

## LEADERSHIP

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**QUESTION:** “We have published a support group newsletter for more than ten years and feel it is time to re-evaluate its content. What should go into a good polio newsletter?”

**ANSWER:** I love this old *Encyclopaedia Britannica* definition: a newsletter is an “informal publication, often simple in format and crisp in style that provides special information for a defined audience....” Simplicity and crispness—terrific bywords!

Luckily, we needn’t spend time trying to determine who our audience is. Our readers are polio survivors, family members, medical professionals, and maybe even vendors. First clue: Every item in a polio newsletter should relate in some way to polio.

Surely a goal of any worthwhile polio newsletter would be to create a publication that tugs at readers. One that generates the feeling that we’re not alone, we’re in this together—and our organization is here for you. Polio survivors should come away from the experience of reading the newsletter feeling somehow better for having read it. AND waiting excitedly for the next issue.

What does it take to do this?

Variety is one answer. News articles dancing with relevant information. Columns doling out dazzlingly penetrating opinion. Feature stories brimming with heartfelt human interest. Photos. Cartoons. Reader letters. Q&A’s. Interactive bits. Member spotlights. Imaginative fillers. An occasional splash of color. Wide-ranging, inventive stuff that’s fresh, often delivered with humor, and always presented with style.

The best newsletters are innovative. They look to their state legislature, for instance, to report what’s happening with a local disability issue. Or they check out the rehab center’s new handicap pool. Or they feature a chat with an old shoe repair guy who specialized in fitting leg braces onto shoes. Or interview the childhood pal of a member who can describe what it was like when her friend was whisked off to a hospital, and how they managed to bond in recovery. Such newsletters are original. Prime plums.

Certainly few of us yearn for newsletters made up of endlessly patched-together recycled articles. There’s great value in seeing the creative self-expression of our fellow members. It doesn’t take someone else to write a good news story.

If done at all, copying should be done with caution.

First, we must always give credit—each “borrowed” article must be accompanied by a “used with express written permission of...” acknowledgement. This means we must contact the author or publisher for written consent to use the piece. In addition, we need to be careful not to pass on bad information—just because another newsletter publishes something, that doesn’t automatically mean it’s factual.

A few words about length: With so many newsletters now presented online, the temptation may be to use infinity as a yardstick. Longer isn't necessarily better. Most excellent publications set length limits. It's said that the average adult newsletter reader has an attention span of 30 seconds. It pays to be succinct.

**TIPS:**

- Design a practical, eye-catching format (consider attractive nameplate, width of columns, font type and size, paragraph style, uncluttered appearance) and stick with it.
- Have a plan—and use it without fail. How many pages? How much space devoted to various sections? How many articles on a page? How to break a story that must continue to a second page? Who will write what? Deadline for contributions? Reliable date of publication?
- Be consistent and uniform. Designate certain pages for regular features that readers look forward to in each issue. Is the main news article always top right on the front page? Is the editorial column always at the top of the last page? Whatever works.
- Follow accepted rules of writing. If unsure, take a quick look at Strunk and White's *The Elements of Style* or even the more sophisticated *The Chicago Manual of Style*.
- Entice readers with intriguing headlines. Short. Catchy. On target.
- Look around; take notes; keep a file. Ideas for articles can come from anywhere.
- Be fearless—and have fun.

In the end, newsletters often turn out to be pretty much a matter of personal taste. Jack's may not be June's. With some productive brainstorming, though, a newsletter staff (or committee) can come up with a superior product for any group. It's bound to be worth the effort.

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