chapter 14

Making News That Fits
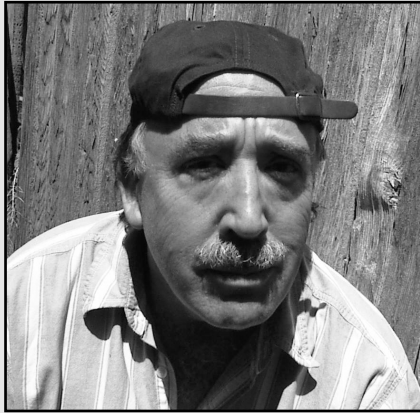
News Articles

Web users are willing to pay for news that gives them a financial edge. Investors, brokers, analysts, and managers ante up almost $60 a year to peek behind the public front pages of the *Wall Street Journal Interactive*, to get relevant, current info in short takes on the site, and by e-mail newsletter. By delivering exactly the kind of news these people want, written specifically for that audience, and published fast enough so the users can get a jump on the market or competitors, the site pulls in real revenue (not just kudos), supplementing the ton of cash earned from the paper editions. The site defines a successful Web news site—a lot of stories, most of them current, and all on target. In the paper world, reporters worship inside dope, multiple sources, accuracy, depth, reliability, and reputation—plus delivering on deadline and ahead of the competition. But Web news writers must worship volume, speed, and focus—and those goals affect the way you write news articles, no matter what site you are working for.

> Successful online pubs are sites of very targeted information that post a lot of info very regularly to drive the traffic to the site. (Randy Scasny, *Website Flow*)

You're a filter

As a reporter, you have to sift through a dozen press releases, hundreds of e-mails, several e-mail newsletters every hour, and tour your beat—the sites you think may have some interesting tidbits—just to pick out the subjects that will interest your niche audiences. Just by picking the topics, you are performing a service.

> No matter how low the journalist remains on the public's Trust Meter, at best he or she provides a valuable filter service. (Ken Layne, After the fall: Late notes from the online journalism conference).

It's not your father's newsroom.
—Steve Outing, article title,
Editor and Publisher

You filter the news by the way you write about those topics showing what you think is important, and not, through your headline and lead. But best of all, your voice filters the news. Your attitude, your stance toward the event, gives the user a handle on the news, a way to take hold of it, adopting your perspective for a moment in order to understand how the event grows out of similar ones in the past, how it differs from that chain of history, and how it impacts you.

The old objective stance—which was always something of a fake—lacked personality, so articles written from that point of view (pretending not to have a point of view) did not tell as much as an op-ed piece, where the bias and feistiness of the individual writer told us more about what the real story might be, even when we disagreed. On the Web, the best news articles are opinion pieces, so that people can get the gist of the stories quickly.

So develop your own persona. Express a few pet peeves. Indulge your hobbyhorses. You'll make a more dramatic impression, and therefore do a better job of reporting.

After watching the ebbs and flows of the traffic on my web site as well as our whole news channel, I really believe that Web reading is immediate, current, of-the-moment reading.

—Randy Scasny, *Website Flow*

Why should I bother reading your piece?

Guests skim your headline, glance at the lead phrase or sentence, and, if you are lucky, skim the first paragraph or two. After that, most leave. If you want to make sure that some folks actually read your piece, make those opening hooks sharp.

> You can't afford to bury the lead online because if you do, few readers will get to it. When writing online, it's essential to tell the reader quickly what the story is about and why they should keep reading—or else they won't. (Jonathan Dube, Writing news online)

Online news articles are "get-to-the-point news." Yes, back when we worked on the student paper, we all learned about this curious architectural phenomenon, the inverted pyramid, with all the answers to key questions frontloaded. But answering all those w-questions weighs down the lead. Postpone the date, location, and even the participants, if they are not central to the story. You can get to them in the second graf. So on the Web the pyramid is right

side up, with just the point showing, at the top.

Because the headline and lead must condense the story for people who are just passing through, while teasing others into reading more, you are working like a poet here, condensing and yet suggesting. Let your persona help, so your text expresses your mood, your reaction, and your take on the story.

Tip: If you're like us, you don't know what you think until you write the rest of the story. So do the beginning last, when you have figured out your position, digested the facts, and come to a real conclusion.

Use loaded terms to get hits

If your job depends on traffic, your article has to show up when someone does a search for the topic you've just covered. Think through the terms people would enter if they wanted to find your piece. Make a list of half a dozen, consciously, and toy with them as you make up your headline and lead.

Simply rewriting your headline to include more keywords can multiply your hits by ten. But don't let the search terms take over. Your job is to integrate them into your point, rather than letting them smother it.

How much can you leave out?

If you want people to keep coming back, write your piece with an eye on repeat visitors—the ones who actually read your stories yesterday and the day before. Assume that your guests know about the election, and just want to hear about the latest scandal with the Bernalillo County ballot boxes. You don't need to provide the full story in lumbering background—filling phrases that tell the out-of-it reader what is going on. You can skip a lot of that catch-you-up talk, just by creating a sidebar with links to those old stories.

Leaving stuff out speeds up the article, and suggests that you and your guest are in the middle of some ongoing conversation, and you are just picking up the next thread, assuming a lot of history. You're emphasizing the now, inviting newcomers to get on the train, and showing that you respect the folks who have already been along for the ride.

Explain whatever relates to the current news later in the piece.

Online journalism has not led to any dramatic increase in the quality of reporting.

—John Markoff,
Farewell to the Web

Print readers have less vested in any given story, because they haven't done anything proactive to get the article.

—Jonathan Dube,
Writing news online

You need to serve those few brave souls who have ventured below the fold, to read the rest of your piece.

The story can be quite long if you break it up into meaningful pieces. (Avoid chopping a coherent piece into a series of small pages, just to present short pieces). Short takes run 250 words; full-length articles hover between 500 and 750 words; and thumb-suckers go to 3,000 or 5,000 words, carved into half a dozen mini-articles, so people can just jump to one or another, and not have to plow through the whole piece, like a *New York Times* Sunday Magazine article with jumps through the real estate ads.

Quotes and lifts

People like to talk, and they like to read anything in quotation marks. The more your story suggests a back-and-forth conversation, the better. So polish up those quotation marks.

But be careful about wholesale lifting from other people's work. The Web makes theft so easy, you may overlook the way borrowing an idea shades into picking up a phrase here and there. Particularly if you indulge in rewriting press releases, you may get in bad habits. Obviously, PR people love it if you take their whole release and issue it under your name. But other reporters may not feel as grateful when you grab their work, even if you give them a mention.

We've been struck at how often reporters interview us about something like online shopping, grab good ideas, and fail to attribute any of them to us, even though our words show up in the piece. Hmmm. Practice a little generosity and credit your sources as you go. Of course, doing so makes you look less like an authority, something that traditional journalists see as a perk of the job. But on the Web, namedropping, thanks, and quotes show you are immersed in a wide-ranging conversation. Instead of losing respect, you gain credibility.

For any person you quote, give readers a clue as to possible bias. Mention that the figures for teenage drinking come from a beer company. Hint at the person's objectivity, too, pointing out, for instance, that the quotes about economics come from a professor of medieval art who leads a faculty union.

No story should come from a single source. You only have so

much time, but you have enough time to cross check your story with five or six folks who are independent, some of whom may yield intriguing quotes. These interviews give depth to your piece, because you begin to see the nuances of the situation, the various sides of the discussion, and, gradually, you form your own opinion.

Thorough research builds up your own understanding, so when you do write the piece, you can write simply. The old rule applies: If you know what you are talking about, you can explain anything to anyone in a responsible way. But if you are just faking it, your prose will sound like plastic wrap, and your readers will soon say, "Yea, sure!"

Partnering with the devil

For traditional journalists, advertising reps always had to be kept at arm's length. But on the Web, your front page is crammed with commerce, and your site is partnering with companies whose products you may have to describe. You may find yourself in an ethically gray area. Press tours, press packages, press gifts—the temptations have always been there, but in the past, reporters acted as if they were incorruptible, while demanding more free passes, sample goodies, and outright giveaways. The Web institutionalizes an ambiguity that has always been around. How objective are you? How much do financial relationships influence your opinion? On many Web sites, your job is to bring in traffic, while not offending the many announced and undisclosed partners, their marketing organizations, their PR teams, and their cranky CEOs. Advertisers are pressing you to create sponsored content that will fold into the site alongside your regular articles. If you find yourself becoming upbeat about every story, pause a moment to see if you have inadvertently moved into marketing.

The people running most content sites do not come from a journalism background, and see nothing wrong with a little slant here, a plug there, and a discrete omission of embarrassing facts. But you have to argue that honesty actually builds trust, and traffic.

Define the way content is presented before marketing defines it for you.
—Richard Gingras,
Five hot tips for successful online journalists (or how to deal with the 26-year-old Harvard M. B. A. who'd rather you didn't exist)

Include images, sounds, and video

For the moment, text still rules the news. You have to grab a bright, revealing photo to put up by your lead, but eye-tracking research shows people still read the headline and first sentence, and the caption if there is one, before bothering with the image.

Part of your job, though, is to snap, beg, borrow, and "re-purpose" images without outright stealing. The responsibility for art has shifted onto your shoulders.

On some sites, you have to collect audio bites, and in a few locations, video, too.

Your text still acts as the glue holding all these chunks together. Your text sits at the starting point, suggesting people click and view. If the text doesn't make the story compelling, folks have no reason to waste their time waiting for a video download or replacing the song that's playing on their computer with your audio.

But you have to write the story to advertise the picture (mentioning something you see there, to encourage people to check it out), the sound (mentioning the tone, the context, the message, to give people a reason to play the audio), and the video (mentioning the scene, and point, to justify a long and potentially unsuccessful download).

Art, sound, and video are not illustrations or add-ons. They are part of the whole story. Write about them with respect, and even though your main loyalty may be to text, learn how to edit these other media, so you don't frustrate your editor, and users.

Links are part of the story

Be selective about the off-site links you throw into the sidebar. Make sure that if I follow your link I will learn something you didn't mention. Links are not footnotes, proving you have done your homework. Links add value to the story, but only if the target sites actually expand on themes you have introduced.

> Many sites have a paranoid fear that if they include links to other sites, readers will surf away and never return. Not true! People prefer to go to sites that do a good job of compiling click-worthy links—witness Yahoo!'s success. (Jonathan Dube, Writing news online)

These myriad content offerings can so easily be linked together (review the book, buy the book) that each component of content begs for its own labeling and sourcing.
—Richard Gingras,
Five hot tips for successful online journalists (or how to deal with the 26-year-old Harvard M. B. A. who'd rather you didn't exist)

Imagine a world with no newspapers.
—Mark Potts,
Musing on the future of journalism

You don't legally have to get an OK from another site to link to a particular page, but you'll get grateful thanks if you do. Avoid any framing that implies the other site's content is really your own.

Of course, all your stories on the site are relevant (we hope!). Identify your own back issues as your own, though, in the link list, so users can distinguish your stories from the background info.

If you hate letting people out the door, you may decide to put all the links at the end of the story. That way, someone would come to the links with the full context. Of course, postponing the outbound links just frustrates most Web users. They expect those links to appear next to the first few paragraphs as a kind of submenu, allowing them to skip your piece and go to something they are really interested in. Forcing people to wait for links is like making students sit through a whole lecture just to find out what questions will be on the exam—a bit inhuman.

Bring together a whole set of stories

If you have done a series of stories on the same subject, or if several writers have triangulated on the same subject, create a page that integrates all those and shows people why they should read each one. You have an enormous advantage over print newspapers because your archive is all online, and you can turn out a special edition, just by posting an aggregating page. APBNews.com did a wonderful job pulling together police reports, articles, maps, audio, and video to tell the tale of nine unsolved murders in the Great Basin desert. You could play detective, using their questions and examining the evidence.

If you're covering a high-profile trial, like the Microsoft anti-trust case or the case of the cops who killed an unarmed immigrant, you have a chance to post the court filings, daily observations, and backgrounders, so that a visitor can get as much information as might go into a non-fiction book.

Even though each story will probably have to be short, you can offer so many stories that you saturate the subject. You begin to be the place to go to get the latest.

Multiple links—multiple sources—are desirable.

—Roland de Wolk,
Introduction to Online Journalism

See: Dube (2001), Gingras (2001), Layne (2001), Nielsen (1998b, 1998c, 1999e, 2000b), Scasny (2001).

Case Study: News Articles at Wired News

Wired.com offers Wired News arranged in five categories—business, culture, politics, technology, and top stories. Appealing to a niche audience (sophisticated high-tech folks who live and work electronically), the writers identify trends, tease out the implications of events their readers might otherwise dismiss, and spot new gizmos. By bringing these ahead-of-the-wave topics to our notice, these very cool journalists give many of us a reason to visit the site on our daily cruise through the Web.

Having such a specific audience to write for, Wired News journalists can build their leads around the readers' biases and opinions. For instance, reporting that the National Book Foundation would now consider e-books for the National Book Award, M. J. Rose writes:

But there's a catch.

Publishers submitting e-books must send a hard copy of the work—printed and bound on letter-size paper.

She knows that we'll be outraged. Her two-paragraph lead sets its hook. We want to know more about these Neanderthals over at the National Book Foundation. We want to know how they can justify such a stupid demand. And we hope to hear someone else attacking them for being hypocrites or old fogeys.

Sure enough, she gets great quotes on both sides of the debate. And, like most Wired News reporters, she doesn't bother explaining what this audience already knows—what e-books are, for instance. She assumes we know, and then she lets us find out more through her examples. After mentioning one successful e-book, she cries out:

> How much of the hyperlinked <u>story</u> would keep its integrity if printed out?

Embedding a link within her rhetorical question makes her point. On the paper page, that link is dead. On the screen, you can click it to find out more about Caitlin Fisher's e-book, *These Waves of Girls* (which recently won the Electronic Literature Organization's fiction award).

Unlike writers at traditional media, most of whom have to express their opinions obliquely through slant, some of these Wired News writers create little personal essays—more like *The Atlantic* and *Harper's* than Associated Press. For instance, Reena Jana argues that artists creating their own software are turning code into a form of conceptual art. But her pace is Web-fast. Here's her lead:

> Sometimes a commercial software program like Flash or Photoshop doesn't offer artists all of the creative tools they need.
>
> So some, like the duo of Jennifer and Kevin McCoy, write their own programs—and along the way arguably turn the tedious task of writing code into an art form.

The site emphasizes two-to-four paragraph openings, giving the text a wider layout, then throwing in a See Also with links to related articles before letting you read on. Result: those openings have to live on their own, as a miniature story, while drawing you in enough to jump to the See Also and go on.

For instance, here's the whole opening for Steve Kettmann's article, "1,001 Arabian Nights of Sex."

> ABU DHABI, United Arab Emirates—It's all about sex.
>
> That, at least, was the surprise conclusion that came bursting out of a panel discussion Monday on what people in the Arab world are looking for when they go to the Internet. In other words, they are like Web surfers everywhere else in the world.

Joke! And then the See Also breaks in, like a commercial after the teaser at the start of a TV show. The rest of the story offers a duel of quotes, pro and con, on the idea that even Saudi surfers like sex on the Web.

Every story on Wired News uses short paragraphs, often with alternating quotes, which make the text seem like a conversation; most include some (but not many) links. But almost none have subheads. So you can't easily skip through these articles. The assumption seems to be that you like to read. Perhaps a lot of visitors scan the opening and print.

E-mail Newsletters

When your e-mail newsletter appears in inboxes, it brings your ideas to subscribers who might not have thought about returning to your Web site. These electronic newsletters remind people that you exist, that you take a certain position on an issue that matters to them, and that you want to reach out to them in a virtual conversation. Writing and publishing a newsletter by yourself or with a small group gives you a platform from which to rant, beg, whine, cajole—and entertain. Creating a newsletter for an organization deepens your relationship with the customer, re-enforcing the brand and increasing the likelihood of repeat business. In most cases, e-newsletters drum up new business for the publisher (whether that means selling products, signing up consulting clients, or getting new speaking gigs), while helping to retain old customers and deepening influence in an industry or market.

But most e-mail newsletters are junk. The publishers make mistakes like these:

- Filling the pages with ads—excluding most other content.
- Pretending to provide objective information while actually just promoting their own products, events, and services.
- Reducing the content to a list of phrases and links— giving you too little information to tell whether or not the links are worth pursuing.
- Repurposing press releases that the subscribers already see in the trade journals, or copying someone else's marketing pitch without modifying it, or offering a comment.
- Playing safe, saying nothing controversial, and making no personal statement.
- Letting bad grammar and typos litter the page.
- Refusing to let you unsubscribe.

Most of these problems stem from misunderstanding what subscribers want. Subscribers want to feel as if they are participating

"Buy our shit" does not qualify as having something to say.
—Eric Norlin, *The Titanic Deck Chair Rearrangement Corporation Newsletter*

in a conversation with you. First, that means the conversation must be voluntary. If you just trap people in your mailing list, you are like a bore cornering them at a party. They will squirm, delete, and do anything to get away.

Then, once you've made it clear that the conversation is voluntary, you have to make the exchange worth their time. Because even if you send your newsletter for free, they are paying you with the currency of their attention. And they want more than ideas and links—they want an experience.

Let subscribers choose you

Spam is not news. Don't let management convince you that sending an unsolicited pitch via e-mail is somehow news. It's annoying, counterproductive, and maybe even illegal.

Get permission, or get your teeth kicked in. If you send out any kind of e-mail without getting people's OK, they will react badly. Some will curse you, others will refuse to come to your site ever again, and a few will launch counter-sites, to serve as forums for everyone who hates you. Plus, if you offend knowledgeable geeks or lawyers, they will track down all your service providers and nag them to block you from sending any more e-mail.

Get permission twice. Don't trick people with a little box on your registration form that says, in effect, "If you don't look here and deselect this little checkmark, uh, we will bombard you with mail advertising our products and services, OK?"

These inconspicuous lines do allow someone to opt out, but only if they notice the line, and if they understand the weasel-worded message.

Best to make the user actively check the box, asking for these e-mail notices, newsletters, or sales alerts. Interestingly, at the moment people are registering or purchasing, they have great hopes, and, contrary to the vows they may have made in the past, many people eagerly sign up.

If you are pitching an e-mail newsletter, put a link to an overview and sample, so the nervous or uneasy folks can see exactly what they will be getting. On the overview page, answer key questions:

The Internet community has reached a stage at which an accusation of spamming is almost the same as a conviction for spamming in many people's minds. Many administrators will block your newsletter at the first bleatings of an upset recipient.

—Peter Kent,
Poor Richard's Web Site News

- How often does this newsletter come?
- Who writes this stuff?
- Will there be ads, too?
- What do you do with my e-mail address?
- How can I subscribe? (Another chance to opt in).
- How can I unsubscribe?

To the folks who opt in, send a confirming e-mail and require that they respond, to really get signed up. That process, known as double opt-in, makes people more aware of what they are doing. Also, the confirmation shows you are on the ball, responsive, and quick. You have begun a conversation, through the odd mechanism of e-mail.

From then on, in every e-mail, tell them that they subscribed, and let them unsubscribe easily. Remember—even if I subscribed long ago, my life has changed, and I may want to get off your mailing list. If you don't make that easy, I begin to resent you, and, at the very least, every time I see e-mail from you, I will click Delete.

Let me unsubscribe simply by sending a blank message to a particular e-mail address, which you include in every e-mail you send. In addition, in every e-mail, put the address of the Web page that describes the newsletter and explains how to unsubscribe.

Ideas + Links = Experience

How can your newsletter make the subscriber's life more fun, more efficient, and more profitable? In what way do you intend to change the subscriber's day?

Focus on the moment the person gets your newsletter and skims through it. What experience are you promising?

Don't fool yourself with thoughts of the long-term benefits. Most people want to see something concrete, usable, or amusing in each issue, to justify opening the next one. Sure, you may not be able to hit the target every time, but if you do fairly often provide an idea they can take away, a link to an intriguing site, a tip they can act on, or a story they laugh out loud about...well, they may not unsubscribe just yet.

Clearly, you need to know your audience very well, to anticipate what will work this magic for them. The narrower your niche, the

In order to be invited into the end user's mailbox (and to get the user to read the message), you have to offer something unique and of value.

—John Funk, "The importance of the end-user experience," in ***Poor Richard's E-mail Publishing***

more you can predict what topics will click, but the fewer topic areas you can cover.

Also, many newsletter editors find that a lot of short issues work better than several long ones. People tend to skip through the long ones and miss a lot of good information. To keep an issue short, offload some info into links or into the next issue. A few screens worth would be ideal, but if you really have thicker content, go two to five printed pages, and out.

So now you have to consider frequency. Subscribers want quick access to perishable information (late-breaking news, stock tips, rumors about industry shakeups), so you have to plan to send those messages pretty often. But less critical information, such as reviews of books, promotions for your latest upgrade, success stories from your customers...well, no one wants to hear that kind of stuff every day. If you can, let people choose to get the daily or weekly edition for content that brings fresh news and information, and offer content that smacks of marketing every other week, or monthly.

> Your publishing schedule should reflect the availability/creation of new and different content that is of value and desired by the end user. (John Funk, The importance of the end-user experience)

Visionaries only

Don't even start a newsletter if you have a vague idea to do something "just like so and so," or "because we probably ought to have some kind of a newsletter." That way you will quickly drift into a mechanical, crank-'em-out routine. Pointless: you don't get many subscribers, but you do add another uninspiring item to your weekly To Do list. Save the world, and yourself, from another dud e-mail.

To launch a newsletter, you must envision how you can make a difference for a particular group of people. Your mission must grow out of whatever you have already been doing, while presenting you with a challenge you haven't faced before, a dream you've had, a crusade you can get caught up in. Lame-ass reasons include getting your name out there, telling folks about your latest sales items, or announcing promotions. If you find you're a little fuzzy

on the purpose of your newsletter, but think you have the seed of an idea, then think about your audience and what kind of content they could use, what they would laugh at, or what they would grab and forward to a friend.

We're not talking about your voice here, but your vision. What can you imagine happening as a result of your newsletter, for one person at a time? The more you let your imagination furnish that picture with detail, the more ideas you get for a position, a slogan, a brand and, flowing from that, articles long and short.

Self-promotion is a perfectly acceptable reason for doing a newsletter. But the newsletter won't succeed if you don't have an idea of the way your content could make an impact on individual subscribers' lives.

Write up a blurb for your newsletter, to set direction for yourself. This is a cheap version of a mission statement, but it helps you figure out why someone might subscribe and what you have to offer.

I'd encourage any sort of style that evokes any emotions in readers.
—Chris Pirillo,
Poor Richard's E-Mail Publishing

Your own voice, please

Once you have a vision and a blurb, you should have a sense of the tone to take. Help people feel like they know you personally. Admit quirks, obsessions, and passions. If you're excited, show it.

Develop your role like an actor, feeling your way into certain speeches, bringing in sense memories, grounding yourself in your through-line—the goal you are pursuing, act-to-act. To sound like yourself takes many rewrites. Like an actor, enrich your part by stretching for new intensity, different takes on your central position, twists and turns. Open yourself up to random inspiration because the spirit can take you way beyond your original concept.

You can tell your persona is working when you get a lot of enthusiastic responses, complex arguments about what you said, suggestions for other avenues to follow, or tips on relevant sites. You are letting the spirit flow through you and getting it back a hundredfold.

Make your newsletter *from someone.* Give it a consistent unifying voice that people can connect with every time they read it. (Geoffrey Kleinman, In the trenches with *The Kleinman Report*)

When we talk about developing your persona, we know it sounds as if we are recommending you fake the personal. That won't work. Really, we are talking about exploring your own reactions, going beyond the identity you built up on your resume, discovering new aspects of your self, becoming more articulate. You might as well put your heart into this effort because if you choose to write an e-mail newsletter, you are committing yourself to a lot of writing, and honesty can help you turn out clean prose quickly.

Their voices, too

People love to be recognized, mentioned, and praised in your newsletter. If someone sends you a tip, follow up on it and thank them publicly by a personal e-mail. In this way, you build up a team of contributors and a community.

Getting feedback indicates they trust you. Reciprocate. Eric Norlin starts his newsletter from the Titanic Deck Chair Rearrangement Corporation, "Valued Co-conspirators!" That's the tone.

Focus on only a few offers

If you're going to market something in your newsletter, keep the focus on one offer, or one or two, not half a dozen. You'll sell better, and you won't make your newsletter look like a tissue of pitches.

Ads and promos are OK, too, as long as your layout separates them. Generally, even in HTML newsletters, the text ads get better click-through rates than the graphic ads. We don't know why, but perhaps it's that people just naturally steer clear of those obvious ad blocks, and get caught in the text trap.

People understand that you need sponsors to pay the costs of your e-mail service, and they don't seem to object to occasional plugs. But make sure the advertisers are responsible companies because you are saying, "Give these folks a try." If the advertiser turns out to be a bum, you've broken your faith with your

Uniqueness counts, especially online.
—Chris Pirillo,
Poor Richard's E-Mail Publishing

I think that campaigning will increasingly be through e-mail, not through Web sites.
—Dick Morris, Vote.com

| 389

subscribers—and that trust is worth a lot more than the dollars you earn for the ad.

If you're going to ramble on about your offer, give each benefit its own paragraph. Chunk your pitch so people can skip and skim. They're more likely to dip into a bunch of short paragraphs than one long block.

If your newsletter ends up being mostly marketing, people may develop a habit of deleting dozens of issues, then read one, almost by accident—and you could get a sale then. The payoff, financially, is uncertain. But the newsletter keeps going out to all those people who opted in, making your presence known and tempting them to double-click. Not a very inspiring prospect, but as in so many aspects of PR and marketing, persistence does get results.

To get heard above the din, you should offer some useful information before and after the marketing riffs. Perhaps you can give the gist of an inside report you've just published, available from a special page on your Web site. In this way, you benefit people without a sale and predispose them to rely on you. If they trust your content, eventually they will trust your argument that they ought to buy x, y, or z from you, or from a partner.

Make Web pages support the newsletter

What if someone accidentally deletes an issue? What if a new subscriber finds out about that special issue you did last December? How can wanderers on the Web find out about your newsletter?

Web pages devoted to your newsletter support it, and give you a venue for archives, supplementary rants, downloads, images, and whatnot. In this way, you can keep plugging your site throughout your newsletter ("For more, see...."), treating the site as a resource.

Respond

The bigger and better your list, the more e-mail you get. You get ideas, reactions, good feedback, and complaints—you'll learn from your subscribers, if you provoke them to write.

To keep up your end of the conversation, though, you must reply personally. Take it from the folks who run newsletters with several hundred thousand subscribers—you get deluged with

"What, if anything, keeps you up at night worrying?"
"What keeps me up at night is doing my own e-mail."
—Gordon Moore, co-founder of Intel, interviewed by Matt Richtel, New York *Times*

e-mail when you say something outrageous, when you goof, and, sometimes, when you have no idea why. But you have to reply or hire someone who can imitate your voice, to say something to each correspondent.

For each person, the newsletter is just you, personally, talking to him or her individually. One subscriber has no idea how many other e-mails you are getting. Each correspondent just wants to know what you think about his or her comment, within a few hours.

What a chore. But, in a way, you promised to respond, when you offered subscriptions. You extended your hand, and now they are shaking it.

Luckily, these e-mails often fall into several categories, and after you have answered a few dozen, you can start copying and pasting the main response, after saying something in the first line indicating that you really have read their e-mail. Now you're talking!

See: Allen, Kania, and Yaeckel (2001), Funk (1999), Kent (1999), Kent and Calishain (2001), Kleinman (1999), Manjoo (2001), Norlin and Locke (2001), Ohi (2001), Pirillo (1999), Rose and Adair-Hoy (2001), Sammons (1999).

Case Study: E-mail Newsletter from the Titanic Deck Chair Rearrangement Corporation

If the ship is going down, play a little music and rearrange the deck chairs. That's what Eric Norlin and Christopher Locke have done with their e-mail newsletter, launched from www.tdcrc.com. Having started a similar irregular rant from Personalization.com, the pair left when that ship got sold, and set up a Web site that imitates IBM, with its sliced logo and corporate layout; then undermines the whole effect by saying, "Damn you, sign up!"

You know how some computers address you as "Valued Sony Customer" until you change the default? Well this newsletter addresses you as "Valued Co-Conspirators."

Then we hear how Eric's work is not going well, Chris has been busy with his book on gonzo marketing, and clients are finking out on jobs, because the bosses only want sales copy, not content.

You get to see a little of what's going on in their lives, like a screen cam showing them at their desks. You hear them razz each other and answer questions from their subscribers.

They can write tight when they need to make a point. And they can rant like a Mark Twain on deadline:

> Not 48 hours ago, I told Locke I had made a resolution
> not to send to this list until I got my head straight.
> Yea, I've been a bit off lately—stressed, if you will.
> So—in grand, overblown, Wild West American fash-
> ion—I hiked up my pants, grabbed my bootstraps,
> and mounted my horse (no, not like that). I was riding
> deep into the desert of my soul.

Fortunately, his sense of humor has not died. He comes back to life to announce the Apocalypse. But first, he reminisces about his father, a dedicated Microsoft devotee. Eric was raised on Microsoft.

> In short, I'm not one of the Grateful Dead, Apple-
> rules, Open Source, Hackers-not-Crackers adherents.

When he gets to the point, he cusses, he kicks, and he stomps. Some of his maxims:

- Personalization means nothing without being personal. Period. That's it. Really—it isn't much more complicated than that.
- Personalization technologies are pointless without honesty.
- Never even consider crossing the "privacy line."

What's invigorating about these rants is that they defy conventional corporate thinking, arguing that the Web's true nature is personal—a way to connect with other people, one by one, rather than a new mass medium. The Web is not the next TV, thank God. And both Eric and Chris have a bad attitude. Eric says,

> Become an artist, not a salesperson. Start a tangled
> conversation—and make fun of the new boss. Better
> yet, writhe onstage in a wedding dress cooing about
> your virginity.

Impractical, imprudent, immodest—yes, they'd probably agree that their newsletter is all of that. But we find that even on days when we are deleting one e-mail after another as fast as we can go, we stop and read this newsletter for a bracing dose of personal outrage.

Weblogs

Putting up a Weblog lets you comment every day on a subject you care intensely about—a hobby, an idea, or, most likely, yourself. You have to care intensely, though, to undertake the work, which involves regularly recording your experiences, your visits to other sites, and your take on the news, and then posting those on your blog.

The most self-involved blogs track the owner's dreams, complaints, shopping lists, sexual experiences (or, more often, lack thereof), and paranoid fantasies. But many sites undertake public crusades, arguing for a political, social, or ethical point of view, interpreting each day's events through that lens. And when a blogger reaches out to a niche audience such as an academic discipline, an occupation, or a political group, the site acts as a forum, bringing together links, comments, and outrage, while the owner stirs the pot and adds the secret sauce.

Blogs are a form of personal journalism. They get around the gatekeepers at the big newspapers, magazines, TV and radio stations, and humongous portals. In the old days, we had to rely on producers, editors, and even writers to put together a summary of the day's news, because there was only so much time and paper, and these physical constraints meant the media could only give us filtered news. Of course, the media folks loved filtering the news, and still do. But now blogs let anyone be a publisher, and the gates are opening.

> A new style of journalism, based on a "raw feed" directly from the source, is emerging. (Paul Andrews, "Who are your gatekeepers?" in *Hypodermia*)

Running a blog is like having your own TV show, where you sit at the anchor desk and call in one feed after another. Instead of just mouthing off to your friends or submitting articles to an editor for

changes and possibly rejection, you post what you think. And if other folks who think along the same lines happen to put up their own blogs, and you link to theirs, and they link to yours, you begin to build a community. But even if you are just solo, you may draw people who are looking for material that has not been sanitized, generalized, and neutralized by the gatekeepers.

Record whatever whenever

Tracking a mix of random thoughts, pointers to Web pages you've discovered, and rants on the spur of the moment, Web logs are an Internet form that makes a daily journal seem tame. The key is to add enough perspective so the reader hears your voice, but not so much that you turn the text into a full article. Blogs are more casual, informal, and tentative.

> Sometimes I'm working on a column about a particular topic. I may say so here, telling readers what I believe at the moment and why—and then invite you to comment. (Dan Gillmor, The whys and hows of Weblogs)

They invite comments from visitors. And often those comments get commented on and reinserted into the blog.

The conversation becomes visible. And that very record of the interaction drives the virtual exchange and encourages it to grow. As other bloggers point to your site, traffic and your e-mail increase.

But because the blog is embedded in the Web, real-time, you will feel compelled to update often. Some bloggers post comments every few hours, others every few days. (The more often you post, the more often people come by).

Payoff: You get to see your stuff up immediately—compared to the days it might take an average site to post your piece, or the months you might wait for a paper magazine to appear. Instantaneity makes the process addictive.

Instant communication power by letting you post your thoughts to the Web whenever the urge strikes.

—Slogan for Blogger.com

A weblog is kind of a continual tour, with a human guide you get to know.

**—Weblogs.com,
What are Weblogs?**

Even when you're writing for a weekly magazine, it seems like it takes forever to see your work in print. With a Weblog, you hit the send key and it's out there. It's the perfect disposable journalism for our age. (Deborah Branscum, quoted in J. D. Lasica, Blogging as a form of journalism)

Growing like a weed

Structure? Sometimes. Often, the new thoughts just get wedged in at the top, shoving everything else down, so a visitor can scroll down for a reverse-chronology tour of the blogger's changing thoughts. In this sense, the organization of the blog, as a whole, just evolves organically. There's a theme, usually, but not much architecture.

Many writers who are used to working in structured environments (technical writing, journalism, instructional design) relish the freedom to go their own way, without having to follow someone else's guidelines, cautions, or dictates. You don't have to work within some schema, document type definition, or template. You can just ramble along.

Linklist or junkpile

Some blogs are just linklists that keep on growing. But what really makes a list into a blog is the commentary. You don't have to say much. But say something. If you were moved enough to capture the link, say why. A sentence will do. In fact, one-sentence comments work best.

But who can resist adding an after-thought, and then taking that back and reconsidering. In this way, the links take on more mystery, tempting the reader to go find out what provoked all this cogitation.

But you aren't forced to offer balancing pro and con quotes from so-called experts, so you look balanced and objective. You can quote any damn fool you want, and you don't have to give equal time. Of course, to blog successfully, you must start out opinionated. Pigheaded is good.

Resist the pressure to take back a crazy statement. Don't veer to the middle of the road. The blog is designed to let you make mistakes, try out concepts, and sound off, without having to pretty up your ideas.

But a funny thing happened on the way to the Web's irrelevance: the blogging phenomenon, a grass-roots movement that may show the seeds for new forms of journalism, public discourse, interactivity and online community.

—J.D. Lasica,
Blogging as a form of journalism

Blogs tend to be impressionistic, telegraphic, raw, honest, individualistic, highly opinionated and passionate, often striking an emotional chord.

—J. D. Lasica,
Weblogs: A new source of news

The links can take people to solid, reliable sites, and crazy, embarrassingly messed-up sites. You don't have a corporate patron looking over your shoulder and tut-tutting a link because the target site, interesting as it is, violates some taboo. In fact, the earliest blogs rose to the surface because the owners found so many odd-ball sites that their lists became a goofy portrait of the Web. So if you find a page interesting, post a notice. (Determined bloggers report visiting 150-200 sites a day, scanning for news).

Making sense

After a while, dedicated bloggers begin to see that they are follow-ing a consistent path through the Web, and their postings track their own intellectual (well, maybe) development. You begin to act as a guide to the field, like the folks at About (formerly Mining Co), who collect the best links in their field, give you a little con-text, and then send you off.

Your focus, like your personality, filters the news, gives it your own slant, and makes weird sense after a while. Part of the process is unraveling the kinks in your own mind.

Counter the conglomerates

Blogs let individual voices get heard. They seem credible in a cul-ture dominated by mergers of big print, big music, big radio, big TV, and big portals, where self-serving mutual publicity makes ordi-nary people feel like they are being run over by a steamroller.

The cost of entry is your time, because you can use free online tools to publish your blogs. If you are already obsessed with a sub-ject and cruise the Net incessantly looking for ideas in that area, the Weblog is just a notepad for your explorations, and you won't begrudge the time involved, particularly if you get feedback. So you are not burdened by the financial burdens that worry the CFOs of corporations. And, ironically, if your ideas get picked up, responded to, linked to, and amplified by a community, you become an author-ity to be quoted by the mainstream media.

Get validation from incoming links

You become an authority just because other people link to your blog. But the point is not the audience size, but the depth and extent of the conversation.

> I don't want an audience. I feel I'm writing stuff that's part of a conversation. Conversations don't have audiences (Doc Searls, quoted in J.D. Lasica, Weblogs: A new source of news)

Searls suggests that as you persist, you develop niche expertise, and the network of related blogs becomes a sort of reputation engine.

See: Andrews (2001), Branscum (2001), Gillmor (2001), Lasica (2001a, 2001b)

Case Study: Weblog by Dave Winer

DaveNet is an occasional Weblog from Dave Winer, who long ago created a fantastic outlining program called More, and more recently set up UserLand, a company offering developers an environment for creating Web sites (including Weblogs). He's a major mover among programmers because he's got wide-angle vision, but also because he likes chatting, e-mailing, speaking at conferences, and weblogging. He gets his ideas out there, and some of these ideas matter to anyone who writes for the Web.

Idea #1: The Web is a writing environment. "Writers flow their ideas and opinion to people who only know the writer by name, not by brand." He argues that the Web is a conversation, and that

fact works against the conglomerates taking over the whole Web with their megalomaniac branding. But he argues that writing for an employer necessarily compromises your integrity because you may have to over-simplify, tell only part of the truth, or outright lie. If so, he urges you to write directly on the Web, to see what difference you can make.

Idea #2: The Web gives you the power to publish as an individual. You don't have to kowtow to a boss, accept editorial changes, or compromise in order to get published. You just publish directly on the Web, as an individual. That's the spirit of the Weblog, and Dave's postings are inspirational.

Idea #3: It's a challenging time for professional writers. How come? Because amateurs, posting on discussion boards, communicating with their peers by e-mail, and publishing their own opinions on Weblogs, are able to offer their personal account of events, their individual reaction to news breaking across the Web, without being constricted by corporate policy, whether explicit or just implied. Amateurs may have more integrity than the pros. As a litmus test, he challenges professional journalists to try writing one story that could undermine their own livelihood. "I also have an interest in the pros adopting the techniques of the amateurs, doing less shaping, coloring, and casting of news, and more straight delivery." He's not opposed to professionalism, but he thinks there should be a little more mutual respect, and maybe even a recognition that "LittleCo's can do things that the Big Ones can't."

Dave asks tough questions of himself, and us. For instance, he asks himself whether he has integrity, when he writes his column:

> I try to disclose my interests, and maybe I don't succeed in doing that, or perhaps a new reader comes along and doesn't understand that I'm often writing about software I create. I try to not push my software too much through DaveNet. On the other hand Scripting News is an hour-to-hour log of my work. Inevitably it does push what I do because that's what it's about. But I don't tell all there. So perhaps that's an integrity problem.

That kind of self-reflection is what makes his Weblog fascinating. You feel as if you are listening in on his internal debate—not watching a polished slide show. Oddly, that humility combined with his natural aggressiveness makes Dave a leader. His Weblog defines the stubborn, almost truculent stance of a lot of bloggers, and he speaks for most of them when he says:

> There is a big difference between what I do and what the BigPubs do. I'm an amateur. I make software. I write because I love to write, and because I want to make sure that my side gets out without interference.

POST |

My Idea:

Post to HotText@yahoogroups.com

Express your own idea on:
HotText@yahoogroups.com

Subscribe:
HotText-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

Unsubscribe:
HotText-unsubscribe@yahoogroups.com

Visit:
http://www.WebWritingThatWorks.com