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**In my 30 years in political communications, I've seen a lot of good and bad direct mail. But nothing gets my dander up like legislative newsletters that ignore the basic principles of sound communication and fail completely to inform their audience effectively.**

# Creating legislative newsletters that tell your story

**S**olid blocks of small print copy, headed with one or two word titles like Education or Fiscal Responsibility that only reveal the source's ability to spell correctly...tiny, inanimate grip-n-grin photos that convey no real impression of the source's personality...copy filled with government jargon and double-speak the average citizen can't decipher let alone understand.

I grind my teeth and want to scream. It is as though once in office every word uttered has become important and the audience is supposed to not mind being made to work...and work hard to get the message.

One of my own elected representatives recently sent me such a newsletter. It was so bad, I sent a note that said: If you paid professionals to create this newsletter, they stole your money and should be sued for gross malpractice; if it was done in-house, you need professional help.

As a professional print communicator of considerable experience and some expertise, I offer the following seven points for making your next legislative newsletter the positive communications vehicle it should be.

**1. Put the essential message(s) into the headlines and visual images.** Advertising research has consistently shown that 4 out of 5 readers don't read the copy. As they peruse your newsletter, they scan the headlines and look at the photos and other visual images. If your message is hidden in a block of gray 8-point copy, you're missing **80%** of the audience. If you have the secret to eternal life or a guaranteed winning lottery number buried in the copy only 1 in 5 readers *have a chance* to find it.

**2. Prioritize accomplishments and feature only the most important.** You can't cover everything. Be selective and informative on the strongest topics. In choosing what to cover, less is always more. It is better to discuss 3-4 topics in some depth than to touch on a dozen or so. In a 4-page newsletter (11 x 17 folded to 8.5 x 11), you should choose an absolute maximum of 5-6 points. Resist the temptation to include something for everyone and to fill every bit of space. You really don't have something compelling to say to everyone, so play to *your strengths*. White space can actually improve the readability of your piece.



**3. Headlines and subheads should make statements, not just label topics.** If 80% of the readers will not read beyond the headlines, you had better say something **in the headlines**. Instead of labeling a block of copy Education, say Councilman Smith fighting to reduce class sizes. Instead of titling a section Fiscal Responsibility, try Councilwoman Jones holds hearing on Housing Department spending.

**4. Select photographs that convey impressions of the source, not that just memorialize events.** Expressive photographs can send valuable non-verbal messages about the source. They can demonstrate accessibility, verify involvement and hard work, and illustrate commonalities of interest. These are all elements in answering constituents' most important questions about their elected officials: Would I like this person? Would she understand my concerns? Would he listen to my point of view? A few well chosen interactive photos can do more to answer these questions affirmatively than volumes of print copy.

**5. Caption your photos with informational copy.** After only headlines and visual images, research shows that photo captions are read more than body copy. Identify the subjects in the photograph and describe the activity.

**6. Minimize the use of jargon, acronyms and government-ese.**

Those working in government routinely use acronyms and jargons to refer to a myriad of programs and departments, but the average citizen can be baffled by the liberal use of terms like DoITT, OCME, MARC, ACS and DOH in constituent communications. If you must use acronyms, follow the rule in journalistic style books. Use the full name in the first reference, eg. Department of Information Technology and Telecommunication (DoITT), before using the acronym by itself. If there is any doubt in your mind that a term or phrase is not in common everyday usage by regular folks, don't assume...reword or explain.

**7. Edit, edit, edit.** After you have written the copy for your newsletter, your work is only half done. Go back and simplify wording wherever possible, brutally eliminate unnecessary language, make certain every sentence is clear and declarative. Give a copy to someone who has not been involved in the writing and ask them to make editing suggestions. Current or former English teachers can usually be helpful as long as they aren't inflexible on *selective* and *occasional* colloquial language and usage.

Read the copy out loud. Listen to the way it sounds. It should sound conversational. If you have trouble with a sentence or a phrase, change it.

*Following these recommendations will not dramatically increase detailed newsletter readership or guarantee your re-election. It will help you achieve the most important objective of all constituent communications...to get your message across to the people. Remember your message is not really about the copy or the photos or the graphic design.*

*Message is the information and impressions your newsletter readers take away from the experience. Adhering to the seven points made here will make that experience easier and more informative for your constituents.*



**8th Grader Jimmy Davis demonstrates a new computer for councilwoman Braown. Ms. Brown sponsored funding that enabled P.S. 88 to double the number of computers in the school.**