



The Local Network

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Golden Valley County Museum
Beach, North Dakota

10 TIPS FOR BETTER NEWSLETTERS

by Tom Wolf, Editor, *The Local Historian*, January 2007

Here are 10 tips for improving the appearance, content, and effectiveness of your newsletter.

1. **Make sure you cover all five 'W's** - *who, what, when, where, and why*. Having a special exhibit? Have you mentioned when it opens and when it closes? Don't make the mistake of assuming that because it was discussed at your last meeting, 'everyone knows.'
2. **Distance yourself.** Try not to be overly familiar. Not every reader will have the same level of information about your organization (especially new members!), so

be sure that you explain things completely. Think, 'What if I didn't know anything about this? Would I be able to attend/ respond/ get my friends to participate from

what's written here?' Consider asking some people who aren't familiar with your organization to read a few issues of your newsletter and give you constructive feedback. Better yet, ask for feedback on the draft of your next issue before you finish it and send it out.

3. **Write about news!** This seems obvious, but it's more fun to know in advance (and in detail) about what's going to happen, so you can participate, than to read about what's already happened.
4. **Expand content by suggesting websites** (either your own or someone else's) where more detail is available to those who want it. This lets you offer more substance than you probably could print, yet keeps your newsletter readable by keeping it brief. It is a service to your readers because it offers them more information, and in printed newsletters saves money that you might otherwise spend on printing.
5. **A good picture is worth a thousand words - probably more.** Use visuals to tell your story whenever you can - scanners and digital cameras make it easier than ever. Consider devoting about a quarter to a third of each page to photos or other visuals. And it's true: people like to see pictures of *people*.

6. **Make sure your newsletter tells a story even if you just skim through it.** The truth is that some readers won't read every word, but they may give you anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes when your newsletter arrives - not that they don't want to read it, but you're competing with a lot of other things for their attention. Sometimes it may get put aside without being picked up again (not that you or I would ever do this!). If all you get is a quick skim, what would you want the reader to learn or remember? Use pictures and captions, bold type, color contrasts, screens, and other devices to make key things stand out.
7. **Type-wise, 'tis a gift to be simple.** Choose one basic tried-and-true typeface like Times, New Century Schoolbook, or Palatino for text, and stick to it. Use a second, contrasting typeface like Helvetica Bold, Ariel Bold, or Tahoma Bold for headlines. Sans serif typefaces like Helvetica, Ariel, or Tahoma (there are thousands more) work well for short material like headlines or captions. This isn't a hard-and-fast rule, but until you develop an eye for type, it's probably a good convention to follow.
8. **Use graphic devices to break up copy, engage readers, and lead them through your publication.** Look at well-designed popular magazines to see how professional designers use initial caps, enlarged quotes, rules, and bold type to organize or break up the page and lead the reader's eye, then think about how you can use the same ideas.
9. **Just because you can do it doesn't mean that you should.** Desktop publishing has opened up all kinds of design possibilities for both print and electronic newsletters, but a little shadow type goes a long way, so

don't overdo the special effects. Resist the temptation to outline text boxes, too. When you do use an outlined box, use the 'text inset' feature of your desktop

publishing program to create a little space (say 10 points) between the type and the edge of the box. It will look better and be easier to read.

10. **Take advantage of grids and templates.** Set up a grid underlying your layout, then work within that grid. For example, this article is laid out in two columns, each the width of two of the narrow columns, in our grid. Most desktop publishing programs let you set up a grid of your choosing, and some offer professionally-designed newsletter templates that can be a good choice if design is not your strong suit.

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Why form partnerships?

Most often, organizations join forces to meet a mutual need or tackle a problem they cannot handle on their own. They may choose to enter a formal partnership, with terms spelled out in a written agreement, or they may partner on an informal basis. In either case, it's important to clarify the responsibilities of each partner.

A valuable resource for planning partnerships is The Partnership for a Nation of Learners, an initiative of the Institute of Museum and Library Services and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (www.partnershipforlearners.org). Check out the website for information on the partnership process, planning tools and additional resources for addressing local needs.

When entering into a partnership, it's sometimes useful to follow a prescribed process for identifying needs. At other times, the need is self-evident.

Learn as much as you can about your partners, say those with experience in community collaborations. Even in small communities where people know most everyone, it's important to learn about the cultures of other groups. Share organizational profiles and develop

definitions for common terms. Remember, every



organization uses its own jargon; a particular word used at a historical organization may mean something entirely different in another arena. Partnerships,

like marriages, work better when you know a lot about your partner.

The more complex the project, the more will go into planning and managing the partnership. It is no surprise that the majority of historical organizations across the country already take part in some kind of collaborative projects. It's also clear that organizations most engaged with their communities have the most productive partnerships. In the long run, taking time to create the right partnership and to tend to the relationship always pays off. (Synopsis of a January 2007 article in the *Minnesota History Interpreter*)

Thank you card to the partners in the 2006 North Dakota Libraries' Summer Reading Kickoff at the North Dakota Heritage Center in Bismarck, signed by many of the 3,733 school-age children and parents who participated. Notice the logos of the sponsors.

Consider attending the following workshops in your area to possibly discuss this topic, along with other interests!

The State Historical Society of North Dakota (SHSND) is offering a series of three free workshops for county, local and tribal historical organizations at

the following sites in April.

Wednesday, April 11 – The Pioneer Museum of McKenzie County in Watford City (at the Conference Center of the First International Bank Gallery)

Friday, April 13 - The Barnes County Historical Society, 315 Central Avenue North, Valley City

Tuesday, April 17 – The Pembina State Museum in Pembina.

Plan It and They Will Come: Dr. Marilyn Snyder, Curator of Education, SHSND

Programming for educational activities and public events begins with an idea. How to take this idea and plan a program or event is the topic of this session. How to flesh out the idea, how to involve other individuals and groups, and how to get others enthusiastic about the idea are all part of the planning process. Current SHSND programs involving students, teachers, and the public will be used as examples of how to take an idea and turn it into an educational activity and/or program. Also to be discussed will be the partnerships that can be used to enhance programs and improve success potential.

WARNING! Are YOUR Collections Dangerous? *Jenny Yearous, Curator of Collections Management, SHSND*

Ammunition, animal mounts, celluloid plastic, doctor's bags, glass fire extinguishers, nitrate film, rocks, and fossils – every museum has collection items that could hurt staff and visitors or damage other items if unaware of the hazards they hold. Knowing the dangers and what to look for makes it easier to safely take steps to make collections harmless without loss of historic value. This workshop will help identify those items that might be hazardous and also show how to safely handle them.

Museum Security: Do It Right without Breaking Your Budget: Blair Newton, *Historic Sites Security Systems Coordinator/Instrument Technician, SHSND*

Museum security on a tight budget is difficult but not impossible. With proper planning and implementation, there are many effective ways to improve security procedures and operations at a museum without breaking the bank. This workshop will cover risk assessment and security design, planning, and implementation. There will also be discussions about security situations at museums.

Heritage Training Scholarships are available to cover an organization's expenses to attend this workshop series. Remaining funds are on a first-come, first-serve basis. For information and an application form, visit the SHSND's website at www.nd.gov/hist or contact Chris Johnson at: (701) 328-2124, email: cjohnson@nd.gov.

For more information and/or to register, contact the host site directly.

