Big Impact in Small Places:
9 Ways to Write Better Email Subject Lines, Headlines, Tweets and Facebook Updates

By Kivi Leroux Miller,
NonprofitMarketingGuide.com

Network **for Nonprofits**
Network **for Good**

This eBook was written by Kivi Leroux Miller, founder of NonprofitMarketingGuide.com, which provides tips and trainings to small nonprofits and communications departments of one. She is also the author of "The Nonprofit Marketing Guide: High-Impact, Low-Cost Ways to Build Support for Your Good Cause," available from your favorite online bookstore.

Network for Good — *for Nonprofits*

About Network for Good
The Home of Easy & Affordable Online Fundraising

At Network for Good, we don't just give you a DonateNow button—we help you make sure people click on it. And we don't just give you EmailNow—we help you run a great email campaigns. We help you become an online fundraising and marketing superhero without superhuman effort or a big budget.

Here are a few of the ways how we can help nonprofits succeed online:

1. Easy, affordable fundraising solutions: Get donations on your website with **DonateNow**

2. Email campaign and newsletter tools: **EmailNow** powered by Emma for sending and tracking mass emails and telling you which messages work best

3. Online event management: **EventsNow** powered by givezooks! for accepting donations, registrations and ticket purchases online

4. Free weekly fundraising and marketing tips: **Sign up here** for great advice delivered to your inbox each week

5. **Fundraising123.org**: Our free online learning center is filled with ideas and best practices on what it takes to be an online fundraising superhero

We're biased, but we think there are many good reasons to work with us:

☑ **Kinship.** We understand you because we're a nonprofit too
☑ **Value.** We handle the tough parts of online fundraising for you
☑ **ROI.** Our customers raise $20 for every dollar they spend
☑ **Support.** We provide lots of training and support via phone, email and chat

How Do You Create, Send & Track Your Outreach?

Network *EmailNow* **for Good.**

Be an email superhero without superhuman effort.

EmailNow was built by email marketing experts to do the tough stuff for you. It allows you to send beautiful email appeals without having to become a designer, software engineer or an expert in HTML or CAN-SPAM laws.

- Easily organize and manage your subscribers while you grow your audience the right way.
- Create stylish campaigns and let EmailNow's engine and relationships help you get great results.
- See how your audience members responded, and use that knowledge to create more effective campaigns

Here's a snapshot of what features you can expect:

- Social sharing
- Stylish, intuitive screens
- Mac & PC friendly
- Create your own database
- Easy import
- Search & segment
- Signup screens
- Free image hosting
- Proof before your send
- Send whenever you want
- Real-time response tracking
- Triggers & follow-ups
- Help when you need it

EmailNow Pricing

One-Time Account Setup	$49.00
EmailNow Monthly Fee (includes 0-20,000 emails)	$29.95
EmailNow Deluxe Monthly Fee (includes 0-100,000 emails)	$179.00

Any additional emails beyond the 20,000 or 100,000 monthly package = $2/1,000 (that's only $0.002 per email!)

Ready to Learn More about EmailNow?

Contact one of our fundraising specialists at 888.284.7978 x1 or fundraising123@networkforgood.org. And, we're happy to invite you to one of our EmailNow demo webinars, led by our Customer Experience Manager, Charles Ball:

http://www1.networkforgood.org/free-weekly-online-fundraising-webinars

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Visit www.networkforgood.org/npo to get started, or call 888.284.7978 x1 to speak with one of our fundraising specialists who would be happy to provide more information!

Other Goodies from Network for Good

Online Fundraising
DonateNow
DonateNow is an online donation processing service for nonprofits to accept credit card gifts on the Web. It is user-friendly, affordable and customizable – giving your donors the best experience and your nonprofit the most bang for its buck (typical returns are $25 back for each $1 spent on DonateNow!).

Email Outreach
EmailNow powered by Emma
EmailNow was built by email marketing experts to do the tough stuff for you. It allows nonprofits to send beautiful email appeals without a designer or software engineer and without worrying about HTML or CAN-SPAM laws.

Online Events
EventsNow powered by givezooks!
EventsNow is an online events processing service to help nonprofits easily and quickly accept ticket purchases and donations online, while helping you manage invitations and registration within your account, all with no set-up or monthly subscription fees!

Live Training
The Learning Center, Nonprofit 911 & Tips Weekly
Our programs and materials help nonprofit leaders become online fundraising and email marketing superheroes. Take advantage of free strategy lessons online, on the phone and in your inbox.

Getting the Words Right

Writing concisely has always been an important skill for nonprofit communicators, but email and social media have made it a necessity. To get your message across, you have to say it well and say it fast.

You can't expect supporters to dive into your website, newsletter or other written materials unless you entice them with pithy, pointed or engaging subject lines, headlines, tweets and status updates.

These bits of text, whether a few words or a few short sentences, are sometimes called microcontent, a term coined by Jakob Nielsen, who in a 1998 article referred to microcontent as ***short content that needs to be immediately clear and inviting to a reader, and which still make sense when removed from its original context*** (when it appears as a snippet in search results, for example).

In all cases, you need to say what needs to be said in the space you've been given. Don't fight the character counts; use them to inspire better writing!

If you can write a great email subject line, you can write great headlines, tweets and Facebook updates, too. This eBook outlines nine tips that apply to all writing in small places.

Make the Short Version Work

You'll find lots of conflicting advice about whether shorter or longer subject lines work better. But there is no arguing with the fact that many of the programs people are using to read your emails (including mobile, desktop and web-based services) are cutting off your longer subject lines. Put the most important words in the first 30 characters, and make sure that those words make enough sense on their own, without the rest of the subject line, which may be cut off.

The same goes for social media. You have different character counts on different sites. For example, you get 140 characters on Twitter, and that's it.

Depending on what software you are using to tweet, you may be able to type more than that, but it won't appear in its entirety in your users' feeds.

While Facebook gives you more room than Twitter (you get 420 characters or about 4 lines of text), don't use the extra space as an excuse to ramble.

Here's how PETA adjusted an update between Facebook and Twitter:

PETA (People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals) PETA has learned that Nebraska egg company TWJ Farms is allegedly planning to grind up approximately 70,000 chickens ... while they are still ALIVE!

Chickens to Be Pulverized ... Alive
www.peta.org
Thanks to a courageous whistleblower, PETA has learned that Nebraska egg company TWJ Farms is allegedly planning to grind up approximately 70,000 chickens ... while......

2 hours ago · Share

269 peo

View all

peta PETA
70,000 chickens to be pulverized... ALIVE! http://ht.ly/356M0
2 hours ago

Have a Facebook update that's so important you can't fit it in the available space? Here's a trick: When you attach a picture, you are given extra space for the caption that appears beside the photo, under your status update. You can put additional information there.

Subject Line Length Tests from National Relief Charities

National Relief Charities (www.nrcprograms.org), which supports American Indian communities, has been running occasional tests of its subject lines, calls to action, donation amounts and content length for several years. Even though a team of two handles all of the organization's Internet projects – including email marketing – they still find time to test at least a few times a year. Here, Internet Marketing Manager Alicia Searfoss shares some of their results – and some sound advice.

Testing Subject Line Length	Results	Conclusion
"Thank Her" versus "Honor a Special Mother"	Shorter open rate: 11.88% Longer open rate: 11.56%	Shorter, less obvious subect line had slightly better open rate – but just barely.
"When Is It Going to Stop?" versus "Urgent Alert: Record-Breaking Gas Prices Impact Relief Efforts"	Shorter open rate: 10.55% Longer open rate: 8.49%	Shorter, less obvious subject line had better open rate.
"Your Gift Will Be Matched" versus "If Someone Would Match Your Donation, Wouldn't You Give?"	Shorter open rate: 7.99% Longer open rate: 9.77%	Although a shorter, less obvious subject line often works, don't totally disregard a stronger, longer subject line if the invitation is good.

"It is critical to add testing into the process—especially for subject lines—because if constituents don't open your emails, the creative you spent hours on is worthless," *says Alicia. "If we have a small sample group or little time to review results, we do A/B testing with a 50% split. Otherwise, we will do A/B testing with 10% each, wait 24-48 hours, and then send the remaining 80% using the winner."*

The bottom line: Test, test, test!

Highlight Everything and You Highlight Nothing

So how do you keep it short? Small spaces demand that you prioritize your messaging. You have to be ultra-selective in any given subject line, headline or tweet.

If your newsletter covers six topics, you might be tempted to include one or two words in your subject line for each article. Don't! You can't really give readers enough information about any of the topics that way. Make a strategic decision and focus on one topic (or two, tops) in your subject line.

The same goes for social media updates. To cram everything in, you might be tempted to abbreviate every word or use a lot of acronyms. But, those are harder for skimming eyes and multi-tasking brains to decipher, so they'll likely be skipped over. Instead, space out your messages over multiple tweets or updates.

Example:

(too much) Greening Wkshp, New Staff, Reg. Deadlines, Thanks!

(better) Greening Your Home – Register Now

Tip 3
Include Your Response Words

People are skimming, looking for words that pop out at them. These are often called your "response" words. In traditional marketing, common response words include *save*, *money*, *results*, *love*, *new*, *easy* and *free*. But the response words for your supporters about your issues will likely be quite different. You are looking for the timely, hot-right-now words that haven't yet degraded into jargon or trite buzzword status.

It may take awhile for you to discover which words resonate most with your readers, but when you learn them, use them anytime you have related content in the body of the email or within the link you include with your tweets or Facebook updates.

In addition to your own response words for your topic or community, also think about the hot topics in the news right now, big brand names or pop culture references. You always have to make the connection back to your content, but playing off these well-known and instantly recognizable words is a good way to pop off the screen. Good indicators of these kinds of words are Google's Trends, Insights and Keywords tools, which can help you see what people are searching on the most.

If your microcontent is truly up-to-the-minute timely, then use response words that convey that, such as *right now*, *today* and *urgent* (just make sure it's true!).

Not sure where to get started with response words?

One tool that can get you started is Dan Zarrella's
"Most ReTweetable Words Finder."
It gives you the most retweeted words related to your topic.

Subject Lines That Work Well – And Not as Well – for a Political Membership Organization

Lillian's List (www.lillianslist.org) of North Carolina, a political action committee working to elect progressive Democratic women to the North Carolina General Assembly, recently reviewed its subject lines for emails sent over the last two years and found open rate percentages from the low teens through the high 20s.

What Works Well . . .
Lillian's List hosts many events, and the subject lines that sounded like personal invitations to events generally did well.

- **You are invited....2009 Chapel Hill Reception (27.6% open rate)**
- **Join Us... 2009 Victory Breakfast (25.1% open rate)**

Subject lines that focus on success, such as those with the words Victory, Congratulations or Celebration also tended to do well.

- **Victory Breakfast Celebration (28.6% open rate)**
- **Lillian's List First Ever Courage Award Announced (26.6% open rate)**
- **Congratulations to Our Lillian's List Featured Candidates (22.9% open rate)**

. . . And Not As Well
Lillian's List endorses several candidates in each election cycle and tries to rally statewide support for each candidate. However, appeals to support individual candidates by name are the lowest performing subject lines, with most under 15%. They also resulted in some of the highest unsubscribe rates for the organization.

- **Representative Weaver needs your help! (14.64% open rate)**
- **Luann Crendell needs your help! (13.72% open rate)**

However, subject lines that only included the candidate's first name performed better, perhaps because they sounded more personal:

- **Margaret needs our help! (21.37% open rate)**
- **Rosa needs your help! (17.4% open rate)**

Subject lines that were more clever (or vague) didn't fare as well as those that were more straightforward.

- **Put away your pocket book and get out your boots (16.23%)**
- **Ninety years ago today . . . (16.1% open rate)**
- **Kick off this year, and say I'm Ready at the best party in town (15.9% open rate)**
- **90 years ago, an Asheville woman rocked NC politics forever (15.3% open rate)**

Even if you aren't split-testing your subject lines, looking for trends like these can help you learn what works best for your list of supporters.

Tip 4
Emphasize the Personal Value of Your Content

Subject lines that make readers think "This is useful" or "This is timely" or "This is about me" will always work.

Are you answering the old "what's in it for me" question? Your supporters take precious time out of their busy days to read your email if you:

- provide information they want, need or are curious about,
- help them do something faster, cheaper, easier or
- otherwise make their lives more pleasant, enjoyable or meaningful.

Another way to instantly personalize your microcontent is to use your reader's name. By using your e-newsletter provider's merge functions, you can put your reader's name right in the subject line. Of course, this works best if your subscriber information is well-maintained!

Examples:

Sally, Did You Vote Yet?

It's Up to You, Fred

The Four Questions Every Ask Must Answer

To grow your donor base and total donations you need to have an appropriate "Call to Action" in every appeal. The problem is that many nonprofit campaigns lack that. Hence the problem of the "Call to Inaction."

It's great to state who you are and what you do, but if you never clearly ask for money and never appeal to potential donors correctly, your results won't amount to much. To do that you need to answer the following four questions every time you ask:

- Why me?
- Why now?
- What for?
- Who says?

To learn more about these questions and their importance to your fundraising appeals, read the full article in the Learning Center:
http://www.fundraising123.org/article/four-questions-answer-every-appeal

Write Visually

We expect both words and graphics or photos when we read online. Remember back in the day when most web pages were text-only? Today if we see a text-only page, we assume it's outdated. We need those visuals, or the communication feels incomplete.

So what do you do with microcontent, when words are all you have? Use descriptive nouns and verbs, with lots of meaning embedded in them (think *daffodil* instead of *spring flower*, or *sprinted* instead of *ran fast*).

Dan Zarrella, who describes himself as a social media scientist, analyzed Facebook data to study the relationship between the parts of speech used in status updates and how those updates are shared on the site. He found that updates with adjectives and adverbs don't perform as well as those with more descriptive nouns and verbs.

He quotes Strunk and White's *Elements of Style*, and we will too:

> *Write with nouns and verbs, not with adjectives and adverbs. The adjective hasn't been built that can pull a weak or inaccurate noun out of a tight place . . . it is nouns and verbs, not their assistants, that give good writing its toughness and color.*

Where you do have the ability to share photos, videos and links, use it! About 90% of what happens on Facebook starts with the status update and continues as people comment on it, click "Like" or share it with others. People are more likely to forward and share updates that include photos, videos and interesting and informational links than updates that are plain text. Keep your update text clear and focused, and rely on the media you are attaching to help tell the story.

You don't have much space, so don't waste it on more words than you need.

Examples:

(too many words) Help us provide assistance to the people who are living on the streets so they can figure out where they can sleep for the night.

(right to the point) Help the homeless find a bed tonight.

Tip 6
Sometimes Clever or Coy Works... Except When It Doesn't

Your microcontent is usually there to entice someone to take the next step: open your email newsletter, click on your link, or comment on your update. That means you often don't want to give all the juicy details away right up front. You can use clever or coy microcontent to pique the interest of your reader to the point where they feel like they have no choice but to click to see what you are talking about.

The same goes with microcontent that's funny, catchy, quirky or opinionated. Because it's so different from most of the mundane copy we see, clever microcontent can often produce good results. That's especially true in social media, simply because a clever update is more fun and interesting than a straight-laced update, and readers expect a more conversational tone on Facebook and Twitter.

But clever can also backfire. It may be too obscure or off-putting for people who aren't familiar with who you are and what you do, especially in email subject lines that can often appear out of context.

Sometimes, it's important to get an essential nugget of information out there, even if your readers stop at the subject line. In those cases, use the subject line to summarize the main article in your e-newsletter – or include the critical information in your status update – and offer supporting, but not essential, information in your body copy or links.

When in doubt, be straightforward and to the point.

Examples:

(gives it away) 75% of Seniors Don't Like Program X

(piques interest) The Program Most Seniors Love to Hate

Be Direct and Timely, But Don't Get Too Pushy

Should the subject line be a clear call to action or not? It depends on which study you consult.

Rather than trying to sort out the conflicting answers to this question, we propose a better question: Does it tell it rather than sell it?

Sometimes an urgent call to action in the subject line or status update is exactly what you need to motivate people.

Letting your readers know that something is truly urgent is part of telling the story. But other times, when the urgency is really of your own making, a call to action in your microcontent can feel like a pushy sales pitch.

Examples:

(selling it) Last Chance to Help Flood Victims
There will always be another chance to help, so this feels like drummed-up urgency.

(telling it) Urgent! Families Fleeing Floodwaters Need Transportation
We're given a specific need with some obvious urgency.

Should I Use the Title of the Newsletter as the Subject Line?

Subject lines like "Community Center Newsletter, July Edition" describe what the email is, but not what's inside. It's describing the wrapper, instead of the candy inside – and the candy is what we want! I usually advise against the "describing the wrapper" approach.

However, I've heard from several nonprofits who say they get great open rates with subject lines like these.

Why? Because the content inside is good.

The e-newsletter content always delivers on that promise, regardless of the Plain Jane subject line.

If I know that every time – or darn close – that I get a newsletter from the Community Center that it will be filled with exactly the kind of information I want, then they can get away with a boring subject line. I don't need any additional incentive like a clever or benefit-laden subject line to get me to open the newsletter.

Most nonprofits will do better with content-specific subject lines that change from issue to issue, but as we've said, you should always test it for yourself.

Avoid ALL CAPS and *Crazy* Punctuation!?!

Microcontent is not the place to write like a teenager's text message. Using all caps and crazy punctuation makes your content look like sales or spam, neither of which is likely to be opened or taken seriously.

Here's one piece of punctuation that can really help, however: the colon. (Yeah, what we just used there.) A colon let's you put your most important keyword right up front, followed by the details.

Example:

Flu Shot: Get Yours Now While There's No Line

Popular Formulas for Headlines

My favorite source for advice on headline copywriting (which also applies to email subject lines and article and blog post titles) is Copyblogger.com, which has an entire series on *How To Write Magnetic Headlines*. Copyblogger founder Brian Clark refers to two rules of headlines.

1) The 50/50 rule: You should spend half the time it takes you to write a piece on drafting a persuasive headline.
2) The 80/20 rule: On average, 80 out of 100 people will read the headline and nothing else. That means only 20 people out of 100 read the main article!

Here are a few headline formulas recommended by Copyblogger (you'll recognize much of what we've already discussed in these formulas):

- Who Else Wants (fill in the blank)?
- The Secret of (fill in the blank)
- Little-Known Ways to (fill in the blank)
- Now You Can (fill with something desirable)
- What Every (blank) Needs to Know about (blank)
- The Lazy Way to (blank)
- You Don't Have to (something challenging) to (desired result)
- How (blank) Made Me (blank)

Test and Track

All of the advice in this guide falls under what we call "best practices," which is shorthand for "what seems to work for most people most of the time." Whether it works for you and your organization on any given email at any given time is another story. We can certainly find exceptions to every "rule" we share here, and your case could be one of them. Consider these tips a friendly nudge in the right direction, but test and track what you do to find the right path for you and your supporters.

For example, split-test your email subject lines. Send out the exact same email newsletter content, but use two different subject lines. Send each version to a small percentage of your list—say 10% get subject line A and 10% get subject line B. Wait 48 hours and send the version with the better open rate to the remaining 80% of your list.

Have timely information that can't wait for testing? Just split your list in half, with 50% getting subject line A and 50% getting subject line B. Look at the open rates of each, see which performed better, and try that format next time.

If you want to know if your results are statistically significant, you can plug your numbers into one of the free split-test calculators on the web (e.g. **www.splittestcalculator.com**).

In social media, you can use tracking tools such as Facebook Insights and Twitter clients (e.g. Hootsuite or TweetDeck) to keep an eye on what your fans and followers seem to prefer.

The Bottom Line: Promise and Deliver

The bottom line is that every piece of microcontent is a promise. The body of your email message should deliver on the promise in your subject line. Where we land after clicking on the link in your tweet or Facebook update should deliver on the promise in the text that preceded the link. That's how you build trust and teach readers to open every email you send, regardless of the subject line.

You can't use all nine of these tips in each piece of microcontent you write, but mix and match them into your micro writing overall, and you'll see your results improve.

Feeling stuck? Can't believe you've already spent 20 minutes trying to write a seven-word subject line? Here are six time-tested ways to punch up your microcontent.

1. Use the Word "You" or "Your"

Make it personal for the reader. People like to read about themselves!

Examples:
You Still Have Time
It's Your Choice
A Video That Will Make You Laugh and Cry

2. Use the Word "My"

People are often more responsive to personal stories and recommendations from peers than from seemingly impersonal organizations. Using the word my sparingly can make your emails feel more one-
to-one.

Examples:
My Reason for Giving In
My Favorite Way to Save
How I Made My Decision

3. Use a Number (e.g. Top Ten, 5 Ways to. . .)

Numbers can boil down the overwhelming to a more digestible form.

Examples:
Five Ways to Get Kids to Eat More Vegetables
Three Neighbors Whose Lives You've
    Changed
Top Ten Reasons to Register

4. Start with "How To"

We are all looking for easier, faster, cheaper ways to get things done.

Examples:
How to Stop Animal Abuse in Your
    Community
How to Teach Your Child to Share
How to Give – and Save

5. Add a Deadline (e.g. Last Chance, Ends Friday, 5 Hours Left)

Genuine urgency can motivate action, as long as it doesn't sound like a sales pitch.

Examples:
10 Hours Left to Double Your Gift
Last Chance to Get Your 2010 Tax Deduction
Early Bird Registration Ends Tomorrow

6. Ask a Question

Readers will think, hmm, do I know the right answer? Let's see . . .

Examples:
Do You Know What Your Kids Eat at School?
What's Next for Billy Joe?
Can You Spot the Mistake in This Video?

Caution:
Don't go overboard!
Moderation is essential; otherwise,
the effect wears off.

From the Author:
What I Learned from My Own e-Newsletter

I send a Nonprofit Marketing Guide e-newsletter to about 10,000 nonprofit communicators a few times a month, and I recently reviewed the open rates by subject line for the last two years.

Here are the top five subject lines, all with over a 30% open rate:

- Your Email Newsletter Needs to Be Shorter
- It's My Birthday Gift to You: Free Webinar on Thursday
- Nonprofit Marketing on Next to No Budget – Get My Tips
- The Bad Media Relations Advice I No Longer Give
- You Had Me at Bequest

What all five of these subject lines have in common is the direct, personal feeling. The first one seems like I could be talking directly about something the reader produced and the others all include *I* or *Me*. It feels like very personal one-on-one communication about topics the readers care about. This tells me that the readers of my newsletter like to feel like they are connecting with me personally, rather than a generic nonprofit marketing help site.

Now let's look at the worst performing subject lines for my e-newsletter, all with open rates between 16% - 18%.

- 15 Spots Left – Coupon Expires Tonight
- Two Days Left to Get Webinar Pass at '09 Price
- Two Days Left
- Transform Your Marketing Plan – Only 10 Seats Left
- Your Fall Training Schedule – Free Webinar Thursday

Subject lines about event registration deadlines? Not so popular. That's good information to know while tracking open rates. However, some of these emails did produce good click-throughs and conversions (i.e. registrations for the events), which means they are ultimately still successful.

What story do your open rates tell you? What can you learn about your readers by analyzing your open rates? You won't know unless you analyze your own data and look for the trends.

Happy Writing!