

Write-Minded: Easy Reader

Producing informative campaign newsletters that readers will enjoy

By [Mary Ellen Collins](#)

The huge wooden thermometer standing in the middle of downtown Grove City, Pennsylvania, in the late 1950s was my first exposure to fund raising. I questioned why its red "mercury" stopped at a certain number, and my mother explained, "That's how much money people have given to the United Way." The next time we went downtown, the mercury level was higher, and I knew that meant there was more money in the pot. It was a straightforward way to get the point across, and it made a lasting impression.

Today people are inundated with fancy publications providing campaign updates for the alma maters of everyone in their family, as well as for every hospital, museum, and social service agency in town. If you are the advancement officer charged with creating a campaign newsletter for your institution, you know you'll be adding one more piece to your constituents' already overflowing mailboxes. What can you do to make them read your publication?

Whether your budget allows for a splashy four-color tabloid or an 8-by-11-inch black-and-white newsletter, your goals are the same:

- to inform and excite your readers about the project;
- to highlight your progress to date; and
- to encourage your readers' support.

A campaign newsletter is not the place for lengthy discourse or dry statistics. Think of your message in terms of visual "sound bites" — catchy headlines, short articles, pithy pull quotes, and some interesting graphic variations of that big, white, wooden thermometer.

Be a people person

Although the campus president and campaign chair may seem like the most logical people to deliver your message, cast your net a little wider and interview people who will directly benefit from the campaign.

Look for personal stories that might inspire potential supporters or provide unique ideas for giving. Run a dialogue with the drama professor who directed plays in the old theater, capturing his excitement about the new performance space that the campaign will fund. Talk to members of the family who celebrated their mother's 90th birthday with a campaign contribution in her honor. Profile students who can explain the importance of scholarship assistance in their academic pursuits.

Everyone from the architect who designs the new science building to the 80-year-old alumna who can't wait to use the new campus fitness center has a unique point of view, and most will be more than willing to share it. A variety of perspectives will make your campaign come alive in a way that repeated communications from the same few people will not.

People look at photos first, so draw readers in with candid moments and unique shots rather than standard grip'n'grin poses. One of the most effective features we used in the newsletter for Simmons College's Sports Center campaign was a pairing of vintage photographs of alumnae athletes with pictures of current sports team members. This type of "then and now" visual can enhance interviews and stories on everything from residence hall renovations to computer technology upgrades.

Pat your campus on the back

Highlight your fund-raising progress in each issue and celebrate all contributions — not just those from major donors. Is there a faculty/staff campaign? Are students conducting phonathons? Did a local foundation just award the largest grant in your campus' history? These are the kinds of interesting stories that will draw readers in.

The second part of the "look how well we're doing" message is the "we can't do it without your help" pitch. Once you've generated some excitement and interest in your campaign projects, don't miss the opportunity to add new supporters. Every issue should include a pledge card, a tear-off pledge form, or a toll-free phone number and the names of your campaign officers.

It bears repeating

Campaign newsletters are an essential element in today's development world, and you will do well to set realistic goals for your publication. Don't expect your constituents to read and remember every word, but do try to give them an enjoyable, informative update with each issue. Talk about your campaign with enthusiasm and pride, even if you're secretly longing for the good old days when all it took was a wooden thermometer to communicate your message.

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