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Meet the MasterMinds: Kick Start Your Email Marketing with Mark Brownlow



Mark Brownlow knows email marketing and newsletters. He's lived and breathed them for years, having written, edited or published over 1,000 email newsletters. Mark's recent book and free newsletter, [Keeping the Key](#), uncovers the common themes, strategies and tactics you can use to get your email opened, read and anticipated by your readers.

In this exclusive interview with MCNews, Mark takes us step-by-step through the factors that will make your email newsletter stand up and get noticed.

MCNews: What does “Keeping the Key” mean for an email newsletter publisher?

M. Brownlow: Your email inbox is your own private space. When people subscribe to your newsletter, they're giving you a key to this inbox and, in turn, access to their minds and – hopefully - wallets.

Unfortunately for newsletter owners, it's very easy for readers to take the key away again. They can unsubscribe, they can ignore your emails, or they can just fail to be influenced or impacted by what you have to say.

So keeping hold of that key – that's the challenge faced by email newsletter publishers. And most of them aren't succeeding...they're just not getting through to people.

MCNews: You've suggested that to realize potential benefits, a newsletter must have influence and impact on its readers. What characteristics of a newsletter will help a publisher achieve that illusive influence and impact?

M. Brownlow: There's a lot of competition for space and attention in those inboxes – not just from what you might consider your traditional competitors, but from everyone sending your readers email; their mom, their boss, their customers, the auto repair shop etc.

If you want to impact and influence your readers over the long-term, then you need to deliver professionalism, value and personality.

Everything associated with the production, distribution and management of your newsletter has to exude professionalism.

You need to deliver useful or entertaining, relevant content – that's the value.

And you need to give people something they can connect to at a more human, personal level by introducing some personality into your publication.

MCNews: Would you elaborate on newsletter “personality?” How can a publisher find a personality that fits?

M. Brownlow: First of all it means a human voice – talk to your reader as if you were sharing a coffee. You’re not writing to a factor, target, segment, customer group or even an audience. You’re writing to an individual.

Then draw in what we traditionally think of as personality; a distinctive style, humor, color to the writing and presentation.

Any newsletter can do this, even if it’s just through a few lines of editorial at the start of each issue. It’s what makes you distinctive, and it gives your readers something human and real to relate to.

Obviously you have to make sure that this personality fits with your readership, content and image. Don’t write like a teenage Britney Spears fan if your audience is corporate executives.

Often you can achieve this simply by being yourself or letting your writers be themselves. It’s harder than it sounds, because we’ve all been conditioned to talk in bland business jargon.

Just let something human come through in the newsletter—A witty aside, a welcome note, anything that takes away the anonymity or sterility of the typical business newsletter.

MCNews: Many publishers wonder if newsletter frequency should be weekly, monthly, or bi-monthly. What are your thoughts on what constitutes an appropriate frequency for an email publication?

M. Brownlow: That’s actually a very difficult question to answer, because there are so many factors involved.

Anything less frequent than monthly is probably a waste of time. You just won’t register on anyone’s consciousness.

A weekly newsletter keeps you top of mind, but it puts you under a lot of pressure to keep to a regular deadline and be consistently valuable or interesting.

For most consultancies producing your typical “advice and information” newsletter, once or twice a month is fine. You’re not placed under quite such a creative burden, and you can write a little more expansively than you could in a more frequent publication.

You do, however, have to make sure you make a big impact and produce a quality issue, if you want people to remember you and welcome each new email.

MCNews: Over the years, you have looked at thousands of email newsletters. What have you seen as the most common areas for quick improvement?

M. Brownlow: The biggest mistake I see being made is to be too publisher-centric. Frankly, few of your readers care enough about your company to want to read your news every two to four weeks. They want information that helps them or their business.

A newsletter shouldn’t be an ego trip. For consultancies, in particular, it’s a way of building a reputation as a trusted source of expertise and information.

Another more technical area is the email headers – the “to”, “from” and “subject” fields you see when an email is sitting in your inbox. They’re a much neglected opportunity to get people to recognize, open and value your email, rather than ignore or delete it.

MCNews: If you look into your crystal ball, what emerging trends do you see for email publishing over the next few years?

M. Brownlow:The old Mystic Mark act. Well, I see a lot of people jumping on board the bandwagon, failing, and then claiming newsletters don’t work. Wrong conclusion.

I see a lot of new technologies appearing then fading again. Because ultimately, it’s all about communicating, and you can still do that effectively with simple plain text newsletters sent through your own email software, if you want to.

I’m looking forward to the price of customization coming down. Basically, when someone signs up for your newsletter, you offer them a palette of content options—A “build your own newsletter” kind of thing. It’ll be nice when any size publisher can apply that sort of technology.

The big unknown is going to be private and public email regulation to deal with the spam problem. Who knows in which direction that will go and how it will affect legitimate mass email communication.

MCNews: If you could pass on just one piece of advice to our readers about email newsletter publishing, what would it be?

M. Brownlow: Remember that you’re communicating with another human being, and one who probably has an awful lot of other emails competing for their attention.

Many of the challenges and problems associated with newsletter publishing can be mastered by keeping hold of that simple concept.

MCNews: Thanks for the tips.