

A Writing Life #2: The Newsletter
By Kelly J. Cooper
16 February 2003

Today we're going to talk about newsletters.

THE DEUCE you say! Newsletters are boring!

Well, yes and no. Learning about newsletters might be boring, but it turns out that they're pretty useful things. A lot of those "make money from home" and "own your own business" advertisements are about newsletters. SURPRISE! There's money in them thar bits.

If you have knowledge of a particular area – any thing from pet lizards all the way through types of ink for different drawing jobs – there's probably a newsletter out there to which you can send a contribution, and maybe even get paid for your effort. At the very least, you can add the publication to your clip folder. And if the newsletter doesn't already exist, there may well be a company that wants to create it but doesn't know where to start. Pitch the idea to them – you never know... you might get a job out of it.

I was laid off in July 2003 and wanted to take time off and try my hand at writing. For a whole lot of reasons, things haven't really gone anywhere. So I reached out to an old acquaintance who teaches Internet and computer-related security courses thinking maybe I could do a bit of teaching while I work on writing. Since my day job was in Internet security and I'm a good teacher, I figured it would be a nice fit.

My acquaintance was interested in taking me on, but she was also interested in my writing and editing experience, because she wanted to start up a newsletter.

Newsletters are considered by MANY businesses to be the new way to maintain a relationship with a customer. They are the halfway point between the dreams of the magical Internet business that make all of our lives easier and the reality of brick-and-mortar shops with parking lots and real estate taxes and people schlepping around. Google has millions upon millions of hits for newsletters. They're everywhere.

Like anything else, some newsletters are good and some are awful. Newsletters are a tool and the way a given business wields them is as important as their content. Many newsletters are the scam-infested work of spammers. Others are pure of heart and only contact you exactly when and how you have requested. Most are somewhere in between. They may contact you when you don't want them too, but they often offer good deals. They might loan their list to other vendors, but then the new guys offer good deals as well. And if there's one thing that middle-America wants, it's a good deal.

The basic idea here is that once a customer has bought something from a business, or even reached out to initiate contact with that business, the hard part is over. The next step is to maintain a relationship so that the customer will return and buy more. This is

the idea behind everything from free coupons and those discount cards at the supermarket to gifts for membership renewal and department store credit cards. I don't have statistics – marketing is not my specialty. But if you're really interested in the field, there's tons of material out there for you. What I'm interested in is the writing and editing aspect of this relationship maintenance.

Many companies only want to make their customers aware of new products, deals, and sales. They generate focused, targeted newsletters that don't require a lot of story-telling. But other companies want to build relationships. They want to have a dialog with the customer, and that's where the writers and editors come in.

I don't want to outline everything I learned, because it took me a couple of days and resulted in four pages of typewritten notes. And that was all just prep-work. We haven't actually launched the newsletter yet, so I haven't gotten paid yet. I'm sure the launch and payment handling will all be an additional learning experience. And it's currently scheduled to be a recurring gig, so everything we learn and all the feedback we get will get folded into the next issue and so on.

But I do want to make you aware of the newsletter industry and point you to a couple of sites that should help you figure things out for yourself.

The best site that I found outlining the technical aspect of creating and sending out a newsletter is [Connectiv Media](#). They do email newsletter consulting, help, and assistance. They also provide, for free on their website, a detailed set of lessons on designing a newsletter. One interesting thing that they note is that when one company sets the tone for how to purchase something, it's natural that the same company's product will fit that set of criteria. And after learning about newsletters from their site, if a business decides that managing their newsletter is too much work for them, Connectiv Media will be a perfect fit to provide the relevant services. Sneaky, but useful.

The best site that I found outlining the softer skills and discussing content is [The Write Exposure](#). The site is presented by one person, Jessica Albon, and her [article library](#) contains some great ideas about promotion and presentation, as well as thoughts on some common mistakes. Reading her articles helped me organize my priorities and think harder about what we were trying to accomplish with the newsletter. It also rounded out my thoughts on the technical details.

I signed up for newsletters from both of these sites well over a month ago and the [Yahoo](#) account that I created expressly for receiving them hasn't gotten any spam. None. Only the newsletters as promised. That's my best endorsement.

So if you're looking for a little extra income, think about your skill set – the tools you use, the things you create, all aspects of what you are good at – and see whether your expertise could be helpful in a newsletter somewhere out there. It'll get you writing, possibly get you paid for your work, and will round out the clip folder of articles you can show other potential publishers. Good luck.