How to Get Busy Parents to Read Your Information

If you are frustrated because parents don’t seem to read the important information you work so hard to send home, you are not alone. Here are some things I have found by watching people read almost anything other than a textbook—a newsletter, flier, magazine, catalog, instruction manual, e-mail, or regular mail:

- Virtually everyone gives each piece a one- or two-second “triage” scan, quickly trashing those in which they’re not interested;
- Almost 80 percent will spend less than 30 seconds “reading” items of interest;
- Around 20 percent will spend up to three minutes carefully reading selected pieces; and
- Less than 1 percent will spend up to 30 minutes reading an entire long publication.

Think now about the information you send home. Can you get your critical points across in the less than 30 seconds most parents will likely spend reading it? Sending home frequent, shorter notices rather than long monthly newsletters is one effective approach—but even short communications must be well planned. Here are some simple tips for capturing parents’ attention and getting your message across.

Write strong, attention-getting headlines. In both print and online, the reader’s eye goes first to the headline (or subject line in e-mail) and then, if still interested, on to the text of the message. The headline is your best, and sometimes only, chance to deliver your message.

Add an illustration or photo that clarifies or emphasizes your message.

Include a sidebar or box near your main article, containing a related point or example. This could be a fact box, checklist, a short Q&A, or a timeline. (See example on this page.)

Limit a newsletter to one sheet of paper. Using the front and back is OK, as is using a single folded sheet. Even an 11-by-17-inch sheet folded to make four pages can work.

Use an attractive newsletter nameplate that reflects the professionalism of your school.

Standardize newsletter design and stick with it. Two or three narrow columns are easier to read than a single wide one.

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Keep articles short. Aim for 75 to 150 words, with a 250-word maximum.

Use plain language, at a fourth- to sixth-grade reading level. Short words, short sentences, and short paragraphs are easier for everyone to read.

The Dollar Bill Test

To make sure every page of your newsletter is attractive and inviting, try placing a dollar bill on the page and moving it around. At any angle and in any direction, it should touch a graphic element that adds visual interest to the page, such as:

- Bullets;
- Boldfaced type;
- HEADLINES or subheads;
- A picture or drawing;
- A background screen;
- Rule lines;
- A box;
- Enlarged breakout quotes from elsewhere on the page; and
- White space that rests the eye.

Taking just a few minutes to write frequent, shorter, and more attractive notices, letters, memos, and newsletters with plenty of white space, compelling headlines, and simple graphic elements that add interest to the page will pay big dividends in both print and online communication with parents. Just look how much we have covered on this single page that you are still reading!