

Nonprofit 911 – February 9, 2010
Ensuring Your E-Newsletters are Read - Not Dead -
On Arrival This Year

with Kivi Leroux Miller of Nonprofit Marketing Guide.com and Ecoscribe Communications

Sponsored by Network for Good

The MP3 audio transcript can be found at

www.fundraising123.org or www.nonprofit911.org

Rebecca Higman: Now, I am really excited to introduce our speaker. Kivi Leroux Miller is president of Nonprofitmarketingguide.com, which I mentioned, as well as Ecoscribe Communications. Through training, coaching, and consulting, she really helps small nonprofits make a big impression with smart, savvy marketing and communications.

She is a nationally recognized speaker and a veteran of the Nonprofit 911 program. And she also teaches a weekly webinar series and writes a blog on nonprofit communications at nonprofitmarketingguide.com.

Also, we are really excited for her. Her first book, also called “The Nonprofit Marketing Guide,” will be available in May of this year, so keep your eye out for that. But without further ado, I am really excited to turn the floor over to Kivi to get us started.

Kivi Leroux Miller: Thanks Rebecca, and thanks to Network for Good for having me back for another conversation about email marketing. Nonprofit Marketing Guide and Network for Good end up serving a lot of the same people. We both really enjoy working with smaller organizations to help you really do the best you can with your limited resources. And you really can do a lot, especially with affordable tools that we have available to us now like blogs, and email marketing, and Custom DonateNow buttons from Network for Good.

So let’s get right into it today. We decided to call this “How to Get Your Email Newsletter Read, not Dead on Arrival.” And when I think about how to really make that happen, there are lots of little tips. You know, what you put in the subject line, what your headlines look like, how you manage your lists, what the colors and the fonts are.

But really, while all those things are helpful, they are really just tinkering around the edges of your success. Ultimately, to have a newsletter that is consistently read and not dead on arrival, you have to have a really good content strategy in place. And so that is really what I am going to focus on today.

As I said, there are certainly lots of other tips on both nonprofitmarketingguide.com and fundraising123.org, which is where Network for Good shares all of its great articles about doing email marketing. Lots of stuff there about how to format the newsletter, and subject lines, and all of those sorts of things. But what we are really going to talk about today is the big picture strategy.

So when I think about nonprofit newsletters, the majority of the newsletters that we see are really created for one of two reasons. The first would be that they are used as a service for you providing education. So this would be especially true for those of you that have memberships, or that see yourself as technical service providers, or as resources for other parts of your professional community.

Other organizations may not really have to rely on individual donors for fundraising, so their newsletter is sort of going to fall in that camp, too, where they are really using it primarily as an education tool, even if they don't technically have members.

The second kind of newsletter is more the one that is really built around communications and marketing and fundraising for the organization. And ultimately, the people who are on that list and getting that newsletter are really considered donors or other pretty active supporters of your organization. So if you use volunteers, you may have volunteers on your mailing list. If you do advocacy, you may have those advocates who you can call on to make calls or to make visits or emails to legislators. But it is really more for an active list of people who you are trying to get do something for you, including making a financial contribution.

Now, you can have a newsletter that does both of these that is more of you providing a service or providing some kind of public education versus more of a marketing fundraising focus. It can do both, but I think it really is best to know which is your primary purpose, because that really is going to affect the kind of content that you produce for the people on your list long-term.

So that would be the first thing that I encourage you to do. If you don't already, just off the top of your head, know what kind of newsletter you are producing, have a conversation with your management and other staff and really think, "OK. Why are we producing this thing in the first place? How does this fit into our larger strategy, our larger programmatic strategies and our larger communication strategies?"

Once you do that, it is much easier to figure out what your content should be. And ultimately, the success of your newsletter is going to depend on your ability to create value in the eyes of your readers. That is the ultimate goal for every piece of communication you send out, but especially for something you send regularly, like a newsletter.

And this is true for print newsletters, too. It is not just true for email. But it is especially true for email just because people can delete it so quickly. So you want to make sure that you are really creating that value. And the idea here is that when I see the newsletter from you pop up in my email box, I think to myself, "This is going to be good," and I go right to it, because I know what to expect and I know that it is going to be really good stuff that I am personally interested in as a person on your list. There is some value to me that you provide consistently in edition after edition of your newsletter. So when I see that newsletter arrive, I know what to expect. I go right to it and I get what I am expecting.

That is your ultimate goal. That is how you get your newsletters read. If you are inconsistent about that or you don't do it very well, then your newsletters are going to be dead on arrival, because people are busy and they just don't have time to read stuff that is not valuable to them in some way.

So, this is really your biggest challenge, figuring out how to provide that value to people on your list. And we are going to talk about how you work through that today.

You are ultimately trying to create, like I said, this legacy. And the way that you do that is to provide consistently good content. How do you do that? It really helps if you use an editorial calendar.

Now, I am one of those people that will create an editorial calendar and then usually not look at it again. I don't build my to-do list off of the calendar; it is more of a planning tool for me to help me think strategically. And in reality, I probably end up doing about half of what I put on the calendar.

Now, for other people, it really can be more of a to-do list where you decide three months ahead of the time what you are going to put in your next three monthly newsletters and you stick to it. It really just depends on how you function and how your organization functions, the extent to which you use the editorial calendar as a planning tool versus a to-do list. But no matter which end of the spectrum you are on, I really recommend that you do use one.

I have a sample available for you to download. It is just a quick Word document with just a chart in it. You can use an Excel spreadsheet. You can do it on a white dry erase board. You can do it wherever you want. But the idea here is you are just creating a really simple chart that has different types of articles down the left, usually, time across the top. So maybe you are planning three or four months in advance and you are doing a monthly newsletter and then you fill in the blocks. So we are going to talk a lot about what those categories are on the left. We call those the "standing heads," and I will get to those in just a minute.

But using this editorial calendar lets you think very strategically about how you are communicating with your supporters long-term. And that is what really builds up this loyalty to you that makes them open that newsletter every single time, regardless of what you are putting in the subject line. Again, the subject line can help push people over the edge to open, but ultimately, it is going to be this idea of reader loyalty to your organization and you consistently providing that value.

So how do we figure out and what are the specific articles that we put on our editorial calendar and what our standing heads should be? I like to work backwards with nonprofits when we are having these kinds of conversations. So what I usually do is say, "Let's start with your ultimate goal and let's put that goal in terms of the action that you want the reader to take."

So after they read your newsletter, whether it is one addition or six months worth, what do you want them to do next? Are you trying to inspire them to change their own behavior in some way, or are you trying to inspire them to talk to other people about your cause? Do you want them to donate to you? Do you want them to volunteer? Do you want them to sign up for one of your programs and participate with you that way? What is it that you want these people to do?

And from that, you build your specific calls to action within your newsletters and you sort of repeat those calls to action over time so that we start to see you asking us on your newsletter list to do the same thing over and over.

Now, you can change it up a little bit here and there so it doesn't seem monotonous, but basically, you need to figure out what is it that you want people to do and use your newsletter to get them to do it.

Let's work backward a little bit more on this idea of somebody doing something to create some more specific calls to action. So say you want people to learn more about your issue. You really are treating your newsletter more like a service of your nonprofit. How would they actually go about learning more?

Well, in some cases, you might ask them to download a report from your website. And so, in that case you would want to make sure that you have a little bit of compelling information about the good stuff that was in that report in the email. You would get them to click over to your website—that landing page they come to as soon as they click would be all about that report and downloading it.

You got to put all these little pieces together so that it works. Maybe you want people to simply discuss an issue that you think is important with their family or friends or coworkers. And so fostering this discussion is valuable to you and your cause.

Well, in that case, our more specific calls to action might be things like, "Click to our Facebook page and discuss it with people there," or, "Download our talking points guide for the health party that we want you to host to have this discussion," or, "Tips for talking to your teenagers about whatever it is." There is a call to action that is specific to that article in that newsletter that really sort of feeds into this bigger call to action which connects to what your mission is and why you are communicating to these people in the first place.

Now, if your organization is really using your newsletter more for fundraising, your calls to action are going to be a little different. You are going to be asking people to donate a lot more often. And you should have those "donate now" buttons in the newsletter. And when they click on those, they should be landing on a specific "donate now" page. And hopefully, the content on that page will duplicate or enhance what they saw in the email so it's consistent. And they follow through and they donate.

Now, OK. That all sounds simple enough-figuring out what we want these people to do and giving them the specific calls to action in the email newsletter. But how do we actually inspire them to do it?

And this is where it is helpful to think about the different questions that people have. And this is where we get to whether something is truly valuable to an individual or not. So what is going to motivate that reader?

If you are doing more informational kinds of content, it might be questions like, “How is this going to make my life better or make my job easier? Why is this important to my company, my family, my community, my career?” You have to answer those questions with your articles, because that is what is valuable to people.

What problem or challenge are you solving? If you are an organization that really is using your newsletter to provide a service to people, I really encourage you to focus in on that question in particular: What problem or challenge are we helping our readers solve? Because that is the kind of stuff that is really going to get people’s attention. You are really helping them. You are providing value and they are going to like you because of that.

If you are doing more of the fundraising, the questions are a little different. It is more along the lines of, “What difference will I make? What kind of contribution am I going to make on this issue by being a donor? I’m investing in your nonprofit. What do I get in return for that investment?” And I’m not talking about a t-shirt or a mug. I’m talking about the difference that you are going to go out and make in the world using my money if I am the one reading your newsletter.

And then you also want to deal with the question of, “Why now?” A lot of nonprofits are constantly appealing for money in pretty generic ways, because, you know, you are trying to raise your money for your unrestricted cash that you need to pay the bills and pay your staff. And it can get a little too generic and can get a little too boring, and you sort of lose the real need and emphasis on now. So, as much as possible, try to answer that “why now?” question at the same time as you are answering the, “What difference is it going to make?” question.

With fundraising newsletters in particular, you don’t want to send the same kind of stuff all the time, because the people that you are fundraising from, your donors, will grow wary of being hit up all the time.

And there is a quote that I really like from Penelope Burke, who is the author of “Donor Centered Fundraising,” which is an expensive book, but it is a great book in terms of giving you a lot of really good statistics about what donors want and about how to communicate with them.

And what she says is, “Meaningful information on their gifts at work is the key to donors’ repeat and increased giving. Communication is the process by which that information is delivered. Fundraising underperformance, therefore, is actually a failure to communicate.”

So when we hear from nonprofits...and I know Network for Good often hears from nonprofits, as I do, that say things like, “Well, we have ‘donate now’ button, but it doesn’t work, or we ask people to donate money through our email news later, but nobody does.” My initial and first response is, “Well, you’ve probably got a failure to communicate.” And this goes back to creating that value that we’re talking about in the newsletter. You’ve got to provide that value, or people are not going to click through and click on those ‘donate now’ buttons.

So in addition to providing articles that really motivate people to click on the “donate now” button, if you’re using your newsletter as a fundraising tool, you also need to incorporate two other kinds of articles. You need to be showing them progress, or success, so donors know their previous gifts are working, and they have a sense for what you’re going to do with the additional gift. And then you also need to be including articles that really demonstrate your gratitude to your supporters.

So you’re making them feel like they’re part of the team. You’re making them feel like their contributions really do matter- that you couldn’t do it without them. So again, you’ve really got three different kinds of articles there that if you’re using your newsletter as a fundraising tool, you have to incorporate into this editorial calendar. If the direct ask for money-you have to ask for money if you want people to give it to you. The second one is showing the progress or success stories. And the third is demonstrating your gratitude and making your donors really feel like they’re part of something bigger. So keep that in mind as we continue to talk about this editorial calendar.

OK, so you’ve figured out what kind of newsletter you’re sending out- what your primary, big picture goal for the newsletter is. You’ve started to think about what it is you want these people to do- these people on your mailing list. Long term, big picture, what are you trying to get these people to do? You can knock that down to more specific calls to action-the baby steps that lead up to that big thing that they do for you.

We’ve talked a little bit about some of these questions that you need to be answering in order to inspire people to follow through on those calls to action. And again, we’re sort of working backwards now to what you actually put in these newsletters and what you put in your headlines.

I really like using standing heads. And what standing heads are is it’s sort of an abbreviation for ‘standing headlines.’ And they’re essentially categories of articles you include on your editorial calendar. You may call these categories something that you just use internally and come with a nice catchy little name for them in your newsletter. They don’t have to be the same. But in your editorial calendar, you would come up with these different categories.

So, for example, if you're doing the more service oriented newsletter, education oriented newsletter, you might decide 'how to' articles are really valuable to the people on our list. Let's make sure that if we're doing a monthly email newsletter, let's make sure that in at least six of those in a year, we've got a 'how to' article.

Advice columns are also great because you can get sort of the conversation going. And you can make the person giving advice someone on your staff or sort of dignitary or celebrity in your field, or you can make it a little more fun. I know a lot of Humane Societies do pet advice, and the person giving the advice is a cat or a dog- that kind of thing. So you can have a little fun with it, or you can make it more serious. But the idea that you have sort of a Q & A advice column can work.

First person anecdotes are great for both kinds of newsletters. You can use them to have someone explain how they solved the problem if you're doing more of the informational newsletter. If you're doing more of the fundraising newsletter, you can have your clients or the people that are helping, the people that your donors are helping, talk in their own voices about their experiences.

I just got finished writing a chapter for a new book on creating your newsletter strategy and one of the people who gave me an example was from an organization called Prison Match here in North Carolina. And they work with mothers who are incarcerated. And she found herself interviewing and writing and losing a lot of the power of the stories because the staff were sort of putting the stories in their own words.

What they decided to do was ask the mothers who were in prison to write a short little story about their best experience getting a visit from their child in prison. And she had 50 women do that, and now she has 50 first person stories that really talk about the value of her program in ways that she could never describe as a staff member. So these first person anecdotes can be extremely powerful, especially in a fundraising newsletter, because they show your readers exactly what it is you do and the impact that you're having on people. So those are great.

Trends articles are really good. Again, that's usually more for the more informational service newsletter. News roundups are popular. Reviews and recommendations: if there are particular ways of going about doing things or particular books out there that people need to make some decisions on what they are going to buy or how they are going to spend their time, you can give them some advice and your opinion on that through reviews and recommendations. Success stories are another good type of article to include in both kinds of newsletters.

Personal profiles. Again, you can profile a donor, you can profile a volunteer, someone who your organization is helping. Again the idea here is to make it more real- to make it more personal. A lot of us, when we do our work, we start to talk about what we do in the abstract and we get closer to spitting out our mission statement, which really doesn't tell people what you do day in and day out. It's a little too big picture for folk. And by using a personal profile of somebody, or

a success story, you really give that example of what your mission statement means and what your program descriptions mean. You get away from the jargon and you really focus in on people. And that's what people really like to read in newsletters.

Lists- top ten lists, etc. Those are fun. People like those. Legislative updates or action alerts if you do a lot of advocacy work or policy work. Things like "hot finds"; so again this is sort of like you finding out the best of the best of the category and letting people in on what you really think is the best. So, you know, for example, I did an article one time on the best places to find stock photography. People loved it because then they don't have to spend all the time figuring out which of these millions of websites to use. So those kinds of things can be really helpful if you're doing that- the service provision.

Wish lists: highlight a different program and different program needs every other newsletter. It's not that really direct hard direct ask for cash, but it's still something that people can do that really contributes to your organization.

So for example, you know, if you're in social services, it's a lot easier because you're working with clients who probably have a lot of other needs. So the most common one that you see is around the holidays, like I'm on the board of an organization that helps people with HIV/AIDS. And yeah, we ask for cash, but in December we also ask people on our newsletter to adopt some of the children of our clients to give them Christmas presents. And so, this year I think we had 70 children who might not otherwise have received anything under the tree at all. Instead of asking our donors for money, we simply asked them to adopt these kids, or adopt one or two kids. So you're still asking them to engage with your organization, but you're not asking them directly for cash, so it's kind of a softer ask that you can include and make it sort of a wish list.

Survey, research results- people rely on nonprofits to really be clearing houses of the information on the topics they care about. So, I may be really into environmental issues and I really think river protection is important, but I don't work in river protection. So I rely on the river oriented nonprofits that I contribute to to kind of let me know what they latest and greatest is, both in the news and the legislation, and also that research. So you can provide those kinds of results.

Facts versus fiction- if you work in a field where there are a lot of myths or a lot of misinformation, or a lot of stigma associated with the work you do, then doing a regular fact versus fiction column can be really helpful. Again it's one of those things that give your supporters some talking points on how to help you raise visibility of your issues and correct some of those misconceptions.

So these are about a dozen or so different types of articles that you can build your entire newsletter strategy and editorial calendar around. And so once you've gone through this process of figuring out your calls to actions and the questions that you need to answer, think about which mixes of these different types of standing heads or other ones that you come up with, are going to be the right blend to motivate your people to do whatever it is you want them to do. If you've

got a monthly newsletter that goes out, and you include three articles, which by the way for email newsletters, I recommend that you don't do more than three. So say you've got three. Maybe every time you include a client profile- a story, a success story, something that really shows the need but is all about the people you're serving. And you're going to do that every single month.

Now, in the other two slots you mix it up a little bit. You pick maybe five of these things that you think are really going to work for the people on your list. So you might say, "You know what, we're going to do about two articles. We're going to talk to people about trends in our fields. We're going to give them the wish list, and we're going to do these facts versus fiction articles." That's four, so let's pick one more. Let's say you're also going to do news roundups. So you've got these five other things.

You spread those out and maybe do...so you've got two more slots in January. Well maybe in January we're going to do the client profile and then we'll do the wish list and the fact versus fiction. And in March, we're still going to have our different client profile, but then we'll talk about trends and survey results, or whatever it is.

You come up... you figure it out, and by doing that, what you've done is you eliminated all the hand ringing and office debates about "Oh my God, what are we going to put in the newsletter that needs to go out?" I've been through so many of those conversations over the years, and once we finally got smart enough to use editorial calendar, it was amazing how much time we saved because we weren't running around the office like chickens with our heads cut off trying to figure out what the heck we were going to put in the stupid newsletter. The newsletter now became an integral part of our communication strategy. We knew what we were doing with it. We knew why we were doing it; it was so much easier to produce.

You'll know what kind of content you need to produce until you can start watching for ideas and filtering through all that mess that comes across every day and really start pulling out those things you know you need. Instead of saving everything because you might need it for the newsletter, you really just start saving those things that fit those five or six standing head categories that you've selected.

The more you write the same kind of article, the better at it you get. So you'll not only produce better quality content for your readers, you'll also do it a lot faster, and we all need to save time, because we're all way too busy, especially in the non-profit world. We all have more jobs than we're paid for, so let's learn how to do things much more quickly. And if you're writing donor profiles over and over and over, believe me, you get good at it and you can do it a lot faster. So that's another benefit of really honing in on the types of articles that you're going to use.

Most importantly, the number one benefit of using this editorial calendar approach and really embracing the idea of a limited number of standing heads is that your readers will start to look forward to your newsletter, and that's because they'll know what to expect.

If I ask each of you to unsubscribe from every single newsletter that you currently get, or every magazine that you currently get except for three... I was going to let you continue to get three newsletters or three magazines, how would you make that decision? You would make that decision based on your expectations for what that was going to deliver to you and what you were personally going to get out of it. Now for some of you, maybe you want stuff that is funny, or maybe you want stuff that makes you feel good, or that helps you with your job. That's what you need to figure out about the people on your list and deliver it to them. Let them expect something really good from you. That's when they're going to open your newsletter, is when they expect something good and you consistently deliver it.

OK. So let's talk about some more ways to fill out that editorial calendar, because even if you do have these big standing heads, they'll go a long way towards helping you create this value, but the reality is you still have to put your fingers on the keyboard and write that first sentence of the article and write that headline, and that can be a little tough sometimes on how to get started.

So I have a couple of additional tips for you on ways to tackle writers block and really find that inspiration. And the first one is something we promised in the little marketing piece for today's training course, which was something to write in every month of the year. And simply looking at the calendar provides you some really good hooks. It doesn't have to be the whole basis of the article, but it can be enough of an angle to get you started to write that first or second sentence and really then get you started on the article.

So on nonprofitmarketingguide.com, when you go to the main article for today's course, which is on the home page, on page three if you print it out, there will be a link to another article that talks about every month of the year. And I just simply knocked this out in about ten minutes by just thinking about holidays. And that's all I did on this- is just look at the holidays, and there are so many other things that you can look at. But just quickly looking at the holidays

January- New Years. OK, everybody makes New Year's resolutions. What are the New Year's resolutions that you want your community to make that would make your mission come true faster? What could people commit to doing in the rest of the year that would help you?

In February we have Valentine's Day. So who do you love, and why? This could be, you know, a piece about the volunteers that you love or the love that the community has shown for you, so you could use it more as a 'thank you' piece. But you spin off the idea of love for Valentine's Day. Some people I've seen doing this now are talking about really bad Valentine's gifts, and so they're kind of making it funny and then offering an alternative gift that's sort of related to your mission.

March- you have the first day of spring, so you can talk about things like signs of renewal. This is also usually annual report time, when annual reports come out, and so you can sort of use it as a 'looking back over the past year' and 'springing forward', because, of course, we also have that

whole daylight savings time in March. So you could use that whole kind of vibe for a March article.

April- you have April Fool's Day, you have Easter, you have Earth Day, so there's all kinds of things you can do around that. May- you have Mothers Day, Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, so you can connect something to motherhood or to military service somehow. If you have a volunteer who is a veteran, you know, that's enough of a hook to do a nice little volunteer story and you've got Veterans Day as your angle to open that story up.

In June, school's out for summer. You've got the first day of summer. Articles that are related to the weather really work for people too. We're sort of in a weather-obsessed culture. So there's always going to be the hottest day of the year. There's always going to be the first freeze. Hopefully, there's not going to be as much snow as landed on the Eastern seaboard, but there's going to be a big snow. So think about how you would tie your work into those kind of topics and prepare for that.

July- you have Independence Day. Who deserves a firework celebration dedicated to them because they're such a stellar contributor to your organization? Can you celebrate freedom or independence in some way related to the work that you do?

In August, we're going back to school. You may have the 'dog days of summer' theme that you could work with, but something like 'going back to basics' or 'studying up' or 'reviewing some new research' could work with that kind of hook.

September you have Labor Day. Who's the person that has worked the hardest over the summer to make something happen for you? You also have the first day of fall in September.

October- we have Halloween, so you could do all kinds of stuff about the scariest thing or what frightens you most about your work or what you see during the course of your experiences.

Then, of course we start to get into the real holiday months with November and December. So at this point you should really be moving into your annual giving campaign, but there are still some things you could do that are a little more creative. Of course Thanksgiving, you always want to be saying "Thank you" to people. But you also have Veterans Day and Daylight Savings, so there may be some fun things that you could do there.

And then in December, again, it's going to pretty much be your annual appeal. Whatever you're coming up with at that point it's all about giving, sharing, taking care of each other. But you also do have the first day of winter- if you can tie into cold weather in any way.

So that's just looking at the calendar and what's printed on the calendar, but there are certainly lots of other dates that are associated with each month of year that you could use. Like I said, changes in the weather, religious holidays. It may or may not be relevant for the people on your list, but if the work that you, or the organization that you work for is affiliated with some kind of

faith community, then you'll want to add all of those Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, or other faith community holidays into that calendar with all of those secular holidays that we've talked about as well.

There are also thousands and thousands of these specially designated days, weeks, and months of the year. And Chase's Calendar of Events is an annual book that's really the go-to guide that will tell you every single day is... I don't know, Style Your Hair Green Day, or whatever. I mean, there are just a million of these days. But on their website they do have all of the special months listed for free without actually having to buy the book. And there's a link from the website from the handout for today to the special months page. And so you can just go January, February, March, April, May and look at the dozen or more ways that this month has been designated. You know, there's like a National Iced Tea Month. I mean, there's just all kinds of stuff that...

Again, it's not like you're writing a whole article about National Iced Tea Month, but it could be enough of a little hook to get you going- to get the creative juices going- to get that article started- to come up with an interesting headline, potentially. So check those out.

There's going to be special days that maybe your organization has created, or that are related to your field. I have a National Wildlife Federation calendar on my desk that they sent me, and they have NWF's Anniversary on the calendar. They have Endangered Species Day on the calendar- May 21. And they have Great American Backyard Campout Day on June 26. So go find all of those special days and those could really help fill out that calendar and break through some of your writers block.

In addition to looking at the calendar, also look at headlines in the news. Tie your articles back into the national or local news. What that does is it makes your stuff seem really timely in current, even if in reality you could've written it six months ago. If you can just tie the headline and tie the first paragraph back to something that's really happening in the news now, it's going to make it feel much more current, which is extremely important for email newsletters. If people think they're getting old stuff from you via email, it's really annoying and it's the exact opposite of the kind of feeling you're trying to create with people. So, it looks timely, it seems like you're really on top of things. That's a good thing for email.

One final comment I have before we take some questions is the idea of a story arc, and this is something I'm starting to see nonprofits play with. I think it's really intriguing and interesting. And the idea of the story arc is that you use your newsletter to tell the equivalent of what I would call a 'nonprofit soap opera.' Now it doesn't have to have all the high drama and sex and backstabbing that we have on typical soap operas. But the idea here is that you're showing people an episode at a time of a longer story and you use your newsletter to do that.

A lot of nonprofits are using blogs to do that, but you can also use your newsletter. And the story arc is how that the story is developing over time in pieces, which are the different articles that you're producing. So maybe you decide to follow a new volunteer. You find a volunteer who

you feel like is going to work out, is going to have a pretty good experience with your organization, and you follow that person and you tell that person's story.

So in February you introduce the person. We learn a little bit about why they're volunteering with you, what they hope to get out of it. And then maybe in March you tell us a story about what they actually did with you. You kind of take us behind the scenes and have that volunteer talk about what that experience was like. And then maybe in April you get the perspective of someone that was helped by that volunteer. So it's more of a client perspective, but they're still telling the story of the volunteer that you've picked. And then maybe in the summer you have the person, at that point, training other volunteers or continuing their story in some way.

And it's one person, and it's over a series of months. You're letting people understand what it's really like to be a volunteer and that's going to encourage people to think, "Wow, I want to do that, too. That sounds like a lot of fun. That person's getting a lot out of this. Look how much they're helping this organization that I already care about. I want to do that, too." So these story arcs, over time, can be really helpful and interesting to people, as well.

So that's really the end of the presentation today. I'm happy to take questions for the rest of the hour. Let me just recap really quickly what you're trying to do here. Figure out why you're doing your newsletter. Is it really providing a service in public education, or is it really for marketing and fundraising? Then figure out more specifically what you want people to do long-term and then what those more specific calls to action are that you're going to be asking those people month in, month out.

Think about your calendar. Think about the types of articles that are going to encourage people and inspire people to follow through on those calls to action. And then work through different ways to come up with those standing heads, whether it's the trend articles, or success stories, or the client stories, etc.

When you do that, you're going to create value. People are going to expect it from you. They're going to go straight to your newsletter when it arrives in the box, and they're going to really going to connect with you as something that's important and valuable to them. And that's how you get your newsletter opened on arrival.

Rebecca, I'm happy to take any questions at this point.

Rebecca Higman: Excellent. Thank you so much, Kivi, and thank you to everyone who has already sent in your questions. I think we've got more than enough to get us through the next 12 minutes, so let's just dive right on in. I want to sneak this question in from Brooke because she indicated that she might have to leave us a few minutes early, so I wanted to make sure we answer her question.

Kivi, she wants to know if you had any advice as to newsletter length. She says, “I produce a quarterly newsletter, as opposed to monthly, that’s fairly news content heavy that runs twenty-ish pages when it’s in print, equal to about 16 to 20 articles online, many of which are reprints from local and national news media as applicable. And I was just wondering if there were any thoughts as to whether length was a distraction, even though in my case I am compelled to include a lot of content to reach our readership.”

Kivi Leroux Miller: And I take it that’s an email newsletter, right?

Rebecca Higman: Yes.

Kivi Leroux Miller: I’m going to assume that. That’s way too long... just brutally, brutally way too long. I understand the need to share all of that information, so I’m not being critical of the fact that you want to share that much. But what I would be critical of is trying to share that much in one email.

People are not going to get through it all. If it’s printing out at 16 to 20 pages, that means you’re really expecting people to do a lot of scrolling, which they’re not going to do. It’s just way too much. I really recommend that people keep it to two screens worth of information, and all of the important stuff needs to be on that first screen that people can see without any scrolling.

So in reality, you’re talking about maybe 1,000 words- 1,200 words tops. It’s not that much information. That’s just the reality of how people read email and use email. That’s what they’re going to see. So there are a couple of ways that you could attack this 16 page print out beast that you’ve created.

The first one is I would really encourage you to do it more often. A quarter... I don’t know whatever else you’re sending out to your supporters, but only touching people quarterly is not really enough these days. So I’m just going to assume, for argument’s sake, that this is the only communication they’re getting from you.

That’s just not enough anymore. I would really suggest that you do it monthly. Doing it monthly is going to make that newsletter shorter, because you’re not summarizing a quarter anymore, you’re summarizing a month. So you’re already getting to something that’s much more reasonable.

And then at that point, this is where you have to provide that value by telling people what’s most important. So instead of just saying “Here are twelve things that we think you need to see,” you know, be a better editor for your supporters and tell them the three things that they really need to see. And focus on those, and then if you really need to include the other nine in your dozen lists, just include a headline. Give me the teaser. Give me a paragraph on the first three things that you think are most important. And then the other stuff, all I get is a headline that I can click through. And you can label it like “More News” or “Other Things You Might Care About” or whatever

like that. But you really have to be a good editor, and that's the service you're providing. That's the value you're providing here.

Rebecca Higman: OK, Daniela would like to know a little bit more about the call to action. She says, "Can a call to action be multifaceted. For example, we frequently use "Adopt, Volunteers, Donate." Do you think this is an effective call to action? We usually have an article related to each of these facets in each edition, or do you recommend that we focus more on one call each month?"

Kivi Leroux Miller: Well I think it's best to have one call to action at the end of each story. So if you're only going to include one story, I would pick the call to action that makes the most sense for that story. If you have multiple stories, if you have a donate story, and a volunteer story, and then the adopt story, or whatever those different calls to action are, you could just include the one that matches that story.

But I think if you're really focusing your content on trying to convince somebody to do something, it's going to be a lot easier on you, and it's going to make more sense to them if you're just asking them to do one thing with that story. So I would experiment with just asking them to do one thing after each article and see how that works.

I didn't mention doing your tracking on this call, which you certainly need to be doing. You need to be checking out your email analytics from your email new letter service provider, which you all need to be using, which Network for Good can certainly help you with. And when you send out your newsletters, you'll be able to tell who's clicking on what links and what your click through rates are. And, you know, if you monitor sort of before you make changes and after you make changes, you can get a sense as to whether stuff's working or not. So I would give that a try.

Rebecca Higman: OK. Sally says, "If you started a paper newsletter first, how important is it that the paper and the e-newsletter have the same content? If the paper newsletter is quarterly with about six articles, should the e-newsletter copy...Or do you think we should have a more frequent newsletter every month?" And just for some context, she says that about one-third of her supporters are on the email list.

Kivi Leroux Miller: OK. I actually have some information about converting from a print newsletter to an email newsletter on Nonprofit Marketing Guide and on the blog, so if that's something you're really thinking about- dropping the print newsletter entirely, I urge you to go check that out. And I can add those links to the page for today, as well.

But, you know, there are two different things. There are things that you would put in print that are not going to work in email. And there are things that are really good about email that you don't get with print. So, things like being able to click through immediately to a website where people can do something. It doesn't have to be just donating. It could be filling out some kind of

form, or signing up for something, or downloading something. You really have the ability with email to push people along with that next step, which in print is much more limited. So I would think about them really as two different things and really figure out what you could do with email that you couldn't do with print and really try to maximize that.

A lot of print newsletters have a lot of basic FYI information in them like calendars of events. That kind of stuff can just be on your website and you can use the email to just highlight the things that are coming up the soonest instead of putting your entire calendar in your email.

I do really recommend that people try monthly. These newsletters should pretty short. You know, if you do have a 500 word email, that's great. That's a nice length because it's going to be on one screen and people are going to be able to see it without any click and scroll. And if you're only producing that much content, you should be able to do it monthly. If you're use to producing eight pages in print every quarter, believe me, you can pull off a monthly email newsletter that's much shorter.

Rebecca Higman: Susan had a question about testimonials. She said, "Kivi, you mentioned having clients write their own stories in first person. We have done this, but the writing is often very rough. Our directors said we should use their words exactly, but I cringe at their mistakes. Is it OK to edit first person testimonials?"

Kivi Leroux Miller: First of all, I love testimonials. I'm a huge fan. I think nonprofits are really missing the boat by not using testimonials everywhere. So if you aren't doing that, really consider adding that to your communication strategy.

Now in terms of what you actually use, it's best to keep it in the person's original voice. But you have to sort of make a judgment call on how important that is. I'm not a big fan of making our supporters look bad in any way. So in cases where I run across really bad grammar, for example, in print, I will correct that and send it back to the person and say, "Is this OK?" And you don't have to say, "You know what, you're a terrible writer and you sound like a fool, and so I had to edit your stuff." You know, you say more something along the lines of, "We only had so much space, so I needed to edit this down a little bit." And you just sort of leave out the fact that you corrected their grammar and get them to approve it. And if they approve it... let them change it again if they want. If they feel like you've really changed it too much, they should be able to change it because it's their name and their voice. But it's perfectly OK, in my opinion, to go back and make small edits and go back and ask people to approve those things.

If you don't have the ability to go back and get them to confirm that your changes are OK, then I do think if you are going to make those changes, you're sort of obligated to use their initials or not really use their full name. If you're going to use somebody's full name, you are sort of obligated to use what they gave you if you can't go back and get that approval from them.

Rebecca Higman: Let's see. Marina said that she heard earlier that you recommend that they keep the number of articles to about three per issue out of six standing heads. "How do you recommend knowing which articles and topics are best liked? Do you think that we should do tests by having links and click throughs at the end of every article and just see which has the most clicks as we go forward?"

Kivi Leroux Miller: You can certainly do that. That should certainly be part of your decision making- your analytics. There's sort of two parts of this: there's what you as an organization want people to know, and then there's what people actually click on. And hopefully, you're getting to the point where those are the same thing.

But, at some point you're going to have to make some decisions about what you feel like is most important to get out there. Keeping in mind who you're audience is, keeping in mind that you need to be inspiring them to do what it is you want them to do so it's not all about you, but you do have to make some professional judgments about what you want people to know about your organization.

In terms of the different formats, just try stuff out. See what you enjoy writing. And the reality is that the more fun you have producing the content, the more fun it's going to be to read. That is just sort of the way it works. So, you know, start with the stuff that you think it interesting- that you enjoy writing, again, keeping your audience always in mind. I'm not saying just forget them and do what you want to do, but you can trust your judgment a little bit when you're starting out and then see how your analytics work.

I also just recommend talking to people on the phone- novel concept. We're talking about online marketing here, but just call up some people who are on your list who you know a head of time and just say, "You know what, we're thinking about changing up our newsletter. Let me just rattle off five different article ideas we have and you let me know which one is going to be most valuable to you." -just basic and formal market research; just doing something as simple as that can really help you get started.

Rebecca Higman: Susan says, "My organization has been sending out emails, which I now see are boring and too long. How can we let people know that we're starting a new way of doing things? How can we reengage our subscribers?"

Kivi Leroux Miller: I would just start doing it. I'm not a big fan of saying the equivalent of, "Hey, we just realized that our newsletter has sucked for the past year and now we're going to do this fabulous thing for you!" I would skip that. I mean, that's what a lot of nonprofits end up saying when they redo their website, for example, or they go through a branding campaign and have a new logo. They basically come out and say, "Hey, we got rid of all the crap!" You know? And I don't think that really works for you. So I would just start doing a better job and people will notice.

And really encourage people to send stuff to their friends. So hopefully, you can use that to sort of reengage some of the people who may have dropped off your list. Really integrate you email into your entire communication strategy. So on your website include the articles that went out last month. Speak to them prominently on your website and let people know, “Hey, this was in our newsletter first.”

Same thing with Facebook- you can put stuff from your newsletter on Facebook back to your newsletter people and say, “Hey, this is the kind of stuff you get first if you’re on our email list.” So that’s another way that you could sort of subtly redirect people to your newsletter who may have dropped off because they weren’t getting any value before without sort of really having to confess that you realize that your stuff was boring.

Rebecca Higman: Yeah, I feel like we see emails like that all the time, people saying, “Hey, look at us. We changed our website, or we rebranded,” you know? It just draws attention to the fact that maybe you weren’t getting the best material before.

Kivi Leroux Miller: Right. And that’s really boring, too. That message in itself doesn’t provide any value either.

Rebecca Higman: Exactly. Thank you so much, Kivi, for all of your information today.

Kivi Leroux Miller: Well thanks for having me, Rebecca.

Rebecca Higman: Absolutely. Anytime. So, thank you everybody who joined us here today. We had a lot of questions about the promotion that we mentioned earlier. We also got a lot of questions about finding those materials in terms of the editorial calendar and the outline for the call today.

Thanks again, everybody, for joining us and we hope to have you on a future Nonprofit 911 call. Have a great afternoon, and enjoy your day. Bye, everybody.