How to get people to read the company newsletter?

Question: I am the executive assistant of a medium-size, 24-hour-operation, family-run healthcare company; this is my eighth year of working here.

Recently, the HR manager and I decided to change the format and distribution process of our corporate newsletter from once a week to once a month and from offline (print copies) to online (as all of our employees now have e-mail accounts). We've found that this saves paper, time and money for the company and that many members of management prefer to receive it this way.

We've also upgraded the quality, going from a two-page black & white publication with ho-hum, everyday news to a snazzy-color Microsoft Publisher newsletter complete with insightful articles about employees (including a monthly spotlight feature), corporate teamwork (quoted articles from sites like monster.com), and, of course the regular content (anniversaries, employees of the month, notes from the different divisions announcing meetings, kudos for a job well done, etc.).

We've also posted the newsletter on our Web site and e-mail out a link to all employees so they can read it whenever they want or download copies. Employees get every-day access to their e-mail accounts both at work and via Web mail when home.

The problem is, despite all our efforts, we've gotten the impression that no one is reading it. It's really important that people DO read it because it contains important information about mandatory procedure changes, meetings and the like.

Management wants the newsletter to keep being published, and we enjoy putting it together. We've tried putting in a monthly contest to get people to read the newsletter all the way through, but the rate of response is tremendously low, and we're finding that many people simply aren't checking their e-mail.

Short of going back to print copies (which we've left out for people to read ... which just get left out), and stuffing 250 copies of the newsletter into 250 paychecks once a month, what other ideas have other admins come up with to interest people in reading your corporate newsletter?

Feedback is much appreciated! -- Frustrated in Upstate N.Y

Comments

How long is this newsletter? From personal experience, I have learned that any email over 3 sentences long is not going to get read. If I get something that is really long, like a newsletter in my email box and I have a bunch of other things in my email box, guess which is going to get ignored? And if it is long, the only chance of it being read is if I print it. For whatever reason, I prefer to read long documents in hard copy.
If there are things that people really need to know and respond to, I would suggest sending that in a separate email that is very short, sweet and to the point.

Posted by: | October 26, 2006 at 01:12 PM

What a lot of hard work you've put into this! You must be proud of it! Unfortunately, in today's electronic environment, there's too much competing for our attention. And all your wonderful work will be for NOTHING if no one reads it. It's very true that, for one reason or another, that kind of document gets read more often if it's provided in hard copy - maybe delivered to everyone's desk in-box once a month? But if you're not willing to do that, you can 1) Provide the email newsletter in a form that pops up immediately INSIDE the email under the subject line, so it's right there - people don't have to click on a link or open an attachment, and if you make it compelling enough, they might stay with you and scroll down to continue reading; OR 2) send weekly, shorter emails that highlight the absolutely vital stuff, and make sure you mention in the first line or two if you need a response from them.

Sorry for all this, but from bitter experience I know that your first, last and (almost) only priority should be GETTING THEM TO READ IT. Every content, layout, etc. decision should be informed by that parameter.

Posted by: Anita C. | October 26, 2006 at 01:40 PM

Hello! Our Communications Manager does send out a quarterly newsletter to everyone in the division also. However, she sends it out as an attachment as a pdf. Works really well because it can be opened immediately upon receipt instead of having to log onto a website. We find it gets read much more this way.

Hope this helps!

Posted by: Rosa | October 26, 2006 at 01:52 PM

You might want to consider forcing a response. Perhaps by starting with Rosa's plan by sending out an e-mail with a PDF attachment.

The additional step is to require a response to the e-mail with wording that once someone responds this e-mail, they are indicating they have read the document.

One way to do this is just ask for a return e-mail. The responses would need to be tracked.

Another way is to add a voting button indicating "I have read this e-mail and enclosed document 'Yes'. This way you can track who has read the e-mail and document. If someone does not respond, a follow up can be made.

Posted by: | October 26, 2006 at 02:08 PM

The forced response is the best way. Also, you might want to indicate their responses will be tied to their performance evaluations as there is required info they need to read and keep updated on.

I find if it's tied to money...they will respond!
I think you are going to hack off a lot of folks if you tie it to their performance review.

For folks to read it, you need the backing of management. Management needs to be the ones "inspiring" them to read it and setting the example of why it is important to do so. If they aren't then it will be an uphill battle for you. There should be positive reinforcements to encourage readership, not negative ones that will only make folks resent you guys.

I know that you have already attempted contests in the past, however this one could change things up a little if you haven't already tried it. Who knows, it might get the employees to read the newsletter. In one of our magazines that our office subscribes to "Cooking Light" I believe, there is a contest which asks the reader to locate an object throughout the issue. It can be something as simple an picture insert of a pencil or pair of scissors. You can insert it within the text, on an edge of a page, etc. And the person who finds them all could win the prize, such as movie tickets, lunch gift cards. Or on a bigger scale, place the winners name (they can enter as many times as they win) into a raffle for a tv, stereo, etc. that is drawn monthly or quarterly basis, depending on the distribution (wkly or monthly)of the newsletter. Just remember that the key is (just like how we do w/our children....) instant gratification. Good Luck!!

My suggestion: e-mail sent with PDF attachment & voting button.
Also, newsletter should be "flagged" as "very important" or whatever similar designation is available in your e-mail delivery system, especially if there are consequences to not following mandatory procedure changes. Top management leading by example: the electronic newsletter is the means for transmitting info formerly in hard copy. Top managers could even write short articles or have a column which would appear ONLY in the electronic newsletter. In the 12 years that I've been at my workplace, we have increasingly moved away from hard copy and into electronic documents. If my public agency bureaucracy can do it (although we will never be paperless), so can your business.

You could print off some hard copies and post them once a month in common public areas like Break Rooms (on the wall next to the coffee / water stations, next to the daily paper, on the refrigerator, or bulletin boards) and/or on bulletin boards next to the Copy Machines or Mail Stations.

We started a new program at our plant recently called "Stall Talk". You know how sometimes in bathrooms, you see advertisements on the back of the stall door? Can you resist reading it? We brought the same concept in for our employee newsletter, wellness tips, and company announcements.

EVERYONE goes to the bathroom. EVERYONE will be a captive audience, uninterrupted, to read whatever it is
you need to post. PLUS, they will read it multiple times over the course of the month, resulting in them being more likely to retain the information over time (due to spaced repetition learning).

Depending on the size of your facility, this may or may not work for you. But changing it once a month may not be too much of a burden, especially if you can get different admins to be responsible for getting it up in "their" area's restrooms. Because we are small, I change the posting every week. I have access to a bunch of 1 page wellness tips through our health insurance broker. You can also access free wellness newsletters through groups like the American Lung Assoc., etc.

People joke about it....but it is extremely effective.

Good luck,
Julie

Posted by: Julie | October 27, 2006 at 02:52 PM

You said that you use this newsletter to accomplish several different things, including employee recognition, notice of meetings, procedure changes, etc. I think you might be trying to accomplish too much with one communication.

I would recommend separating the way you communicate the day-to-day business items meeting notices, procedure changes, etc.) and the more motivational things (employee recognition, anniversaries, articles written by employees, etc.).

Some people simply aren't interested in the lighter items, and will probably not read them no matter what you do. If you separate the meatier "business" items, providing them using separate e-mail communications, they are more likely to pay attention.

I used to co-write an employee newsletter, which was exclusively the lighter, "rah rah" stuff. We didn't include any "official" business items in it. We found that most people read the newsletter the first few months we ran it, but interested died out after a while.

Posted by: Lisa | October 30, 2006 at 03:01 PM

I'm a little late getting on-board with this one ... I like what Lisa says about separating business items from the lighter fare. I also like Julie's idea of a "captive audience"!

Contests are great and I've seen the one Tanya talks about.

You might ask a question at the beginning of the email about something in the newsletter and award something like movie tickets to the first person that responds correctly each month. This way people would have to search for the answer (read) and do it quickly in order to be first. Mission accomplished.

You could have other contests (brain bruiser, trivia) for other prizes as well.

I've done newsletters for several years that are mailed out to my client's clients. Trying to get interest in the contests is difficult. You make them too hard and no one gets it ... too easy and it just isn't fun.

Since your readership all work together, try to find something that will get people talking to each other to try and solve.
My first impression would be that if there are important changes in the newsletter that everyone should know about, a newsletter is not the way to do it. For most people, a newsletter is not required reading. When we are making important changes that everyone needs to know, we send an e-mail labeled "policy change" or "procedure change" or something like that. I don't think those type of important items belong in a newsletter.

Posted by: Mark | November 17, 2006 at 12:44 PM