Designing a LIFE Project Newsletter

Newsletters (print and electronic) are an excellent means of disseminating information about your project and keeping in touch with your target groups (national or local representatives, companies, general public, press), both during and after the project actions. Newsletters can also provide support for similar projects or for actions achieved by your association or company. Moreover, it could become a platform for the exchange of good practices between associations and of companies working on similar projects.

La voce del Parco – uses a consistent layout that is repeated in each issue of the newsletter. The user-friendly layout format features the project logo and so creates a distinctive, recognisable identity for the publication. The lead article is continued on a second page so that it does not take up the entire front page.

Factsheet

There are five main factors that LIFE project staff should consider during the planning and production of effective newsletters. Newsletters need to have:

1. Regular issues, produced on time;
2. Simple and user-friendly format;
3. Attractive presentation;
4. Easy to read text; and
5. Careful editing.

1. Regular issues, produced on time

Producing and issuing a regular newsletter on time requires a lot of planning and pro-active management. This can be helped by:
- Developing a consistent newsletter structure;
- Producing a written set of guidelines for writers; and
- Preparing a timetable covering all editorial and publication tasks.

Be consistent. A newsletter must be sustainable so always be realistic about the amount of content you and your team can consistently produce. Don’t hesitate to limit the number of pages. A single-page, two-sided newsletter published every month is preferable to an eight-page newsletter that appears quarterly. Your goal is to build and maintain awareness among your target groups.

Set yourself deadlines and try to respect them. Add contingency time within the newsletter planning timetable to allow for unexpected delays.

2. Simple and user-friendly format

Using a common format means that you don’t need to start from scratch each time you begin preparing a new issue. It also provides the newsletter with identity, integrity and credibility. Many desktop publishing software packages include a selection of newsletter templates to copy or use as basis to build on.

Choosing the format

Newsletters can be produced in both print and electronic format. The latter version is easy to handle and allows a broad and cost-effective dissemination. The print version can be issued in a limited amount and sent to selected target groups or to specific events.
When launching an e-newsletter you will have to choose between html and plain text format. Though html newsletters look more impressive and offer interactivity, they also come with slow downloads, which may deter your audience from reading your information.

Printed newsletters are generally delivered in A4 format. If you choose a single page, give preference to a thicker paper.

Useful tips for newsletter formatting

- Be brief in the introduction section. Many newsletters use an ‘in this issue’ introduction box at the top;
- Place your masthead (with all contact details) in a visible place;
- Editorial text or messages from the project manager should have a regular position, normally after the lead items. In-house news should have a regular position further in;
- Ideally, the newsletter should say that the project is financed by LIFE (though this is optional);
- Don’t forget the logos (LIFE and, where relevant Natura 2000), the project’s title and all necessary contacts. This information should be clearly indicated and always appear in the same place;
- Consider an acknowledgment box that lists everyone who contributed to an issue;
- The footer should have information about how to subscribe and unsubscribe; and
- Don’t forget to number and date each issue.

3. Attractive presentation

First impressions are important. An attractive newsletter which appears relevant and uncomplicated will encourage people to read further.

Don’t make the newsletter overly complex. Basic newsletter contents include several lead stories, a number of shorter news items and a message from the project manager. More sophisticated publications can extend their content to include features, columns, an editorial, news in-brief sections, cartoon, associated beneficiary progress reports, etc.
Title

Start at the beginning and choose a distinct title. The newsletter’s title should serve as an icon, indicating the content of your newsletter. Short titles are better and allow the use of a large type size. You can also add a longer subtitle set in a smaller type size which further explains the title.

Layout

Guide your readers through the newsletter by choosing an appropriate layout. Blank empty space is the easiest and least-expensive way to make a newsletter appear more attractive and easier to read. If you are using a columns layout, devote one column to photographs, diagrams and short topics.

Photos

Don’t forget to check the quality of your photos and remember you need fewer pixels for an electronic version than a paper one.

Colours

Use colour with moderation. Colour can be used for your company’s logo, your newsletter title, or as background. For printed newsletters, you can also use pre-printed paper or coloured paper.

Test the attractiveness of your newsletter on colleagues or friends before finalising the presentation.

4. Easy to read text

People decide within seconds whether they want to read a publication or not. Do some research beforehand and learn from the way other newsletters or newspapers present text.

Articles

Aim to write article text concisely and in the active voice. Edit for clarity, conciseness, jargon, length and accuracy. Information is often more interesting and easy to understand when it is told as a story by someone talking about it. Remember to quote your sources.

Article titles should be short and eye-catching. The introduction to an article should ideally answer the following three questions about the article topic: Who? What? and Where?

The lead article should be devoted to the most recent news and present a summary of pertinent points, rather than a detailed report. If necessary continue the lead article on the second page so that it does not take up the whole of the first page of the newsletter.
Typefaces

Use different typefaces for the headlines and the text. Headlines should be as short as possible. Choose a common typeface for all of your headlines and limit headlines to two sizes. Use one size for headlines of primary importance and another, smaller, size for headlines of lesser importance. For your headlines choose a typeface that forms a visual contrast with the body text. For example, use sans serif for headlines (i.e. Arial) and a serif typeface (i.e. like Times Roman or Garamond) for the text.

Subheads and columns

Subheads break up a long text and make it easier to read. Ideally, subheads should have the same typeface used in the headlines, but smaller. Columns or boxes are ideal for short topics, a calendar, or for networking addresses.

5. Careful editing

Take care to ensure that you check how your newsletter reads as well as what it looks like. Interesting illustrations can obscure important content messages. Relevant and well-written content should be able to stand on its own, even as plain text.

Content variety

Working with other writers helps increase the variety of newsletter content. Newsletter editors should provide clear directions to writers about each article’s topic, structure, length and deadline, as well as the main points that the text will address. Always remember to include writers’ by-lines, since this can help increase future contributions and also gain credibility for your publication.

Editors should monitor feedback from readers. Watch to see how people read your publication and aim to speak to a new sample of readers after each edition is issued.

Archive

Previous issues of the newsletter should be archived and links to these can be highlighted on the LIFE project website.

LIFE advice sources

- For good examples of LIFE project newsletters, visit the Communication Tools section of the LIFE website.
- For instructions about LIFE logos, visit the logos page.
- See other LIFE communication factsheets.

Additional advice sources

- The Newsletter factory web site features a collection of useful tools for newsletter editors such as a proof reading checklist and a style sheet questionnaire.
- Company newsletters provides an interesting analysis of editorial considerations with a particular focus on electronic newsletters.
- Pagesmag.com sets out a selection of tips to assist preparation of effective newsletters including how to pose photographs and how to undertake a readership survey.
- About.com contains useful advice about desk top publishing newsletters based on the 3 Cs of good newsletter design: Consistency, Clutter-busting and Contrast.
- New Entrepreneur presents 12 steps to success in preparing an effective newsletter covering topics that range from layout for laypersons to perfecting punctuation.