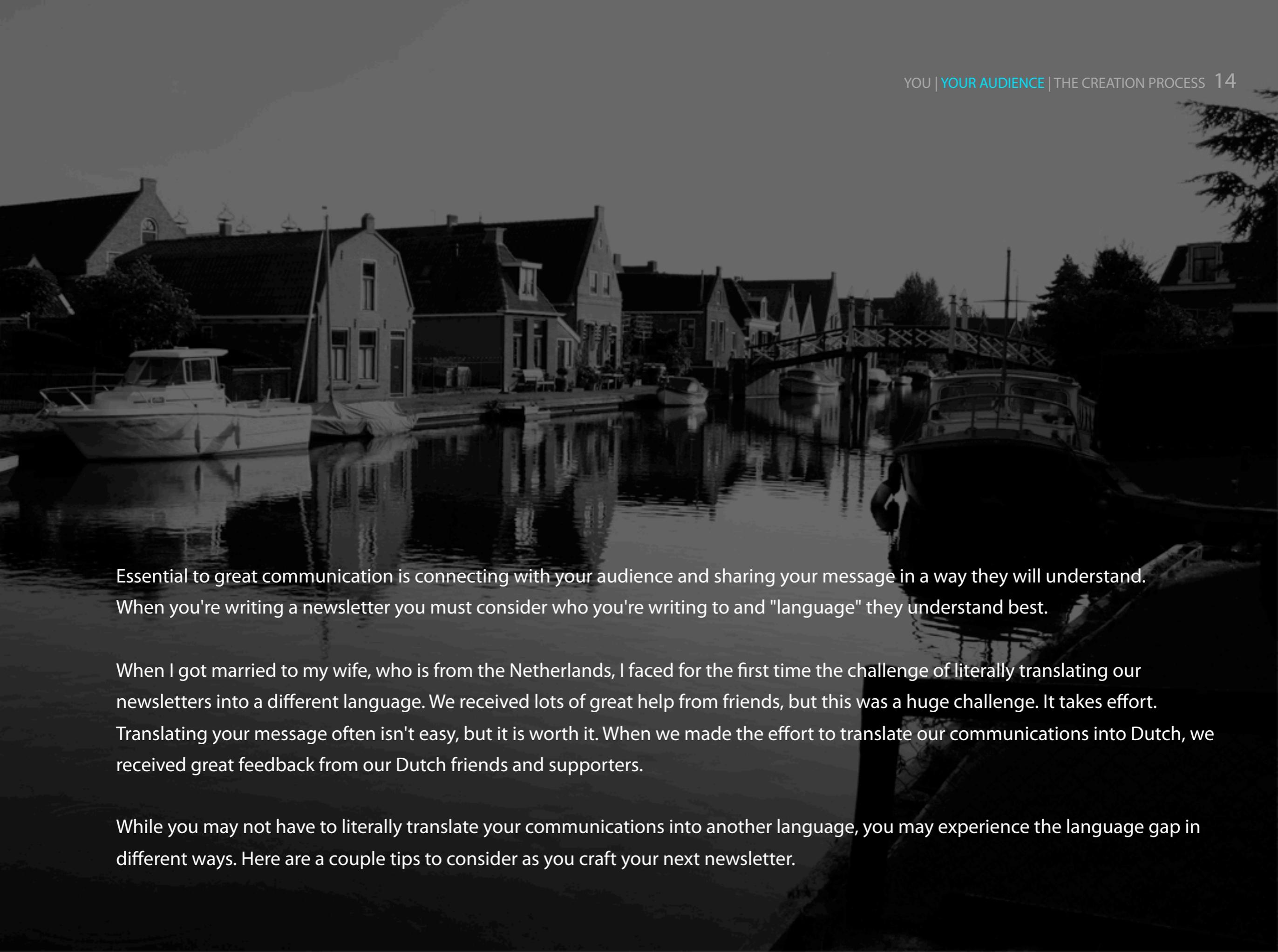
Try the “elevator pitch.” The scenario is that you going to meet with someone interested in supporting you and would like to hear more about your mission. You have prepared all the things you’ll say to introduce him to your work. As you get to his office, he comes out and says he needs to attend to something urgent, and asks if you could accompany him in the elevator and explain your work along the way. So you have to ditch the well-planned conversation and give the 30-second version. What would you say? Who are you and what is your mission? This helps clarify your mission and define the core message of your newsletters.

YOUR

AUDIENCE

"It's always about bridging the distance between artist and audience to make a real connection. If there's no connection, there can be no conversation."

Garr Reynolds, author of *Presentation Zen*



Essential to great communication is connecting with your audience and sharing your message in a way they will understand. When you're writing a newsletter you must consider who you're writing to and "language" they understand best.

When I got married to my wife, who is from the Netherlands, I faced for the first time the challenge of literally translating our newsletters into a different language. We received lots of great help from friends, but this was a huge challenge. It takes effort. Translating your message often isn't easy, but it is worth it. When we made the effort to translate our communications into Dutch, we received great feedback from our Dutch friends and supporters.

While you may not have to literally translate your communications into another language, you may experience the language gap in different ways. Here are a couple tips to consider as you craft your next newsletter.

D.U.A.T.Y.A.D.U. (Don't use acronyms that your audience doesn't understand.)

Every community and workplace has a language of inside jokes, acronyms, and vocabulary of its own, which, for the uninitiated, might as well be Dutch. The issue we often run into is forgetting that not everyone understands our dialect.

Chip Heath and Dan Heath, in *Made to Stick*, call this the "Curse of Knowledge." Once you know a language, it's hard to remember what it was like to not know that language. Once you're an insider, you can't remember what it was like being on the outside looking in.

I used to lead the "Worship, Intercession, Spiritual Warfare and Evangelism" school, and found it super inconvenient to write the long-hand school name every time I mentioned it in our updates (kinda interrupts the flow). Despite the inconvenience, I always made the effort to write it out, or at least add a link to the *W.I.S.E.* school as a footnote for those who want to know more about it.

Another thing to realize is that your audience isn't engaged in your life - and often your newsletters, unfortunately - to the extent you are. You may have explained what "YWAM" means in the past 3 newsletters, but your audience may be tuning in for the first time in months. If you don't want them to feel out of the loop make sure you explain yourself.

When you write about your programs, community or mission, remember that you're audience isn't immersed in your daily language.

CONSIDER YOUR MEDIUM.

Your preferred method of communication, be it video, email, or pop-up-and-dance-around-the-room multimedia experiences, must come second to your audience's preferences and ease with technology.

This is difficult for me. I love using design-rich media, but find that at times my efforts are not worth the investment for the technical difficulties they bring for my readers. For those whose email hosts don't receive HTML emails, I am sure to include a link to the newsletter online. Also, for some of our friends who don't use email at all, I try to make the effort of sending them a paper copy of our newsletters (ok, my mom helps actually get it into their hands, thanks Mom).

One great comment I once received was, "Your newsletter looked great on my iPod!" While this happened by accident, it reminded me that some of our readers open our newsletters on small screens. Now I intentionally try to make HTML emails mobile-device friendly (550 pixels wide is great for mobile devices and most PC users as well, see [Resources](#) for the place to find more practical tips).

When we take time to consider our audience's preferences, we show that we care about and respect them. And sometimes actions speak louder than words....

While we're talking about various mediums, also consider your time vs value. You can spend 20 hours every month making an amazing newsletter, but all the effort might go unnoticed by the majority of your audience, who want the content more than anything. And, chances are your supporters aren't donating to you to have you spend all week making newsletters for them, so they'll understand if you are trying to use your time wisely.

David DuChemin, professional photographer and author of *Within the Frame*, has this mantra,

"Gear is good. Vision is better."

Basically his point is that photography is about making great photos, not just having the latest gear. I think the same principle applies to us as we design newsletters. Your newsletters may be pretty, but what really counts is your content. The design elements should merely support what you're saying, not be the focus in itself.

**Not David DuChemin, but Ted introduced me to his writing.*

ASK PERMISSION.

“Permission marketing is the privilege (not the right) of delivering anticipated, personal and relevant messages to people who actually want to get them.” *Seth Godin, marketer, author, blogger at sethgodin.typepad.com*

I know it feels so good to be able to send your newsletter to 100,000 people immediately (you know, all those Facebook “friends” and any email address you've ever accumulated), but that's not the respectful or wise way to build a newsletter list. Only send your newsletter to those who want to receive it. Why? Because when people request your newsletter, it means they're bought in, want to hear about what you're up to, and won't get annoyed when they get your regular mail, they asked for it! Start small when it comes to your address list, and let it grow over time.

This might sound kinda obvious, but these days our mailboxes and inboxes are filled with companies and people who don't get that. Let's do better.

With that permission comes responsibility. Like don't ever include your readers' email addresses in the "To:" or even "CC:" row when sending group emails. The "BCC:" (Blind Carbon Copy) works great, or you can use a mail host (see my subtle Mail Chimp plug) that will do this for you automatically. This is about respect for your readers and general professionalism.

TRY THIS.

Get feedback. Ask a few friends, ideally from a variety of ages and walks of life (people who don't understand the lingo), for honest feedback about one of your newsletters. Ask for input directly, seeing as the "let me know what you think" at the bottom of a newsletter often doesn't elicit many responses. Ask them for specific feedback regarding length of the newsletter as well as language used. Even better, sit down with someone as they read your newsletter. You may be surprised at how the simplest things (in your mind) can be misunderstood, and how your "clear" communication can leave many of your readers in the dark due to the "Curse of Knowledge." Keep this feedback from the uninitiated in the back of your mind as you write in the future.

Try the "tapper and listener" exercise. Think of a song. Tap the rhythm of the melody on a table, and have a friend try to guess the song. Notice that as you tap you're playing the melody in your head, so it's impossible *not* to decipher the taps. For your friend, on the other hand, who's not hearing the song, it's nearly impossible to decipher the taps. The "Curse of Knowledge" at work again. Just don't tap *Jingle Bells*, for some reason my wife guessed that one right away...

THE

CREATION

PROCESS

Ok, this is the fun part. Get your paper, pencils and crayons, we're gonna make ourselves a newsletter!

The following is my process of creating newsletters, as well as some considerations as you're writing content and designing your newsletter.

** Creating beautiful newsletters at the age of 3.*

MAKE A DEADLINE.

The most important thing in making newsletters is just making them, and regularly. Writing newsletters can be a dreaded activity for anyone, but it becomes less so when you get into a rhythm with it.

How often should you write? I think it's better to err on the side of shorter newsletters and more of them. People are more likely to read them when they're short - there's nothing worse than having your newsletter sent to the "read later" folder simply because the length is intimidating. Frequent updates will help people feel that they're already in the loop with what you're doing. But don't go too crazy with frequency. People don't need your daily news (you don't have time for that, and no one needs to know which flavor of cream cheese you put on your bagel this morning).

Personally, I sent short monthly text emails to financial supporters and close friends, and would send a quarterly HTML newsletter to our larger email list. At that time I would also create a print version of the HTML email to distribute to those who didn't receive emails, sometimes the print version would also be included in my home church's weekly bulletin.

COLLECT STORIES.

“Stories have the amazing dual power to simulate and to inspire. And most of the time we don’t even have to use much creativity to harness these powers - we just need to be ready to spot the good ones that life generates every day.” *Chip Heath & Dan Heath, Made to Stick*

You've gotta have something to say, right? In the weeks before your newsletter's set to send, think about what's been going on in your world and what you'd want to share with others. Think of significant stories or events that paint a picture of your last couple months and your overall mission. As you're doing this, remember the [Curse of Knowledge](#). Even if you feel as though the last months have been completely boring, there's probably a lot that you're a part of that would help your readers understand you, your mission, and how they can pray for and encourage you.

During content-collection time I would usually look for a significant story, such as somebody who's life was changed or a realization that I had etc. Stories are powerful at painting a picture of your world, and are interesting to read. The facts, numbers and schedules are necessary too, but stories carry emotion, humanity, and life, and they're happening all around you all the time.

I would usually write my content first, before moving to the design phase. Remember, your newsletter design serves to compliment and re-enforce your content, not replace it.

My newsletters would usually have this basic outline: overview of what we've been up to the past couple months and what's ahead (facts), story about someone, a few prayer points, and a thank you.

SIMPLY DESIGN IT.

If I could give one tip when it comes to actually designing your newsletter, it would be to keep it SIMPLE.

Scott McCloud, author of *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*, says this about simplicity in art:

"By stripping down an image to essential meaning, an artist can amplify that meaning."

He was talking about simplicity in comic art, but the same is true of any design, and is important to consider as you put the elements of your newsletter together. We've talked about the priority of your content, and your newsletter design should amplify the things you want to convey.

While content-collection usually comes first, at this point allow the design and content to play off each other. Restraints of design (as well as page-size etc) often force changes in content, and help clarify and simplify what you're trying to say.

It's also important to consider your audience as you design. I once made the mistake of deciding to compress my newsletter to fit on a smaller page. It looked great, but I received several comments that the font-size was too small. If your readers can't actually read it, you've defeated your own purpose!

WHY HTML

I've heard many people ask, "How can I put my newsletter inline in an email instead of having to make it an attachment?" The answer is to create an HTML email. Creating an HTML newsletter allows you to create colorful, image-rich newsletters that show up directly in the reader's email window. No more attachments and no more "10 minutes to download" emails.

Of course, the acronym "HTML" itself is enough to scare most non-web developers away, but that needn't be the case. There are many HTML email services that help make it easy to create HTML emails with little or no web design experience required.

The best of these is Mail Chimp. I've designed and sent HTML emails with several other email services, but Mail Chimp is the most user-friendly for the price (free!). I highly recommend it. Here's why...

MONKEY BUSINESS

6 reasons why Mail Chimp is your friend:

It's free! You can send 3000 emails/month with a free account.

It really is easy to use. When I started using Mail Chimp I also recommended it to a couple friends who had no HTML experience. Within a couple days I had received two beautiful newsletters from them. There are also options for including your own design and customizing templates.

Protect your supporters' privacy. Never accidentally forget the BCC again! Your readers won't be able to see any other email addresses from others recipients.

They help you. For this eBook I was going to do a tutorial about setting up and using Mail Chimp, but they already include many video tutorials to help you get started.

Customizable sign-up forms. This makes asking permission easy.

More fun than a barrel of monkeys. With their fresh design and a good sense of humor, they'll help make "newsletter time" something to look forward to.



TRY THIS.

Just do it. Of course, once again, the key to making amazing newsletters is DOING IT. Sit down and make one! Good luck.

Start a Mail Chimp account. Head over to mailchimp.com and sign up for your free account. You can start things off by importing your mailing list or, if you haven't already, now may be a great time to ask permission from your readers. Send a link to your sign up form. Don't worry if your list shrinks a bit.

RESOURCES.

BOOKS ABOUT COMMUNICATION

Made to Stick | Chip Heath & Dan Heath | This is a great book on effective communication. Also check out their resources at madetostick.com.

Presentation Zen | Garr Reynolds | Though writing specifically about presentations and smart PowerPoints, Garr shares principles of simplicity that are essential for any form of communication. Also visit Garr's blog, presentationzen.com.

Seth Godin | Seth first introduced me to the concept "permission marketing." Check out his blog, sethgodin.typepad.com, and his books, especially his newest, **Linchpin**. Also check out his **talk at TED** about a new way of marketing, called "Tribes."

MORE RESOURCES.

TIPS FOR HTML NEWSLETTERS

Mail Chimp Resources | mailchimp.com/resources | Find great Email Marketing Tips and free HTML Email Templates here. It's great stuff.

MY NEWSLETTERS

Check out a few of our newsletters from 2009.

SPRING 2009 | Email brentandanna.com/mailing/2009/spring/spring2009.html

Print (PDF, printed on half of an 8.5X11) brentandanna.com/mailing/2009/spring/spring-2009.pdf

SUMMER 2009 | Email brentandanna.com/mailing/2009/summer/summer2009.html

Print (PDF, printed on half of an 8.5X11) brentandanna.com/mailing/2009/summer/summer-2009.pdf

Also visit my blog, blog.brentmanke.com, for more thoughts about communication.

THANK YOU.

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Liefs, thanks for your encouragement and listening to all my rabblings.