Non-profit organisations and relationship cultivation: Do electronic newsletters have a role to play?

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Introduction

Digital platforms offer tantalising potential benefits to non-profit organisations. In recent years, non-profits' use of digital platforms, channels, and tools has been studied in terms of the abilities of these technologies to improve external and internal communication, provide better and more up-to-date access to information, increase charitable giving, and recruit volunteers. Of particular interest to the non-profit sector have been those studies examining how organisations are or are not using social media and social networking sites, including blogs and Facebook, to cultivate relationships and/or create dialogic engagement with their publics (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Duhe, 2007; Eyrich, Padman & Sweetser, 2008; Jo & Kim, 2004; Kenix 2008; Kent, Taylor & White, 2003; Quinton & Fennemore 2013; Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013; Taylor, Kent & White, 2001; Waters & Jones, 2011).

While social media use is widespread and continuing to rise in non-profit organisations, its effective use means continual monitoring, requiring time and financial resources that are often in short supply (Hawkins, 2010). A digital communication tool of near ubiquity in the non-profit sector, due in large part to its cheapness, immediacy, and wide reach, is the electronic newsletter (Ayyadurai, 2013; Dickerson, 2012). Electronic (sent via email) newsletters evade easy categorisation as social media because they do not enable the creation of an interactive online community as does, for example, the commenting feature of a blog, with its threaded dialogue (Cho & Huh, 2007; Kent, 2008). An electronic newsletter operates fundamentally unidirectionally, not structurally supporting a feedback loop between the organisation and its stakeholders: this feature means the electronic newsletter doesn't mandate regular monitoring for the purposes of responding to feedback (a factor which may be perceived as an advantage or disadvantage by the organisation). Because the unidirectional nature of email postings does not offer the same possibilities for stakeholder interaction as blogs or social networking sites, the suitability and potential of electronic newsletters as a communication tool for maintaining or cultivating relationships has been largely unexamined. Similarly, researchers have overlooked non-profit organisations' strategies regarding electronic newsletter (or e-newsletter) use, and the perceptions of e-newsletter readers with regard to the relationship-building role of an e-newsletter.

In New Zealand, the non-profit sector is diverse, vigorous, and sizeable, employing 9.6% of New Zealand's workforce, thus making it, proportional to the economically active population, the seventh largest in the world (Sanders, O'Brien, Tennant, Sokolowski & Salamon, 2008).

This exploratory study examined the use of e-newsletters by three New Zealand non-profit organisations (NPOs), analysing stakeholders' perceptions of this communication tool. Over 1,000 e-newsletter recipients responded to a survey enquiring into their perceptions of and preferences regarding those electronic communications. Data from the survey respondents was compared with data derived from interviews with representatives of the non-profit organisations. This shed light on the organisations' degree of understanding of their publics' perceptions and desires regarding relationship cultivation, through the particular channel of the e-newsletter.

This study aims to address the following research questions:

RQ1: What are the attitudes of e-newsletter readers toward the frequency, amount of content, and interest level of the e-newsletter they receive?

RQ2: How well do non-profit organisations know what their readers want in an electronic newsletter?

RQ3: How might non-profits build on reader feedback to build relationships more effectively and efficiently through the electronic newsletter?

Literature review

Ledingham (2006) has defined public relations as the management function that establishes and maintains relationships. There are many ways that organisations can capture the public's attention and initiate a relationship, but communication tactics may be sweepingly categorised into either a one- or two-way communication flow. Images of Greenpeace activists hanging off large ships as activists try to bring attention to commercial whaling exemplify Grunig and Hunt's (1984) press agentry model. Characteristics of the press agentry model include one-way communication intended to influence an audience to accept the communicator's agenda or opinion. The risk of such tactics is that attention is lost once the news cycle moves on to the next organisation's story, and no relationship is maintained. A second approach focuses on using two-way symmetrical communication to build and maintain relationships with a range of publics. From a normative perspective, the two-way symmetrical model of public relations offers practitioners a framework for excellent practice (Dozier, Grunig, & Grunig, 1995; Grunig & Dozier, 1992). A dialogical approach to public relations, as opposed to one based on persuasion, is central to Grunig and Hunt's (1984) ideal model, a perspective promoted by Kent and Taylor (2002) and Ledingham (2006). Similarly promoting this ideal of dialogism and mutuality within public relations, Bruning and Ledingham (2000) define relationship management as "combining symbolic communication messages and organizational

behaviors to initiate, build, nurture, and maintain mutually beneficial organization–public relationships" (p. 87).

In the mix of advertising, marketing, and other communication functions, public relations is unique in its ability to build and enhance relationships with a range of key publics via relational strategies (Kelleher, 2009). This study draws on Kent and Taylor's (1998, 2002) model for assessing an organisation's dialogic relationships with stakeholders via the Internet. Kent and Taylor identify dialogue as a key ingredient for building relationships because it allows for the "negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions" (1998, p. 325). This study also builds on the premise that the relationship between an organisation and its publics should be built upon a give-and-take model that is honest, open to mutual feedback and adaptation, and essentially ethical. As Taylor and Kent write, "Organizations must 'engage in dialogue' to be ethical" (2014, p. 387). Moreover, to properly engage ''requires an understanding of, appreciation for, and commitment to dialogue with and among stakeholders and organizations as community-building discourse and power resource co-management'' (Heath, 2014). However, academic literature on dialogue suggests that "dialogue is difficult if not impossible to carry out in public relations" (Lane, in press), and this challenge has implications for ethical practice. Toledano and Wolland (2011) insist on the need, among proliferating considerations of social media's potential, for thoughtful discussion of potential abuses of digital technologies (see also Hallahan, 2006; Coombs & Halladay, 2007). They quote Burleson and Kline (1979) who suggest a fundamental requirement of ethical dialogue is that participants must have an equal chance to initiate and maintain discourse, and suggest that while social media offers the *opportunity* for dialogical communication, "we cannot assume that social media are automatically dialogical in nature" (p. 44). Toledano and Wolland further note, "listening is still not evident in [many] practitioner discourses, let alone as having an ethical dimension" (p. 45). Willis (2014, in press) agrees, arguing that organisations are largely ignoring the opportunity to listen and

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engage with social audiences. Under the guise of listening, organisations use audience feedback merely to better achieve organisational objectives.

Hon and Grunig (1999) have built on interpersonal relationship research to formulate six concepts important for maintaining relationships between organisations and their publics: access, openness, assurances, networking, sharing of tasks, and positivity. (Grunig (2006) has more recently called for maintenance strategies to instead be labelled cultivation strategies, arguing that relationships can rarely be 'maintained' because they are dynamic and constantly changing entities.) Hon and Grunig posit that the success of an organisation's relationship-building efforts with its publics can be measured by focusing on the relationship outcomes of control mutuality, trust, satisfaction, and commitment. Relationship theory has been profitably applied to organisational use of digital platforms, and studies have indicated such technologies may promise an array of positive effects on relationship outcomes. Sweetser and Metzgar (2007), for example, have examined the use of blogs as a relationship management tool for organisations in crisis (see also Cho & Huh, 2007). Rybalko and Seltzer (2010) have examined how Fortune 500 companies attempt to build dialogic community with their stakeholders through the use of Twitter. O'Neil and Schieffer (2014) examined the use of Facebook by 100 Fortune 500 companies as well as 100 Philanthropy 200 companies to discover the most frequently used relationship cultivation strategies were openness and access, which the authors categorise as exemplifying one-way communication, and further note that the interactive strategies of networking and sharing of tasks are being under-utilised.

Paine (2011) has noted that while "relationships impact the bottom line in any organisation, in the not-for-profit world relationships take on even greater importance" (p. 191). However, in building and maintaining those relationships, non-profit organisations are facing increasing communication challenges: they must negotiate shrinking budgets and compete for stakeholder attention in an ever more cluttered communication environment (Levine & Zahradnik, 2012). A scarcity of resources compels many non-profit organisations to employ 'shoestring strategies' (Boyer & McCallum, 2012) to maximise their communication activity without adding further costs. Digital communication platforms and social media such as websites, YouTube and Twitter are inherently cheap and can transport messages to large audiences, offering a number of obvious advantages for non-profit organisations with limited time and financial resources (Curtis et al., 2010; Burton, Dadich & Soboleva, 2013; Patel & McKeever, 2014; Waters & Jones, 2011; Waters & Lord, 2009). In a large-scale study, Curtis et al. (2010) found that almost 99% of surveyed US non-profit representatives used one or more channels of social media, and Barnes (2011) has reported all the US charities surveyed (n=78) used at least one social media channel. However, several academic studies have indicated that non-profit organisations have not engaged with websites and social media with the success of the public and private sectors (see for example Burt & Taylor, 2008; Fine, 2006; Schneider & Foot, 2004; Sisco & McCorkindale, 2013; Waters, Burnett, Lamm & Lucas, 2009). Branston and Bush (2010) found that NPOs had difficulty connecting offline activities, such as donating and volunteering, with their social engagement channels. Park and Rhee (2010), in a study of relationship maintenance strategies in the South Korean non-profit sector, suggest a modification of Hon and Grunig's six-strategy model, and further suggest that the strategies of sharing and access may be of particular importance for non-profits in helping motivate stakeholders to volunteer and donate. Olivier, O'Neil and Lambiase (2013) also found that the particular relationship cultivation strategy of sharing of tasks correlates positively, but weakly, to stakeholder volunteering and donating. It appears that, although the two-way potential of social media is cited by practitioners and academics alike, the promise of relationship cultivation via electronic platforms is still to be fully realised by many non-profits, and non-profit groups need to be much more strategic in planning particular communication approaches to divergent stakeholder groups (Maxwell & Carboni,

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2014). Bradshaw and Nolan (2010) have suggested that while "digital channels are acknowledged as a vital part of non-profit communications, the sector's ability to leverage them is still very patchy" (p. 12).

Recently, a number of studies have sought to focus on particular digital platforms and channels within non-profits' broader communication efforts. Several have examined non-profits' efforts to cultivate relationships via the specific channel of the organisations' websites (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; Kenix, 2008; Kent, Taylor, & White, 2003; Patel & McKeever, 2014; Waters & Lord, 2009; Williams & Brunner, 2010). The importance of attentiveness to feedback from stakeholders was identified by Kent, Taylor, and White (2003) in their study of 150 activist and watchdog organisations' websites. Kenix (2008) has suggested that many non-profit organisations are using their websites largely for one-way dissemination of information, missing significant opportunities to engage in productive dialogue with their publics and thereby to increase the effectiveness of their messages. Williams and Brunner (2010) studied the websites of 129 non-profit organisations, specifically assessing the use of Hon and Grunig's relational strategies, and while they discovered that all six strategies were employed by most of the organisations, the level of engagement was low overall. Additionally, scholarly attention has turned to relationship cultivation strategies underlying NPO use of Facebook (Bortree & Seltzer, 2009; O'Neil & Schieffer, 2014; Quinton & Fennemore, 2013). In their study of dialogic strategies used by 50 environmental advocacy groups in their Facebook sites, Bortree and Seltzer (2009) found that the majority of the organisations studied failed to use it for interactive dialogic purposes. Blogging (Cho & Huh, 2007; Kelleher & Miller, 2006; Kent, 2008) and Twitter (Burton, Dadich & Soboleva, 2013; Lovejoy, Waters, & Saxton, 2012; Rybalko & Seltzer, 2010; Waters & Jamal, 2011) have also been examined with regard to the relationship cultivation efforts of non-profits.

The digital channel of email remains relatively under-studied, although a 2010 survey of over 400 US non-profits enquiring into their use of 18 separate types of social media found that 97.8% used email (in comparison with the 54.5% that used social networks, and the 48.4% that used blogs) (Curtis et al, 2010). In New Zealand, an unpublished 2012 study examined the communication tools employed by the country's fifty largest non-profit charitable organisations and found that, while 100% of respondents had a website, 94% also produced email newsletters (Dickerson 2012). A 2013 study examined the technical composition and strategic effectiveness of the e-newsletters produced by three New Zealand non-profits, assessing the degree to which these e-newsletters corresponded with the organisations' stated communication goals (Gray & Hopkins, 2013). As a communication tool for managing organisation-public relationships, email is still fundamentally used as a one-way communication channel by most non-profit organisations, but it arguably possesses characteristics that may promote dialogic engagement with stakeholders. Research is needed to closely examine how e-newsletters may work to cultivate the relationship between organisation and public, and to examine the perceptions of non-profits' publics in terms of that relationship cultivation.

E-newsletter communications are ubiquitous, but under-studied. The current study considers the use of e-newsletters as a strategic tool for non-profits within the context of a public relations and relationship management framework. Given the multiple strategic possibilities available to them, non-profit organisations have choices concerning which relationship cultivation strategies they will incorporate into their campaigns. This study sought to investigate particular aspects of non-profit organisations' use of e-newsletters, involving readability, inherent interest or enjoyability, and frequency of contact, with the aim of better enabling NPOs to build and maintain relationships.

Method

With the assistance of three non-profit organisations, invitations to respond to an electronic survey were sent to their e-newsletter

subscribers. The survey included a series of closed questions, designed to be answered using either a Likaert five-point scale or a simple yes-no binary, regarding subscribers' preferences regarding hard copy vs. electronic newsletters, their reading patterns with regard to the organisation's e-newsletter, and their feelings towards the e-newsletter.

Survey respondents were asked:

• "What would you prefer in terms of the frequency of delivery of the e-newsletter?"

• "What if anything would you change about the amount of content of the e-newsletter?"

• "Is the information provided in the e-newsletter what you're interested in knowing?"

In order to gather more nuanced information regarding the individual organisational e-newsletters, respondents were invited to write in further comments about the electronic newsletter they received. These comments were subsequently categorised and subjected to thematic analysis. Emergent themes included frequency; amount of content; inherent interest; pleasantness/unpleasantness; and readability and format.

We also undertook interviews with the chief executives and communication heads of the three organisations. In the interviews, the organisational representatives were asked several specific questions that related to the subscriber survey, including questions about how often organisations sent e-newsletters, and what features they believed made e-newsletters effective. Interviewees were also asked about their strategic goals for the electronic newsletters, and their perceptions of the e-newsletter's role (actual or potential) in building relationships with their stakeholders; these broader questions were intended to help discover what, if any, strategic thinking underpinned the organisations' choices in terms of e-newsletter content and design. The anonymity of the organisations and of all survey respondents was guaranteed, and no identifying information was recorded. The research was approved as low risk by Massey University's Ethics Committee.

Findings

Three specific survey questions sought to elicit answers to RQ1: *"What are the attitudes of e-newsletter readers toward the frequency, amount of content, and interest level of the e-newsletter they receive?"* Respondents' expressed preferences were compared with the organisations' choices and stated goals, to help answer RQ2, "How well do non-profit organisations know what their readers want in an electronic newsletter?"

In response to the question, "What would you prefer in terms of the frequency of delivery of the e-newsletter?", 62.5% of respondents (n=1097) indicated that receiving a monthly email was ideal; a further 31.6% of respondents preferred quarterly.

Of the three non-profits participating in the study, one sent out a monthly e-newsletter, one sent a quarterly e-newsletter, and the third generally distributed e-newsletters monthly, but occasionally sent an 'extra update'. The survey indicated overwhelming preference for monthly or less frequent than monthly delivery of e-newsletters. Only 5.8% of recipients expressed a preference for e-newsletters to be sent more often than monthly (specifically, weekly). While there were relatively few comments regarding frequency of e-newsletters, the majority of these comments expressed the view that if an e-newsletter were sent more frequently, it would be *less* likely to be read. Characteristic comments included: "I like monthly newsletters, because they don't flood my inbox"; and a further comment articulated the view that the amount of news rather than a pre-determined schedule should determine frequency: "If the content is new and relevant then monthly is fine. If there's no news, then don't make it up i.e.: send the newsletter quarterly."

Interviews revealed that representatives of the organisations were keenly conscious of subscribers' sensitivity to communication frequency. The chief executive of the largest organisation in the study said, "If we want to do it [send an e-newsletter] more regularly we can. We don't because we've made a conscious effort not to inundate people because people get so much. You don't want to over-cook it …

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people just think 'oh, [organisation] newsletter again' and just delete." Another organisation had specifically queried their volunteer centres about e-newsletter frequency: "I asked them last year at both meetings, was monthly enough? And they said yes, what else would you put in there?"

In response to the second question, "What if anything would you change about the amount of content of the e-newsletter?", 82.5% of respondents (n=1088) said the amount of content should be kept the same, with 12.2% wanting more content and 5.2% expressing a wish for less.

Many comments concerning the amount of e-newsletter content contained requests for more photos, though most (not all) of these comments came from subscribers to an organisation with a strong animal focus and a strong demographic component of child-centred families (to whom pictures will generally appeal). Five individual comments asked for more or more in-depth content. One further, related comment recommended that "more links would be good rather than more content", suggesting that interested readers could follow up by clicking a link on a particular story, without bogging other readers down in content they might not want to navigate.

The issue of the 'right' amount of content was one, interviews revealed, that the organisations themselves had wrestled with. One communication head recognised that the ease of including and linking to lots of content via an electronic format had proved a double-edged sword: "we often tried to do, I think, more stories than people can absorb … because of the fact that it's easy … I think we didn't give ourselves the capacity to really fine tune; we just kept kind of casting the net quite wide." All organisations specifically recognised and mentioned subscribers' desire for 'shorter' communications, as expressed by one CE: "we consciously make it not too long, *so people will read it*" (emphasis added).

Finally, in response to the third question, "Is the information provided in the e-newsletter what you're interested in knowing?", 96.1% of respondents (n=1089) agreed that the e-newsletter information interested them. When

each of the three organisations was examined in isolation, the percentage of subscribers agreeing that e-newsletter was interesting was markedly uniform (and markedly high) across all three organisations (95.1%, 95.7% and 96.6%).

One chief executive discussed in some detail how the writing style of the e-newsletter was crucial in maintaining reader interest: "The weight falls on the shoulder of the writer of the newsletter to … keep it interesting and to capture the right angles and to write stories that will appeal to people." If the e-newsletter is not written in an interesting way, she believes, it will "fall over". One other interviewee reported making regular use of analytics software to track which particular stories in an e-newsletter proved most interesting to readers, as recorded in click-throughs.

The open-ended nature of the question about "any other comments about the e-newsletter" elicited a large number of comments. Readers identified a range of e-newsletter features that they enjoyed, liked, loved, or disliked. Of the 25 comments coded as pleasant/unpleasant, 21 expressed positive feelings and only 4 expressed negative feelings. One strong theme emerged: e-newsletter subscribers of these three organisations love photos and videos.

• "Find the video newsletter excellent. Prefer to text-based."
• "I absolutely like the fact that it includes a video message from the chief executive – it feels sort of personal to the reader."
• "I love pictures!"

That an e-newsletter is often designed to provide only a taster and draw interested readers in to related, more detailed content on the organisation's website was recognised by readers, and both the advantages and disadvantages for the reader of this were commented on.

• "One of the added benefits of e-newsletters is the interactive nature of them – and the ability to get to more information on subjects of interest."
• "Hate all the links etc … time is short and [I] can't be bothered having to go to them to get the info."

• "It's frustrating at times to click on links that don't work or haven't been updated to reflect the content of the newsletter."

Survey respondents made more comments (n=29) concerning the theme of readability or format of the e-newsletter than any other theme, and opinions were strong. Reader friendliness, particularly in terms of using headings and other formatting aids to help readers quickly identify what articles would be of interest, was very highly valued.

• "I will only scan the first page, therefore make the first page interesting, use subheadings with links."

• "I like headings and links, so that I can easily access things that I find relevant. I only want to read what is interesting to me."

• "Some e-newsletters state 'An under-2-minute read'. This helps me plan whether to read at once or keep for later more in-depth study."

Subscribers' lack of time and the need to skim or read quickly were repeated concerns; brevity was praised.

• "Keep the writing of individual articles as brief and succinct as possible. That way, more people are likely to read them... otherwise they're inclined to read the first paragraph only then move on."

• "Start with a content list, one line per item."

All the organisation interviewees reported paying specific attention to brevity, to layout, and to formatting aids: "We acknowledged that everybody reading the newsletter would be time-limited so we tried to highlight some [stories] in the banner at the top so that they knew very quickly what was in it." This same chief executive identified the particular importance of e-newsletter navigability: "[we ensured] that it was a smooth process so if you read a little bit online and then clicked back to another page, that it was easy to get back... So you didn't go through endless processes and then lose the newsletter."

An additional issue that emerged from the survey, which had not been identified by the organisations' representatives, was the need to format the e-newsletter for readability on mobile devices such as smartphones. Representative comments include: "It would be great if it could be formatted for smartphone. Sometimes it is a little tricky to read," and "Please fix the formatting. It's awful on phones." Finally, one respondent pointed out that in order to get recipients to actually open and read the newsletter, the subject line of the email itself was critical.

Discussion

With regard to RQ1, *"What are the attitudes of e-newsletter readers toward the frequency, amount of content, and interest level of the e-newsletter they receive?"* we found recipients tended to prefer monthly e-newsletters, most thought the existing amount of content was satisfactory, and an overwhelming majority agreed that the e-newsletter interested them. These responses indicate that non-profits appear to be for the most part successfully tailoring frequency of communication, amount of content, and interest-level of content to the needs and wants of their readers. The study also found that stakeholders identified formatting aids, readability, and inclusion of enjoyable elements like photos and videos as significant components of an e-newsletter that improved their positive feelings toward the publication and the organisation.

The frequency of e-newsletter production varied somewhat across the three organisations, and respondent preferences did show some disparity, but the overwhelming majority of respondents preferred to receive an e-newsletter either monthly or quarterly. A number of comments pointed out that higher frequency would probably mean a lower rate of readership.

In terms of amount of content in the e-newsletters, subscribers across all three organisations reported a high level of contentment with the amount of content provided, although a strong preference for a high proportion of graphical versus verbal content was reported. Interviews revealed all the organisations were sensitive to limiting the amount of content, and very conscious of the risk of 'over-cooking' their newsletters and thereby losing readers.

The non-profit organisations whose e-newsletter subscribers we surveyed should be

heartened by the response of over 96% of respondents that they were interested in the content of the e-newsletter. However, it must be recognised that this figure is drawn from the ranks of e-newsletter subscribers who were sufficiently engaged with the organisation – and sufficiently interested – to complete an online survey about communications from that organisation. Thus our sample is a self-selected group already prone to feel warmly towards the organisation. To this group, at least, the organisations are doing a good job of pitching their content.

The factors that emerged in respondents' comments as having the most relevance to whether or not recipients actually read e-newsletters were recipients' email overload and scarcity of time. If these factors are not carefully considered in the tailoring and sending of e-newsletters, relationship erosion, if not outright resentment, can quickly occur. Overwhelmingly, readers want e-newsletters to be brief. Specific issues regarding formatting and design also emerged as important components of positivity in an e-newsletter. Readers reported a desire for the e-newsletter to contain enjoyable components such as photos and videos, and the use of informative subheadings was positively valued. E-newsletters' inclusion of links to the organisations' websites, where additional stories and fuller content may be found, was strongly linked to positivity, in so far as such inclusion enables the newsletter to be quickly read, and offers readers who want further information the option to quickly access it – without making the newsletter text itself off-puttingly voluminous.

In terms of RQ2: *"How well do non-profit organisations know what their readers want in an electronic newsletter?"* we discovered that, for the most part, organisations displayed sound awareness of their subscribers' preferences in terms of receiving and reading e-newsletters, and had taken a series of steps to specifically address those preferences. The organisations expressed particular consciousness of not overloading subscribers either with too frequent contact, or too much content within the e-newsletter. When interviewed, the chief executive who recorded regular video segments

for the e-newsletter expressed uncertainty as to their usefulness, but the survey's findings provide strong encouragement for the segments to be retained, and for other organisations to consider employing them.

In terms of RQ3, *"How might non-profits build on reader feedback to build relationships more effectively and efficiently through the electronic newsletter?"* several insights emerged from our findings. Readers were very conscious of, and demanding regarding, the reader-friendliness of the e-newsletters, and were discerning in pointing out formatting features that helped and hindered them as readers. In terms of layout and readability, organisations can benefit from subscriber feedback concerning improving newsletter format for mobile devices, and from the strongly expressed preference for graphical and video components. A number of specific suggestions may be useful for individual organisations, including the tailoring of the email subject line itself, an indication of how long each linked story may take to read, and the provision of a list of informative headings, at the head of the newsletter, outlining the contents.

Of course, we recognise that, as Grunig (2002) has pointed out, "relationships cannot always be reduced to a few fixed-response items on a questionnaire" (pp. 2–3). Relationship cultivation is necessarily a complex and multi-faceted operation, and we chose to focus on particular aspects of one particular channel in this study. Further, our survey questions were necessarily limited, and while we gathered further and more nuanced input from the comments solicited, it is likely that further aspects concerning relationship cultivation have not been captured. We recognise, too, the limitations of our sample – self-selecting 'interested' e-newsletter recipients, from a small number of organisations. Nonetheless, our findings offer useful pointers to shape the next stage of the research, which will survey e-newsletter recipients from 40 of New Zealand's largest non-profit organisations.

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Conclusions and recommendations

This research suggests that e-newsletters, despite their unidirectional nature, can and do contribute to the cultivation of relationships between a non-profit organisation and its publics. In the words of one respondent: "I think it is good to be kept informed. It helps us to support our relationship with them." The organisations we investigated showed an informed sensitivity to reader preferences regarding frequency, amount of content, and interest level of their e-newsletters, and were keen to deliver what readers wanted.

This study showed e-newsletter readers are overwhelmingly time-conscious. If non-profit organisations are to maximise the reach and effectiveness of their e-newsletters, then they must ensure that the content, layout, and link functionality of their e-newsletters respond to the time pressures of their readers. The study also revealed that e-newsletter readers enjoy photos and videos, often expressing a preference for graphical elements over verbal ones. Again, this is an important finding for non-profit organisations seeking to use limited budgets to reach and cultivate as many readers as possible.

Finally, while the overwhelming majority of respondents to this survey reported that they found the content of the e-newsletters interesting, in order to elicit more specific information regarding what stories or sections of the newsletter hold most interest to readers, we recommend non-profit organisations make more consistent use of analytics software.

This study suggests that examining stakeholders' perspectives on the relationship cultivation efforts of non-profit organisations' e-newsletters provides valuable insights into ways non-profits can use this communication tool to help create lasting, mutually beneficial relationships with their supporters.

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