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## The 12 most common newsletter design mistakes

By: Roger C. Parker

Your newsletter's success depends on its design. An attractive, easy to read newsletter encourages readers to pay attention to your message.

Cluttered, hard to read newsletters, however, discourage readership—no matter how good the ideas contained inside.

Before they begin to read your newsletter, your clients and prospects will be judging the value of your ideas by your newsletter's design. Effective design *pre-sells your competence* and *makes it easy* for readers to understand your message. Design also helps *set your newsletters apart* from the competition.

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### Layout problems

Layout problems involve the placement and size of elements that remain the same from issue to issue.

#### **Mistake 1. Nameplate clutter**

Design begins with the *nameplate*, or newsletter title set in type at the top of the front page. Nameplate problem often include:

- *Unnecessary words.* Words like "the" and "newsletter" are rarely needed. Readers will unconsciously supply a "the" in front of a title, if desired. It should be obvious from the design and content of your publication that it is a newsletter and not a business card or advertisement.
  - *Logos and association seals.* Your newsletter's title should not compete with other graphic images, such as your firm's logo and the logos of trade or membership associations. These can be placed elsewhere on the page, allowing the nameplate to emerge with clarity and impact.
  - *Typographic effects.* Stretched or distorted type, type set in strange shapes, or letters filled with illustrations or photographs, often project an amateurish, rather than professional, image.
  - *Graphic accents,* like decorative borders and shaded backgrounds, often make the titles harder to read instead of easier to read.
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## Mistake 2. **Lack of white space**

*White space*—the absence of text or graphics—represents one of the least expensive ways you can add visual impact to your newsletters, separating them from the competition and making them easier to read. Here are some of the areas where white space should appear:

- *Margins.* White space along the top, bottom, and sides of each page help frame your words and provides a resting spot for your reader's eyes. Text set too close to page borders creates visually boring, "gray," pages.
- *Headlines.* Headlines gain impact when surrounded by white space. Headline readability suffers when crowded by adjacent text and graphics, like photographs.
- *Subheads.* White space above subheads makes them easier to read and clearly indicates the conclusion of one topic and the introduction of a new topic.
- *Columns.* White space above and below columns frames the text and isolates it from borders and *headers* and *footers*—text like page numbers and issue dates—repeated at the top and bottom of each page.

A deep left-hand indent adds visual interest to each page and provides space for graphic elements like photographs and illustrations, or short text elements, like captions, quotes, or contact information.

## Mistake 3. **Unnecessary graphic accents**

Graphic accents, such as borders, shaded backgrounds, and *rules*—the design term used for horizontal or vertical lines—often clutter, rather than enhance, newsletters. Examples of clutter include:

- *Borders.* Pages bordered with lines of equal thickness are often added out of habit, rather than a deliberate attempt to create a "classic" or "serious" image. Page elements, like a newsletter's table of contents or *sidebars*— "mini-articles" treating a point raised in an adjacent article—are likewise often boxed out of habit rather than purpose.
- *Reverses.* Reversed text occurs when white type is placed against a black background. Reverses often make it hard for readers to pay attention to adjacent text.
- *Shaded backgrounds.* Black type placed against a light gray background, or light gray text against a dark gray background, is often used to emphasize important text elements. Unfortunately, the lack of foreground/background accent often makes this text harder to read instead of easier to read.

Graphic accents should be used only when necessary to provide a *barriers* between adjacent elements—such as the end of one article and the beginning of the next—rather than decoratively or out of habit.

*Downrules*, or vertical lines between columns, for example, are only necessary if the gap between columns is so narrow that readers might inadvertently read from column to column, across the gap.

#### **Mistake 4. Text wraps**

Text wraps occur when a photograph breaks into adjacent text columns, reducing line length. Although often impressive to look at, text wraps can seriously interfere with easy reading.

Text wraps destroy *rhythmic reading*, the way your reader's eyes quickly move from left to right, scanning and identifying groups of several words at a glance.

Text wraps also interfere with easy reading by creating awkward word spacing and excessive hyphenation.

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#### Hard to read headlines and subheads

Headlines and subheads play a key role in the success of your newsletter. Ideally, they telegraph and a glance, attracting your reader's interest and maintaining their interest throughout long articles.

Their ability to do this, however, depends on your reader's ability to locate and easily read them.

#### **Mistake 5. Overuse of upper case type**

Words set entirely in upper case type—capital letters—are significantly harder to read than words set in a combination of upper and lower case type.

Words set in upper case type frequently occupy three times as much space and are characterized by unsightly gaps between certain pairs of letters (i.e., "YA").

Readers depend on word shapes for instant recognition. Words set in lower case type have distinctive shapes. This is because some letters are tall, others short, and some drop below the *baseline* the words rest on:

- *Ascenders*. Letters like b, t, l, and d, contain elements that are noticeably taller than letters like a, e, i, o, u, and w.
- *Descenders*. Letters like g, p, j, and y, contains elements which drop below the line.

Words set entirely in upper case type, however, lack the distinctive outlines created by lower case letters. Words set entirely in upper case, capital, letters are surrounded by rectangles lacking the distinct, recognizable shapes readers depend on to identify each word.

### **Mistake 6. Underlining**

Headlines, subheads, and important ideas are often underlined for emphasis. Unfortunately, underlining makes words harder to read, *reducing* their impact!

Underlining makes it harder to read by interfering with the descenders of letters like g, y, and p. This makes it harder for readers to recognize word shapes.

Not only does underlining project an immediately obvious “amateur” image, it confuses meaning because today’s readers associate underlined words with hyperlinks.

### **Mistake 7. Long subheads**

Short subheads are more effective than long subheads. The best subheads are simply keywords introducing the next topic. Readers can see them, and understand them, at a glance.

When subheads contain full sentences, they slow readers down and take up more than one line, further reducing their effectiveness.

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### Problems involving type

The bulk of your newsletter likely consists of articles set in text columns. Here are some points to review to ensure that your newsletter encourages, rather than discourages, easy reading.

### **Mistake 8. Inappropriate typeface choices**

Nameplates, headlines, and subheads should form a strong visual contrast with the body copy they introduce. There are three categories of type:

- *Decorative*. These heavily-stylized typefaces are intended to be “recognized” as much as “read.” Their use should be limited to just a few words. Typefaces like Stencil or OCR, project distinct images.
- *Serif*. Typefaces like Times Roman, Bookman, and Palatino contain tiny strokes at the edges of each letter. These contribute to your reader’s ability to easily recognize each letter. The serifs also draw your reader’s eyes from one letter to another. Serif typefaces are ideal for body copy.

- *Sans-serif.* Typefaces like Arial, Frutiger, and Helvetica lack serifs. The simplicity of these letters makes them ideal for headlines and subheads.

### **Mistake 9. Inappropriate type size**

Type size should be proportional to line length, or—stated another way—column width. *Too big is as bad as too small!*

- *Too big.* Body copy is often set in 12 points, which is often too large for two or three column newsletters. Oversized type is hard to read because there aren't enough words on each line for readers to comfortably scan. Oversized type can also result in awkward word spacing and excessive hyphenation.
- *Too small.* When type is too small for the line length or column width, readers must make several left-to-right eye scans on each line, slowing them down and tiring their eyes. Under-sized type is hard to read because readers must strain to read it.

### **Mistake 10. Insufficient line spacing**

Many newsletter editors rely on their software program's "default" or "automatic" line spacing. This is wrong. Appropriate line spacing, or *leading*, depends on the relationship between typeface, type size, and line length:

- *Typeface.* Sans serif typefaces usually require more line spacing than serif typefaces.
- *Type size.* As type size increases, line spacing should increase. However, the readability of small type sizes can often be enhanced by adding extra line spacing.
- *Column width.* Extra line spacing can enhance the readability of both wide and narrow columns.

Line spacing is important as the white space improves recognition of word shapes and provides "rails" which guide your reader's eyes along each line.

### **Mistake 11. Failure to hyphenate**

Body copy should always be hyphenated. A failure to hyphenate interferes with word spacing and line endings, depending on text alignment:

- *Justified.* Failure to hyphenate justified text—i.e. text set in lines of equal length—plays havoc with word spacing. Word spacing becomes very cramped in lines containing several short words. Large gaps appear between words in lines containing a few long words. These variations in word spacing become very noticeable when they appear in adjacent lines.

- *Flush-left/ragged-right.* Failing to hyphenate text set flush-left/ragged-right results in irregular—or ragged—line endings. Lines containing a few long words are very short. Lines containing several short words become very long. This can create a distracting zig-zag effect when short lines follow long lines.

Hyphenation should be carefully reviewed. Avoid hyphenating more than two lines in a row.

## **Mistake 12. Excessive color**

Color succeeds best when it is used with restraint. When overused, color interferes with readability, weakens messages, and fails to project a strong image.

Headlines, subheads and body copy set in color, or against colored backgrounds, are often harder to read than the same words set in black against a white background. Be especially careful using light colored text. Restrict colored text to nameplates or large, bold, sans serif headlines and subheads.

A single “signature” color, concentrated in a single large element and consistently employed—like in your nameplate—can brighten your newsletter and set it apart from the competition. The same color, used in smaller amounts, scattered throughout your newsletter, fails to differentiate your newsletter or project a desired image.

Consistently using black, plus a second highlight color, creates a quiet background against which an occasional color photograph or graphic can emerge with far greater impact.

## **Conclusion**

The architect Mies van der Rohe, once commented: “God is in the details.”

Newsletter success, too, lies in the details. Your readers are always in a hurry. The smallest detail can sabotage their interest in your newsletter, interrupting reading until “later.”

And, as we all know, “later” usually means “never!”

**For more information**

Contact Roger C. Parker for help with:

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Clients include Apple Computer, Ford, Hewlett-Packard, John R. Deere, Photo Marketing Association, Shearman & Sterling, Microsoft, and Yamaha.

Roger has helped numerous start-ups immediately achieve recognition, putting them on the path to buy-outs as large as \$87,000,000.

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