

# THE CHANGING FACE OF ARBORICULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS

by Duane A. Pancoast

**Abstract.** The public's emerging awareness of the role trees play in the global ecosystem can provide arborists with excellent marketing opportunities as they contribute to the education of their clientele. To accomplish this mission, we have seen a redirection of communications emphasis to customers, prospects and to residents in targeted neighborhoods. Such an approach provides arborists with the amount of space, the format and the control to carefully blend teaching about the needs of trees and their role in the environment with marketing messages about the company's services. Drawing on the newsletter experience of arborists across the country, this paper will show that there are no absolute rules for producing a newsletter. Rather, there are certain key elements that should be present. They should be adapted to the market and local conditions. Technical recommendations concerning content, style and production are also presented.

The decade of the '90s dawned amid growing concern for the environment. Prompted by the global warming trend called the Greenhouse Effect, the American Forestry Association launched a program to plant 100 million trees in American communities by 1992. President Bush also initiated a public-private sector America The Beautiful program whose goal is to plant one billion trees annually for the next five to 10 years. All of this activity peaked in April when we celebrated the 20th anniversary of Earth Day.

From all the rhetoric and tree planting ceremonies has emerged a new interest in trees among Americans. After they plant these millions of trees, however, ongoing aftercare will be required or we will soon be back to pre-1990 conditions in which more trees die and must be removed than are planted. To assure that this does not happen, many marketing opportunities exist for arborists. But they cannot rely on the communications of the '60s to get their message to an increasingly sophisticated audience.

A laundry list ad in the local newspaper or shopping guide used to be sufficient to generate plenty of business. Such ads, which list every service the arborist offers, are still done by some, and may even list such taboo services as topping (1). Today, however, successful arborists have relegated that form of communications to their Yellow Page ads and use other mass media adver-

tising very judiciously.

Successful marketers in every industry have learned to work smarter. For arborists, this means targeting their marketing communications. Advertising people refer to this as a "rifle" approach as opposed to the "shotgun" approach of using mass media. Target marketing for arborists usually takes the form of direct mail and the material mailed is often a newsletter.

Newsletters can provide the medium for arborists to educate the public about the needs of trees and their role in the environment. There is sufficient space for the arborist to carefully blend education with marketing messages. Unlike media publicity, the arborist, rather than an editor, has absolute control over the content.

Some arborists have been publishing newsletters for years. Others have joined the trend since 1985 when the National Arborist Association instituted the Freeman L. Parr Award for the best newsletter. This award program showed arborists outstanding examples of this marketing approach.

Many newsletters are written by arborists and often read as though they had been written for other arborists. Our firm currently publishes 15 newsletters for clients; six of them are for arborists across the country. The purpose of this paper is to share concepts for publishing successful newsletters.

**Newsletter content.** An arborist newsletter should contain company news, news about company people and new products or services. It should also discuss ongoing services that need reinforcement. Pruning, fertilization and pest control, the basic steps to good tree health, need reinforcing in every issue. If your area is victim to poor arboricultural practices, the proper approach should be covered in every issue. Each issue should also explain tree biology on a level the average property owner can understand. New staff people can be introduced and veterans recognized. Stories about specific services should have a call to action, but should not be too

commercial. Remember you are educating as well as selling.

**Newsletter style.** This author has seen too many newsletters written by arborists even though they go outside for design. A nice looking newsletter that does not read well will defeat the purpose. Most arborist-written newsletters are too technical for the average person. They cover

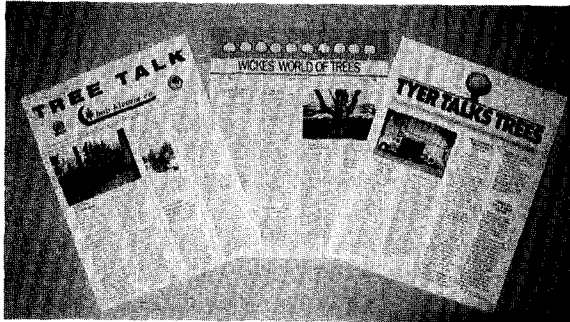


Figure 1. These three examples illustrate different designs within a single format. For commercial tree care companies, two sides of a single 8½ X 11 sheet, printed in two colors on a color paper represent the most cost effective newsletter. When pages are added, the cost goes up and the temptation exists to fill them, often resulting in more copy than the average customer is willing to read.

subjects in much more detail than the reader can or has the desire to absorb. Are arborists who write in this style trying to impress customers about how smart they are, or are they leaving the impression that they are not?

Although the public is becoming more aware of trees and the needs of those trees, most people are not interested in becoming amateur arborists. Perhaps we need to stop educating and begin informing. Webster's New World dictionary defines "educate" as "to train, teach, instruct or develop, especially by formal schooling"; "inform" is defined as "to give knowledge of something" (2).

People understand how animals live, but they may not be as familiar with the way plants live, how their systems function and, consequently, their health needs. This could be one reason why some people fail to distinguish between living plants and hardscape items.

When possible, we recommend equating complex plant health concepts to corresponding human systems. When discussing fertilization, for



Figure 2. A close-up of the 2 pages, four color format, advocated by the author.



Figure 3. Further economies can be realized by making the newsletter a "self-mailer." With the bulk mailing permit printed right on the newsletter, the arborist only has to apply an address label.

example, we compare the nutrients in fertilizer to vitamins, and the need for fertilizing plants to the taking of vitamin supplements by people. It is quite common in arboricultural writing to use fertilization and feeding interchangeably, although Dr. Alex Shigo warns against doing that (3). Instead we use the vitamins analogy.

**Newsletter format.** The variety of newsletter formats is infinite. They range from single color to full color printing. Some are on white and others on colored paper. Some have four pages, some two. Unless a company offers landscaping and lawn services in addition to tree care, we do not recommend four pages. The format we prefer, and publish most, is a single 8½ X 11-inch sheet printed in two colors on a colored paper. Type is set in four columns instead of the more traditional three columns. Although budget is certainly a con-

sideration in choosing this format, so is content.

The two-page, two-color, four-column format is cost effective in a number of ways. Printing is relatively inexpensive. It can be a self-mailer or mailed in an envelope. The extra column with its smaller but cleaner type permits as much as 60 percent more material to be included. Best of all, this format encourages tight writing. There is no room to be wordy.

We do not recommend full color. Quality "four-color" printing is still expensive. Cheap four-color printing looks cheap. It also takes longer to print than single or two-color printing, reducing the timeliness of the newsletter, and it gives the illusion of undue prosperity. Customers may wonder if you could lower your fees if you did not spend so much on your newsletter.

**Publication frequency.** The number of newsletters published per year should be governed by material and budget. Most of our clients publish twice a year, in spring and in fall. One publishes only in spring, another quarterly and another seasonally as tree care emphasis changes. Some arborists publish monthly, but this is a major investment in printing and postage. We



Figure 4. This newsletter has an attractive two-color masthead. The information and photos are then printed in black on a shiny paper. This arborist uses a three column format, allowing for bigger type. Extra copy is accommodated by using an 8½ X 14 sheet instead of the more standard 8½ X 11.



Figure 5. Four pages like this are warranted only if you have enough information on an ongoing basis. This arborist operates a full service landscaping and lawn care service as well as tree care company, and all services have to be represented.

recommend quarterly as the maximum publication frequency.

**Printing and production.** Using desktop publishing for layout and type can save time. However, most internally generated desktop published pieces are not as sharp or as attractive as those in which the printer or an artist sets the type. It also cannot print fine enough for the type we use in our four-column newsletters. This has to be clear, clean type or it will appear to be too small. Desktop published material must also be proofread very carefully.

Although printers prefer black and white photos for single color newsletters, they can print color photos in black and white. Most of today's auto focus point-and-shoot cameras produce photos of sufficient quality to be used in newsletters. Photos should be used judiciously and only if they illustrate a story. The average two-page newsletter has room for only three or four. A four pager can fit six to eight comfortably, but should be included only if they can enhance the story.

The printer selected must be able to do the job at the necessary quality level and in a timely fashion. Although there are printers on nearly every street corner, most are known as quick copy shops. There are commercial printers who can do a much better job at a price that is competitive to quick copy shops.

Regardless of who does the printing, an adequate supply of newsletters should be printed. After sending them to customers and prospects, they make excellent handouts and leave-behind pieces for sales calls. They also should be used as direct mail pieces for targeted mass mailings to specific neighborhoods.

### Summary

A newsletter provides an arborist with an attractive, informative, cost effective medium with which to educate clientele about tree needs, why specific services are necessary, and also serves as a marketing tool. The task may seem formidable to one who does not enjoy writing or graphics. A newsletter is such a powerful marketing and information tool that arborists should seek professional assistance. This makes

good economic sense as well. The arborist who is dabbling in graphics is not making any money and the result may be comparable to the graphic artist or writer pruning his own trees.

### Literature Cited

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**Résumé.** La conscience émergente du public sur le rôle que les arbres jouent au sein de l'écosystème global peut fournir aux arboriculteurs une occasion excellente de marketing en autant qu'ils contribuent à l'éducation de leur clientèle. Pour accomplir cette mission, nous avons observé une réorientation des communications mettant l'accent sur les consommateurs, les clients éventuels et les résidents de quartiers cibles. Une telle approche fournit aux arboriculteurs avec une somme d'espace, le format et le contrôle pour allier avec soin l'enseignement sur les besoins des arbres et leur rôle dans l'environnement avec les messages sur les services de la firme. Tiré de l'expérience de lettres d'information d'arboriculteurs d'un bout à l'autre du pays, cet article va démontrer qu'il y a aucune règle absolue pour la production d'une lettre d'information. Plus exactement, il y a certains éléments clés qui doivent être présents. Elles doivent être adaptées au marché et aux conditions locales. Des recommandations techniques touchant le contenu, le style et la production sont aussi présentées.

**Zusammenfassung:** Die wachsende Aufmerksamkeit der Öffentlichkeit auf die Rolle des Baumes im globalen Ökosystem kann Arboristen, in Verbindung mit der Informierung möglicher Kundschaften, Marketing-Möglichkeiten anbieten. Um diesen Auftrag zu erfüllen haben wir, Kunden und Einwohnern in gezielten Nachbarschaften nach, schon eine Neuorientierung der Kommunikationsbetonung gesehen. Solch ein Plan verschafft Arboristen Raum, Format und Kontrolle um das Unterrichten über die Bedürfnisse von Bäumen und ihre Rolle in der Umwelt sorfältig mit Marketing Information über die Leistungen einer Firma zu verbinden. Unterstützt von Flugblättererfahrungen von Arboristen im ganzen Land, wird diese Arbeit zeigen, daß es in der Herstellung von einem Flugblatt keine absoluten Regeln gibt. Vielmehr gibt es bestimmte Schlüsselbelemente, die vorhanden sein müssen. Sie sollen auf den Markt und auf örtliche Zustände angepaßt werden.