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Mackenzie Hammack
mhammack@eagles.bridgewater.edu

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BCVoice Newsletter Creation and Evaluation: The Effect of Subject Line and Internal Links on
Open Rate and Click-Through Rate for a College Newsletter

Mackenzie Hammack

Bridgewater College Honors Project

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Abstract

This study focused on understanding the effect of subject line on open rate and internal link placement on click-through rate in a newsletter that supported a newspaper at Bridgewater College, a small, private liberal arts college in Virginia in order to increase student engagement with and awareness of campus news. No significant difference was found in open rates between a generic and specific subject line. Similarly, no significant difference was found in click-through rate among six different types of internal link placements. Due to the high open and overall click-through rate, it is recommended that the newsletter continues.

Given that 71% of Americans aged 18-29 consume their news digitally (Shearer, 2021), there is an increasing need to make publications more accessible. This study examined the start of a digital newsletter at Bridgewater College, a private liberal arts college in central Virginia with approximately 1,450 students (“Bridgewater facts,” 2022), and tested variations in the newsletters subject line and internal link placement in order to increase engagement with the newsletter through open rate (the percentage of emails opened by subscribers) and click-through rate (the percentage of emails where at least one link was clicked on).

Literature Review

While the effectiveness of various types of electronic newsletters is debated, their use is undeniable; many large newspapers, such as the New York Times, use newsletters to help reach their audiences. According to a study by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 21% of Americans used their email to access news weekly (Newman, 2020).

According to MailChimp, which is the newsletter service this study used, the average open rate across industries is 21.33%, and the average click-through rate is 2.62% (“2022 Email Marketing,” 2022).

One of the most important elements in newsletter design is the email subject line as this is the first thing the audience will see and is often a determining factor in whether or not the newsletter is opened. Generally, subject lines should be short and make the reader curious about the newsletter itself (Bly, 2018). Additionally, Kumar (2021) suggests that longer subject lines may lead to information overload in consumers, resulting in lower open rates. Tests conducted in a Croatian business-to-consumer market compared generic and specific subject lines across two groups three times; while the result of the first test showed no statistically significant differences, the results of the second and third tests showed that generic subject lines performed better (Biloš et al., 2016). In addition to length and content, the use of special characters or emojis in subject lines has also been addressed; Mailchimp recommends that special characters or emojis are limited to just one (“Best Practices for Email Subject Lines”)

whereas Biloš et al. (2016) did not find a statistically significant difference when comparing the open rate of emails where the subject line did or did not include special characters.

Bly (2018) suggests that the type of sender used for a newsletter should vary based on the purpose of the newsletter; the sender name should either be the name of the individual sending the newsletter or the name of the business. In a study of 84 newsletters from 16 Spanish newspapers, 85.8% of the newsletters attributed their authorship to the media company as a whole instead of one individual person or editor, and the newsletters who attributed their authorship to a specific person were described by the study as “newsletters with an appreciable level of curation editorial work, beyond the selection of news” (Guallar et al., 2021, p. 54).

Click-through rate is also used alongside open rate to monitor audience engagement. Studies show that links on the left side of emails receive more clicks with those in the top left being prioritized over those in the bottom left (Kumar & Salo, 2018). Additionally, Kumar (2021) found that the length of the email may not have a significant negative impact on click rate, but that the number of links may have a positive impact on both the click rate and amount of times the email is reopened. The links should also be clear on what they represent, easy to click, and understandable outside of the context of the rest of the sentence in which they are embedded (Shestopalov, 2022).

The overall design of a newsletter also impacts audience engagement. The principle of repetition is especially important in a newsletter to make sure all parts of the message fit together (Williams, 2014), which can be extended to include making sure the newsletter matches the publication it is representing. Readability and contrast are also important to differentiate different sections of the newsletter (Williams, 2014), which becomes especially relevant for audience members who are primarily using the newsletter as a way to quickly get information at a glance.

This study tested whether or not an electronic newsletter was an effective tool at increasing engagement with an online college newspaper. This was tested through altering

subject line and internal link placement to test their effects on open and click-through rate respectively.

H₁: A general subject line will result in higher open rates.

The first part of this study compared a more general subject line to a more specific subject line for that week of the newsletter; the general subject line referenced the college newspaper, while the specific subject line referenced the stories included in that week's newspaper.

RQ₁: Will some types of internal links perform better than others?

The second part of this study compared six types of internal links to one another to see if certain ones resulted in a higher click-through rate, including photos that also functioned as links to news articles. The five other types of links, based on the section of the sentence highlighted, were phrases containing the subject of the story, phrases containing the main verb of the sentence, sports team names, sports results, and supplementary details in the sentence (including the direct object, indirect object, and more).

Methods

Participants

Four strategies were used to recruit subscribers to the BCVoice newsletter. The first strategy was a pop-up that appeared when someone opened BCVoice.org; this pop-up was created through and hosted by MailChimp and would not appear if MailChimp determined that the user had already subscribed to the newsletter. The presence of the pop-up alerted people who were visiting the BCVoice website of the newsletter and required no additional advertising.

The second recruitment strategy was the use of QR codes on posters that took individuals directly to a sign-up for the newsletter. Twenty posters were placed in prominent locations such as the campus library, dining hall, an academic building, and a common area between two dorms. While many of these posters were removed throughout the semesters for unknown reasons, some did remain up all semester.

The third strategy was face-to face interaction, including speaking to classes directly about the newsletter. The success of this strategy varied from class to class but did often result in a small spike of subscribers after the announcement was made. Tabling was also done for about two hours outside of the library, but only resulted in approximately two new subscribers.

The fourth strategy was to use digital channels. This included both a post and story on BCVoice's Instagram and a message sent to all students with majors or minors in the English department. Neither of these strategies resulted in a substantial increase in subscribers.

The number of participants grew throughout the study as more subscribers joined and none unsubscribed. The first email was sent to 92 subscribers. Of these subscribers, 66 were from student emails, 23 were from faculty and staff emails, and 3 were from emails unaffiliated with the college. The final email was sent to 130 subscribers. Of these, 79 were from student emails, 38 were from faculty and staff emails, and 13 were from emails unaffiliated with the college.

All subscribers were randomly divided into Group A or Group B. As new subscribers joined throughout the course of the study, they were sorted each Wednesday immediately preceding the newsletter being sent out. The groups determined which newsletter each subscriber received.

Procedure

The newsletter was sent out each Wednesday at noon for eight weeks starting on Oct. 12 and taking breaks on weeks when BCVoice did not publish new stories. While subject line effectiveness and link placement were two important factors of the newsletter that were tested, the rest of the newsletter was still created with newsletter best practices and design principles in mind while also being styled in a way that reflected the design of the BCVoice website in order to create visual consistency.

One of the first major decisions in regard to the newsletter design was the overall format and content. The BCVoice newsletter was loosely modeled after *The New York Times's* emails

that provide a short blurb following the headline of each story. Adjusting for consistency to BCVoice, the newsletter began with a feature story and corresponding photograph, headline, byline, and a brief, two-paragraph summary of the story; this combined the way that features were shown with a photograph, headline, and byline on the BCVoice website. To keep the newsletter concise but informative, subsequent stories were summarized in bullet points.

Many of the other design choices in the newsletter mimicked the BCVoice website, such as the fact that both featured the BCVoice logo at the top; in the newsletter, this also served as a link to the BCVoice homepage. Additionally, the newsletter followed the overall structure and order of the website by being divided into a top section that is unlabeled but featured stories from the news section of the website. This was followed by a crimson and white banner that began the sports section and another that began the arts and entertainment section, both of which also featured photographs from the most prominent story from each section that also served as links to those stories. However, the order of the sections could be changed in the newsletter to reflect the most prominent stories from that week. An example of this was the week following Homecoming 2022 as there were many more prominent sports stories than news stories; these sections were swapped in the newsletter and a summary of that week's athletic game results was featured. The newsletter also followed the website design with similar choices for the font of the headings and body text to further emphasize the consistency between the two sources. Some design choices in the newsletter, such as sizing, use of whitespace, and the newsletter's dimensions were constrained by MailChimp's software.

After the format and design were created, the name of the sender and preview text, which follows the subject of the email in subscribers' inboxes before they open the email, were the last consistent features of the newsletter that had to be addressed. The name of the sender for the newsletter was "BCVoice." This followed the standard for most newsletters of this style and also provided clarity for the audience on who the newsletter is from. Due to the fact that each email featured a variety of content, the importance of the subject line, and the fact that it

was not required by MailChimp, the preview text for each email was left blank for MailChimp to fill in by default; it appeared as a cluttered link in subscribers' inboxes. This is something that will need to be addressed in possible future newsletters, especially given the fact that it could influence open rate.

A template was created in MailChimp's software that was copied and edited each week to create two versions of that week's newsletter. The templates were turned into campaigns that allowed altering variables such as subject line or link placement. Each week, building the newsletter involved changing and re-linking photos, replacing the feature story with a new short summary, and summarizing and linking all other stories with bullet points. On certain weeks with prominent opinion columns, which were not published often enough to need their own section, or weeks where videos were included in the newsletter, these would be added to relevant sections or at the end of the newsletter. This template was used to create a campaign in MailChimp which allowed for final editing including adding a subject, sender name, and determining which subscribers the newsletter would be sent to.

Measures

Table 1

Subject Lines Used in Testing

	Week 1	Week 2
General	This Week in BCVoice	This Week in BCVoice
Specific	Stories on Valley Votes, Class Pizza Parties and More	Stories on BCSCA, Fall Market and More

Table 2

Internal Links Used in Testing

	Phrases containing the	Phrases containing	Sports team names	Sports scores or	Supplementary details of the	Linked photos

	subject of the story	the main verb of the sentence		placements	sentence	
Week 3	"Alumni" "fall break"	N/A	"home-coming football" "volleyball team defeated" "soccer also beat" "men's soccer beat" "women's soccer lost"	"Eagles winning four of their games" "swim team came in fifth" "23-19" "3-0" "1-0" "1-0" "2-1"	"five matchups" "broke three program records" "Dahmer"	Logo and sports photo
Week 4	"Latin Student Association" "trick-or-treat"	"returned to court" "continues to plan" "invited local families"	"Women's soccer" "Women's cross country" "Men's soccer" "Men's cross country" "Volleyball lost 3-0"	"beat Shenandoah 7-1" "finished fourth out of ten" "lost 3-0" "finished fourth out of eleven"	"ODAC quarterfinals"	Logo, news photo, sports photo, and A&E photo
Week 5	"Title IX Coordinator and Executive Director of Compliance" "Tai Chi" "KCC" "Black Adam" "Bridgewater Coffee" "BC"	"filled the position"	"basketball" "Women's soccer"	N/A	"grab-and-go coffee" "two touchdowns" "ODAC quarterfinals" "The Moors" "food insecurity" "stickers"	Logo, news photo, sports photo, and A&E photo

	theatre” “Crop Hunger Walk”				“exercise science class” “Jaylen Wood” “upcoming season” “to-go boxes” “self expression” “mixed reviews”	
Week 6	“Skip Burzumato” “Engage” “Rubber mats” “Daylight savings” “Beverly Purdue Art Gallery”	“beat Albright” “lost” “did not acknowledge” “continues to support” “share their thoughts”	“Women’s cross country” “Esports”	“16th at regionals” “11th at regionals” “77-67” “64-59 to Marymount”	“Veterans Day” “temporary walkways” “set back an hour” “pre-season scrimmages” “D1 sports teams” “Robert Sulkin” “Veterans Day” “leadership and engagement minor” “fewer and more casual meetings”	Logo, news photo, sports photo, and A&E photo
Week 7	“BC shooting suspect” “Hall of fame football player” “Bridgewater College Student Association” “Res Life”	“continues to deal with low engagement” “indicted by grand jury” “experienced its last” “continues to be involved”	N/A	N/A	“full lunar eclipse” “roundtable discussion” “dis-satisfaction” “Iranian protests” “UVA shooting”	Logo, news photo, sports photo, and A&E photo
Week 8	“Voices of the week” “Piscataway	“summing up overall records”	N/A	“58-41” “2-3”	“four-year engineering program”	Logo, news photo,

	Nation dancers” “fall sports”	“lost to Guildford” “Students share”			“overall start” “engineering and physics department” “National Native American History Month” “Christmas movies”	sports photo, and A&E photo
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Results

Table 3

Open Rate for Weeks 1-2

	Emails sent	Emails opened within 24 hours
General	96	70
Specific	96	74

Z-Score=-0.6667 P-Value=0.25143

Table 4

Overall Click-Through Rate for Weeks 3-8

	Emails sent	Emails with any links clicked by students	Emails with any links clicked by faculty and staff	Emails with any links clicked by other emails	Total number of emails that received clicks	Click-through rate
Week 3	110	9	10	0	19	17.3%
Week 4	120	17	8	0	25	20.8%
Week 5	124	25	13	0	38	30.6%
Week 6	128	8	12	1	21	16.5%
Week 7	131	15	13	3	31	23.7%
Week 8	132	7	11	3	21	15.9%

Table 5*Click-Through Rate for Internal Link Categories*

	Links sent	Links clicked by students	Links clicked by faculty and staff	Links clicked by other emails	Total clicks	Click-through rate
Phrases containing the subject of the story	1,446	29	21	3	53	3.804%
Phrases containing the main verb of the sentence	1,143	20	27	2	49	4.287%
Sports team names	827	1	2	0	3	0.363%
Sports scores or placements	1,013	4	1	0	5	0.494%
Supplementary details of the sentence	2,202	23	31	2	56	2.453%
Linked photos	5,520	21	11	2	34	0.616%

Discussion

The difference in open rate across the two weeks that different subject lines were tested was not significant, which does not support the hypothesis that a general subject line would result in higher open rates. Since the specific subject line performed slightly better, Weeks 3-8 used a specific subject line.

In regard to internal link placement, there was a range of 3.924%. The two lowest performing internal link types were sports team names and sports scores or placements; while this does show that these links were less popular than others, it likely reflects more on the audience's attitudes towards sports stories rather than the links themselves. Photo links also did not perform well, but this may be attributable to the fact that MailChimp does not give an obvious indicator that the photos also function as links; instead, the hyperlinked text to the stories are more obvious. Phrases that contained the main verb of the sentence functioned the best as links, although there was little difference between these and phrases that contained the subject of the story. While highlighting different aspects of stories may have played a role in which links received clicks, the type and subject of the stories included in the newsletter likely played a larger role on the number of clicks received.

The overall click-through rate for the emails sent from Weeks 3-8 averaged to be 20.8%, which exceeded the industry standard of 2.62% ("2022 Email Marketing," 2022).

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to determine whether or not a newsletter would be effective in increasing student engagement with digital campus news at a private liberal arts college in Virginia with 1,450 students. In regard to whether or not the newsletter achieved its goal, the open rate exceeded the industry standard of 21.33% ("2022 Email Marketing," 2022), going so far as to show that a majority of subscribers opened the newsletter each week. While students, faculty and staff, and some emails unaffiliated with the college signed up, 61% of those subscribers were students and a majority of the opens were made by students. This indicates that readers engaged at some level with the newsletter. While the click rate for individual links

varied, this could be due to a variety of factors outside of the comparisons run for internal link placement. Although readers may not have opened individual news articles, they were likely still being exposed to campus news through the text of the email newsletter itself. The overall click-through rate was also still high. Finally, subscriber rate increased throughout the course of the study, showing an appeal to the news delivered in a succinct email.

This study faced many limitations, but time and sample size were the largest. This study was time-limited to a single semester; once the newsletter was approved and ready to be sent out, only eight publications of the weekly campus newspaper remained. Additionally, because the study had to rely on opt-in subscribers, the final number of subscribers to the newsletter was 130 including faculty, staff, students, and a few people using emails unaffiliated with the college reaching a small percentage of the total Bridgewater community.

For future study, researchers should focus on fewer link types, such as just phrases containing the subject of the story and phrases containing the verb in order to see if there is a clearer difference with fewer categories.

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