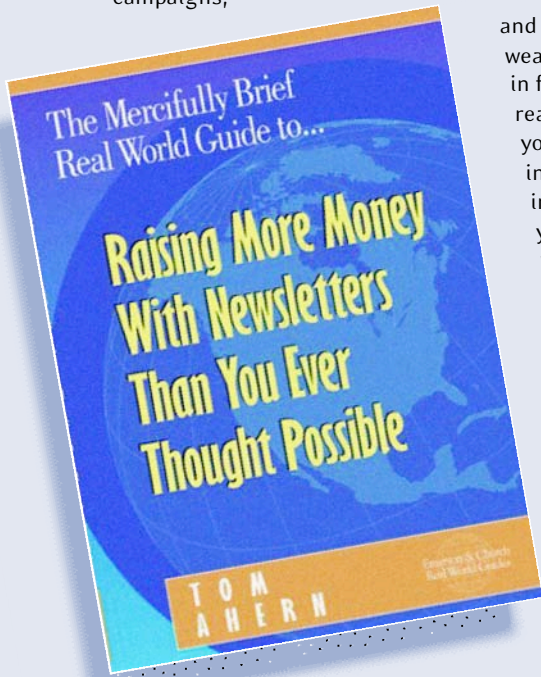# free-range thinking

If your nonprofit's newsletter is targeted primarily at donors, Tom Ahern's new book is a must-read. *Raising More Money With Newsletters Than You Ever Thought Possible* is a by-the-numbers manual that can help you negotiate every aspect of production, from writing more compelling headlines to designing more attractive pages, all the way to the finer details of crafting better sub-heads, captions and pull-quotes.

Ahern's firm, Ahern Communications, specializes in capital campaigns,

And Speaking of Newsletters...

and he has translated a wealth of field experience in fundraising into a fast read with specific advice you can incorporate into your newsletter immediately. (And if you are wondering where Ahern stands on print versus e-newsletters, you can find the answer in Chapter 42.)

To order the book, visit Ahern's web site *(www.ahern-comm.com)* or Amazon.com. ■

The Mercifully Brief Real World Guide to...
Raising More Money With Newsletters Than You Ever Thought Possible
TOM AHERN

Like This, Only Better

Printed newsletters may be easier to read and carry, but the electronic format can save you money, track usage more closely, and capture feedback instantly.

First, a confession: writing this article, I feel somewhat like a Hummer owner touting the benefits of driving a Prius. Since 1999, I have been producing this printed newsletter, using snail mail to reach readers across North America. Increasing readership has steadily raised costs, but I have steadfastly defended this format because print is easier on the eyes than electronic versions and inherently more portable. Besides, I *like* receiving mail — there is something reassuring about a stack of letters — and I believe many people share this feeling, hopelessly retro though it may be.

That said, the more I learn about electronic newsletters, the more I view them as a communication tool every nonprofit should have in its toolbox. Recently, I convened a three-way conversation with Michael Katz, author of the book *E-Newsletters That Work,* and Stefanie Weiss, editor of an exemplary nonprofit e-newsletter. In the course of our discussion, Katz offered five fundamental guidelines for creating effective e-newsletters. Since he works almost exclusively with small businesses, I kept asking Weiss if the principles held for nonprofits. They did, she assured me, so I present them inside for your review, whether you are considering launching an e-newsletter or would like to improve one you are already sending.

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Like This, Only Better

Here are Michael Katz's five guidelines for publishing an effective e-newsletter, viewed through a nonprofit "lens" with help from Stefanie Weiss of Experience Corps:

1. Narrow your audience.

Because the cost of adding subscribers is virtually zero, most e-newsletter publishers assume "the more, the merrier." Katz believes just the opposite. "There's so much competition for attention, your newsletter has to be on the top of its pile to get read," he says. Bearing this in mind, Katz advises his clients to identify a particular audience that will be best served by the information or expertise the client has to offer. "If you try and speak to [everyone] with the same voice and same content," he explains, "you won't hit a home run with anybody. And if you don't hit a home run, nothing happens."

"Yes, write to your primary audience," agrees Weiss, "but small nonprofits cannot create separate newsletters for members, legislators, or whomever they're trying to reach." The main goal for nonprofits, she points out, is to remain top of mind with a *variety* of audiences. Experience Corps, consequently, is a bit more conservative in its aspirations for its newsletter, trying, as Weiss puts it, "to hit a triple with most people."

2. Deliver content this audience considers useful or interesting.

"The more you talk about yourself," says Katz, "the less interested people will be in reading your newsletter." Whether your organization is talking to potential customers, members, partners or donors, Katz asserts that "the ticket for entry" into any reader's mind is information that he or she will find useful or relevant. When you cannot generate such information on your own, Weiss suggests looking for other resources on the web that can be featured as links in your newsletter.

To make the information as visually interesting as possible, Katz and Weiss both recommend formatting with HTML. While some experts say plain text can feel more personal, Katz counters that HTML allows you to incorporate eye-catching photos and graphics while also tracking usage (i.e., specific links that are clicked can be reported back to the sender.) Converting a print newsletter into a PDF and sending it as an attachment is *not* a wise strategy, however. Many recipients will not open attachments due to fear of viruses, says Weiss, adding, "sending a PDF says hi, I was assigned to do an e-newsletter and I don't know what I'm doing."

3. Speak English.

Even when employing all the design flourishes afforded by HTML, e-newsletters still arrive like any other email, and that influences recipients' expectations. Whatever they open, they expect it to be concise and easy to digest. Consequently, e-newsletters "should be more like speaking than writing," says Katz, who regularly writes his in the first person.

"Tell stories, be personal, be short, and don't brag," Weiss adds. *The Voice of Experience* regularly features a page 1 letter to readers by CEO John Gomperts, who writes in a breezy, conversational style: "Port Arthur, Texas, is the home of Janis Joplin," wrote Gomperts in June 2005, chronicling a visit to a city his organization serves. "Driving through town, you get some sense of why she sang the blues."

4. Keep it short, but publish frequently.

"People want to get in, learn something, and get out," says Katz. If they open an e-newsletter and are intimidated by its length, they will save it for "when I have time." Unfortunately, Katz adds, "When I have time translates to never." He advises clients to keep newsletters as short as possible while still delivering useful information, and to publish at least once a month. "You have to publish frequently enough that people remember you, and that also makes producing the newsletter more of your routine."

Experience Corps limits its monthly newsletter to a maximum of 5 items, with each item introduced by just three sentences before the reader has to click to read more. "People just aren't going to keep scrolling

down," Weiss warns, so *The Voice of Experience* is written and designed to present its contents on one or two screens at most.

5. Outsource the back end. (I.e., Get help.)

Companies that help with distribution, tracking, list management, and other technical aspects of e-newsletters have proliferated since 2001, says Katz, and the competition has kept fees cheap. Katz says small businesses can get started for as little as $15 per month, and Weiss reports paying just $25 per month for her technical support. "Rules and standards for sending email vary and are constantly changing," Katz notes, "but e-newsletter companies make it their business to stay on top of the changes so you can stay spam-compliant." At such reasonable rates, Katz and Weiss agree, there is no reason to go it alone. ■

Page 1 of a recent Experience Corps e-newsletter.