

# In the Boxing Ring: Print vs Web Communication

By Gea Swee Jean  
Genii Group

January 2008



## Excerpt

*Most IT marketers these days use online newsletters as part of their integrated marketing communications (IMC) toolbox. It's fast, low cost and convenient. But why not use a printed magazine as well? The common response is: "Why should I spend my money on print?" Think again. In this paper, I throw print magazines and e-newsletters into the boxing ring for a fight to the finish – and discover six compelling reasons why you should.*

To borrow the words of marketing expert Seth Godin, "There are three things great marketing always is. It's anticipated, it's personal, and it's relevant."

Given these three criteria, it's no wonder that having a regular company e-newsletter is a popular tactic among IT marketers now. It's a quick and easy way of maintaining a regular connection with your audience (whether existing or potential customers) that is certainly anticipated, and can easily be made personal and relevant.

Alongside e-newsletters, I personally recommend using regular print magazines to maintain a relationship with your audience as well. A print magazine is especially useful for IT companies who wish to offer something a bit more substantial to their audience.

However, when the idea of a print magazine is mooted, oftentimes the immediate response from IT marketers is: "We already have an e-newsletter. Why should I spend my money on print?"

Why indeed? In our era of fast and relatively cheap email communication, why even bother with print?

The debate rages on among marketers and in the publishing industry itself. This paper sets out to conduct a blow-by-blow comparison of both marketing communication media, throwing print magazines and e-newsletters into the ring for a fight to the finish. Is one medium better than the other? To find out, read on.

## Rules of the Fight

We begin by establishing the basis of comparison to ensure a fair fight. We can

compare the effectiveness of print magazines and e-newsletters by addressing six key questions:

1. What information do they share?
2. What audience do they reach?
3. What customer information can be collected?
4. How do they contribute to the company's image?
5. How convenient are they to read?
6. How easily are they shared with others?

One point to note is that we must distinguish print magazines and e-newsletters from ad-hoc promotional flyers or emails. The regularity with which magazines and e-newsletters are distributed helps cultivate an interested and engaged reader base that anticipates their arrival. As compared to unanticipated emails blasted to your inbox or flyers shoved in your mailbox, this makes a world of a difference!

## Round 1: What information is shared?

At first glance, it may appear that magazines and e-newsletters share similar information. Both run stories on solutions, events, white paper findings, and so on.

On closer inspection, however, magazines have the luxury of delving more deeply into stories, featuring longer stories that can not only explain what a solution is, but also how and why it works best in different environments. They also have more freedom to include longer analysis pieces, stories on market trends, or even interviews with senior executives.

On the other hand, e-newsletters carry short news bites that can be read quickly and digested easily. Says Web usability expert Jakob Nielsen, "People get a lot of email. They

don't have time to read a lot of text. Newsletters must be designed to facilitate scanning". Also, e-newsletters have hyperlinks that lead outwards to the World Wide Web. A quick click on a hyperlink leads to technical specifications, lists of partners, similar products, and more. The breadth of information available is boundless, thanks to the interconnectedness of the Web.

So it seems that both contenders come to mixed blows in this round, each having their own unique strengths. Why the difference between the two? It links back to the reading habits of offline and online readers.

Research done by Usability News (Shaikh, 2004) highlighted seven major factors that influence user preference for reading something online or in its printed form:

- length of the document
- purpose of the document
- ease of navigation
- convenience
- quality of the document
- complexity of the document
- portability

The study findings showed that for long documents that are intended for use as research, presentations, or for supporting a point, readers prefer them printed. Complex documents are preferred in print as well, and the ability to highlight key points and write down comments on paper is a key advantage. However, for short documents, especially if used for entertainment, readers prefer reading them online.

**Verdict: A tie.** Both have their own strengths and weaknesses in this category, so this first round is a hit-and-miss affair.

### Round 2: What audience is reached?

It is relatively easy to blast copies of your e-newsletter to every single person in your database – and more than a few marketers I know do that. The real question that remains is: Who reads it?

Well, for print magazines, the good news is that the higher up a reader is in the management chain, the more likely he/she is going to spend time reading a job-related magazine. A study conducted of urban working professionals, executives and managers in Malaysia's Klang Valley showed that 67.9% of senior level managers read job-related magazines, as compared to 57.8% of middle level and 35.4% of junior level management (Ong, 2002).

In fact, "the higher the level, the more time would be spent on reading", said the study. It found that 62.5% of senior level managers spend more than four hours a week reading, as compared to 56.5% and 36.5% of middle level and junior level managers respectively.

And the most significant difference between higher and lower level management was in their attitudes towards reading:

"... junior level professionals tended to agree more that they read only if a topic interested them and when they did not have anything else to do... On the other hand, more senior personnel had a stronger appeal to reading – they believed that reading could enhance job-related skill and they always made sure that they had the time to read."

E-newsletters, on the other hand, cater to a cross-section of IT professionals and managers on the World Wide Web. However, the problem with distributing an e-newsletter in today's world is that "people get a lot of email. They don't have time to read a lot of text" (Nielsen, 2002), to put it simply. In fact, with the overwhelming amount of email that people are bombarded with today, a Nielsen study (2007) found that only 19% of e-newsletters are read thoroughly. This is down 4% from 23% four years ago.

Bearing in mind these statistics, it's easy to see how e-newsletters are often read less by high level managers who are in and out of meetings – and more by IT professionals or junior level managers, who typically spend their workday at their computers, connected to the Internet.

**Verdict: A tie** once again. Magazines and e-newsletters excel at reaching different audiences.

### Round 3: What customer information can be collected?

As B2B marketers, possessing quality customer information is essential. The more you know about your audience, the more relevant and personal your communication with them can be, and the easier it is to cut through an increasingly noisy media environment.

An ongoing print magazine or e-newsletter is an ideal vehicle through which you can start collecting valuable reader information. Some questions you could ask:

- What topics interested you in the past four issues?
- Did the information provided help you be more effective in your job?

- What are your IT-related priorities for the next six months?
- What is the size of your annual IT budget?

With a regular print magazine going out to your readers every three months or so, it's easy to conduct a reader survey once in a while to get an idea of what readers value – as well as to gather information about their job role, their solution category, their pain points, budgets, and so on. The survey can be done on paper and faxed back, or readers can be pointed to an online survey form.

Going a step further, with a subscription model for your print magazine, you could collect detailed information through a registration process. This would include reader name, job title, company, telephone number, email address and mailing address. By taking steps to maintain the list and keep it updated, you can even track if your reader has had a change of role or company.

Reader surveys can also be done very easily with e-newsletters, by pointing respondents to an online survey form, or by including the questions and answer selections within the e-newsletter itself. However the information collected would probably be less detailed than if it were a print magazine registration, as readers are more wary of sharing their information online for fear of compromising privacy.

This is a valid fear. It is getting harder and harder for the average consumer to keep information private, and those who have volunteered too much information too easily have had to pay the price of spam in their inbox and cold calls from various telesales departments. Understandably, people are wary.

On the other hand, think about the last time you subscribed to a print magazine. Did you feel just as wary about filling in that subscription form for a magazine that would be delivered to your doorstep for free every month? I bet you didn't. By the sheer fact that a print magazine is tangible, and it being delivered to you at no cost month after month, creates a certain perceived value. In this way, a tangible print magazine can seem to be worth more than a virtual email – which makes it easier for readers to feel comfortable sharing their information in return for a regular subscription.

**Verdict: Print magazines win in this round.**

**Round 4: How is your company perceived?**

Another way in which a magazine or e-newsletter can contribute is in the way it helps shape reader perceptions of your company. To be honest, producing a regular print magazine is not an easy feat. It requires planning, consistent gathering of possible content, and discipline in ensuring every issue is published on time. Regular distribution is important because when readers can anticipate the magazine's arrival, the better they remember you. It's that simple. If your readers even notice that the magazine hasn't arrived as expected, that's a great sign!

Also, providing and sharing information in a printed format shows the seriousness with which your business approaches existing and potential customers. The act of producing a regular print magazine speaks volumes about your company's commitment to your existing and potential customers. While others may spout rhetoric, you really care. That is the value print magazines bring to the table.

On the other hand, think about the most recent e-newsletter you received. What was it about? What was the major piece of news shared? Was it even memorable? Or did you hit "Delete" without a second thought? Or filed it away, thinking that you'll come back to when you have a spare moment (which almost always never happens)?

That's one of the weaknesses of e-newsletters. There are so many of them that it's hard to leave an impression. Print magazines work much better here. By virtue of the fact that they are substantial in mass and weight, they work much better as a leave-behind as compared to an e-newsletter. Would you easily discard a 48-page, full colour, glossy magazine with a compelling headline on the cover? I bet you wouldn't.

**Verdict: Print magazines win in this round.**

**Round 5: How convenient is it to read?**

We live in an information age. The truth is that both print and Web are easily accessible and quite convenient to read in today's business environment.

Print magazines, being tangible, are convenient as they can be brought along to meetings and referred to at any time. Say your reader is typically in and out of meetings the whole business day. In the small gaps of time in between, while waiting for another party to arrive, it's easy to flip open a magazine. Even if all he/she reads is just one caption beneath an

attention-grabbing photo, or a sidebox highlighting the key points of the article, it is easy enough for them to bookmark that page and come back to it later.

Print is also a convenient medium for the business traveler – they can be read while on the plane, coach or train. The medium is sturdy enough such that even if it is dropped, it doesn't affect the integrity of the publication very much – you can just pick it up again. But imagine the consequences if it was your BlackBerry, smartphone or notebook computer that fell out of your grasp!

With that said, while email access is quite reliable in most business environments in Asia, the electronic device required to read your e-newsletter on will still be the weakest link.

Business travellers will still have to hope that their battery won't run out, that they won't drop the device, that e-newsletters still appear in an easy to navigate format. If they're faced with any of these challenges, the quickest and most convenient action to take would be to simply hit the "Delete" key.

**Verdict: Print magazines win this round.**

#### **Round 6: How easily is it shared?**

What's a piece of media if you can't share it, discuss it with others, and pass it along? New information on IT solutions often needs to be discussed with other stakeholders in the company before any buying decisions are made.

In the print publishing world, the "pass-on" effect with print magazines makes up a crucial part of readership numbers of any publication. A magazine, say *The Economist*, can be read by one person in the office, and instead of being discarded, is passed on from one person to the next. That's the "pass-on" effect, which contributes to what is known as secondary circulation.

Readers will pass magazines on to colleagues or peers when they are done. They may want to make notes in the margins as they read, and call out specific information for colleagues to take note of – "Is this something we can implement for our company?", "Will this be useful to us?" Information can be easily and immediately called out.

Nonetheless, e-newsletters have their strengths as well. It's so easy to forward an e-newsletter by "word of mouse". There is no doubting the

Internet's ability to spread information like wildfire. Not only that, but the e-newsletter is duplicated as it goes along – so everyone has their own copy to refer to, which can prompt discussions to continue online over live chat or email.

The limitation faced by e-newsletters is their note-taking ability, which is limited to single lines of text, separate from the content itself. Compare this with a print magazine, where key points can be highlighted directly and notes made in the margins right next to them.

**Verdict: A tie.** Both can be easily and effectively shared in different ways, online and offline.

#### **Final Verdict**

I would like to be able to say unequivocally that the print magazine, having emerged the winner in three out of six rounds, is clearly the champion in the ring.

Print magazines are more effective than e-newsletters in terms of the detailed level of customer information they can collect, the way they help shape readers' perceptions of the company, and the way they are convenient to read even while on the go.

However, I hesitate to declare a winner in our pseudo boxing match.

The points of comparison discussed touch on six key differences between print magazines and e-newsletters. Both mediums are unarguably different in:

- the kind of information they communicate
- the audiences they reach
- the customer information that they can help collect
- how they contribute to the perception of the company
- how convenient they are to access and to be read anywhere; and
- how easily they can be shared with others

The conclusion, I find, is not that one medium trumps the other – but that both have significant strengths, to be deployed strategically by IT marketers, depending on the goals of the marketing campaign itself.

Print is still very much an effective medium in reaching senior level management, who prioritize reading job-related magazines. E-newsletters, on the other hand, can be distributed to such a large reader base so easily that not fully utilizing the medium would be a

mistake. But while e-newsletters are a convenient tool for marketers, they must be used appropriately and discretion exercised so that they remain relevant.

By understanding and therefore leveraging on the unique strengths of both mediums, IT marketers can fully utilize print magazines and e-newsletters in complementary ways, in order to achieve maximum marketing effectiveness in their marketing campaigns.



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