

Case Study: Program Audit of a Consumer Health Newsletter

2021

Overview

A weekly bilingual health newsletter was launched in 2018 by a federal health agency to share clear, trustworthy health information with the public. By 2021, the newsletter had more than 150,000 email and text subscribers seeking accessible, easy-to-read health content.

Over time, the newsletter became increasingly resource intensive. Subscription platform costs tripled from 2018 to 2021, and production required significant staff time each week. To guide future decisions, leadership requested an audit of the program's cost, reach, and impact, along with options to improve sustainability.

Scope of Work / Approach

The audit examined both operational and strategic aspects of the newsletter program. It analyzed subscription data, engagement metrics, and cost trends over time to assess the program's overall efficiency and impact.

Staff time and workflows were reviewed to understand the effort required to produce weekly editions and manage the commercial subscription platform. User survey results and analytics data were used to assess audience satisfaction and content relevance.

In addition, the audit identified substitute sources of trusted consumer health information to which subscribers could be referred if the newsletter were discontinued.

Key Insights / Findings

- The newsletter reached an audience that may be less comfortable using the internet and social media, particularly older adults.
- Subscribers valued the newsletter as a source of timely and trustworthy health information, including links to other authoritative federal resources.
- Open and click-through rates exceeded public sector benchmarks, and overall subscriber growth was steady.
- Preparing weekly editions required substantial staff time for writing, editing, and approvals, limiting capacity for other communications priorities.

- The newsletter was delivered via a proprietary subscription service that was costly, required significant administration, and offered limited options for layout, personalization, and analytics.
- Subscription management and staff labor represented a disproportionate share of total communication costs relative to audience size.

Recommendations

- Implement a cost-benefit alignment research plan to determine the future of the newsletter.
- Define clear success measures such as engagement rates and downstream web traffic to demonstrate the newsletter's value.
- Discontinue three low-engagement topic areas to streamline operations.
- Simplify internal review and approval workflows to minimize production time and improve coordination.
- Improve tailoring of content to audience to increase relevance and engagement.
- Transition to a less expensive email distribution platform to align cost with value.
- Stop sending the newsletter via text message due to low engagement from that channel.
- If the newsletter is ultimately discontinued, refer subscribers to other reliable consumer health information products from sister agencies.

Impact and Value

This audit gave agency leadership a clear, evidence-based picture of the newsletter's reach, audience, and resource requirements. By quantifying subscriber engagement, staff time, and delivery platform costs, the findings highlighted the newsletter's value in reaching an older, less digitally active audience and identified opportunities to streamline operations.

The assessment directly informed actionable decisions, demonstrating how a systematic cost-benefit analysis can optimize resource allocation and support informed, mission-aligned content strategy.