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Don't place too much emphasis on the click-through rate

MEASURING THE USEFULNESS OF E-NEWSLETTERS

After reading several postings on Melcrum's CommsNetwork website and email listserv¹ asking for benchmarking statistics on measuring the usage of electronic newsletters, Angela Sinickas explains why, with the exception of a few situations, click-throughs aren't the best indicator of an e-newsletter's value.

How many staff read electronic newsletters and group emails? How many delete them without opening and how many click through to read more than just the one-paragraph summary of a typical e-newsletter article?

Newsletter openings aren't comparable

I don't gather statistics to compare in these ways because e-newsletters vary so much in content and in the way they're formatted that they're actually not comparable on the basis of openings or click-throughs.

Some newsletters are also posted in their entirety on the intranet site. Many people regularly go to the intranet to read the whole newsletter and never open the email at all. The opening rate and click-through rate don't give a good indication of the total number of people reading the content.

Some newsletters provide more information in the one-paragraph summaries of each featured story than others, so relatively few people feel the need to read more details. Other newsletters provide just a headline and a single teaser sentence. Some break off the teaser paragraph in the middle of a sentence, which often encourages a greater click-through rate. The click-through rate might not be a very good indicator of interest in a story. For example, a low click-through rate could actually indicate a very

tightly written newsletter that answers all the important questions about topics in the original emailed story summaries.

Some employee newsletters are very focused on new job-critical information, such as the products their staff are selling in stores. It might be called an employee newsletter, but it's really closer to a marketing fact sheet. This type of newsletter covers clearly job-related information that sales staff can put to immediate use to increase their commissions, so it's highly relevant for them. Comparing this type of newsletter to a more typical one would be meaningless.

Access to emails isn't the same as access to information in e-newsletters. Many employees work in environments where few of them can access a shared computer. Often, one person prints out an e-newsletter and posts it on the staff bulletin board for everyone else. As soon as one person reads the newsletter and tells other people near their workstation about the news, others may feel less need to read the newsletter online for themselves, yet they've absorbed the information in the newsletter.

The number of click-throughs will also vary by the number of possible stories to click through to. One edition might have



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five stories and the next might have 10. The second one could easily have double the click-throughs of the first one, not because it's better written, but just because there were more opportunities to click.

What should you measure?

Through a totally separate channel (not as part of the e-newsletter itself), survey how many people say they receive the e-newsletter. Then ask those who do recall receiving it questions about how useful it is. Questions like these do have comparative norms.

For example, the Sinickas survey database shows that the usefulness of electronic newsletters is about 66 percent for weekly/monthly newsletters and 74 percent for daily newsletters. Frequency seems to matter a great deal.

The percentage of employees who say they read or skim at least half of each e-newsletter ranges from a low of 25 percent to a high of 63 percent. That's where the content makes a big difference, as does the length of the newsletter.

For a recent client, we asked employees if they were more likely to read individual group emails from different departments or a weekly consolidation of them written as an electronic newsletter. The consolidated e-newsletter won by about 85 to 15.

When click-throughs do matter

There are times when counting clicks can be valuable. Let's say that there's an action you want your audience to take that can be counted, or at least indicated, online. Perhaps you want them to sign up for a particular training course, for example. Then if newsletter readers click online to a page where they can begin that action, you can use clicks to calculate a return on investment (ROI).

Then you might find that the ROI from just a single article could result in more financial value to your organization than the cost of your e-newsletter for an entire year. Now that's a click-through to monitor, but it still wouldn't make any difference how your number compares to other companies' numbers.

1. More information on these services can be found at www.melcrum.com