

10 rules of the road for your holiday newsletter

by Jenifer Goodwin

Every year around this time, along with the catalogs and the Christmas cards, another sort of correspondence appears in the mailbox - the family holiday newsletter.

HOLIDAY NEWSLETTERS - Morsels of everyday life in a family holiday newsletter can be unappetizing, so keep it snappy! CNS Photo. In theory, newsletters are an efficient means of sending greetings while bringing relatives and friends up-to-date on significant events in your family's life.

In reality, most newsletters are as unappetizing as eggnog in August.

What is it about the combination of snowflake stationery and a PC that makes otherwise considerate people start offering up details like the square footage of the house they're having built with their husband's massive bonus? Why does the season of sharing make parents try to convince us that their children are as charming as the Von Trapps?

Why does the holiday newsletter unleash the braggart within?

In an effort to help you avoid the four major newsletter pitfalls - too long, too boring, too braggy and too many Santa stickers - here are the Top 10 rules for what not to include in yours.

Rule 1. Remember, every child is not gifted. Or talented.

Go ahead, tell the grandparents every detail about your son's turn as the pumpkin in the school play, or the face his teacher made when she described him as "spirited." But then fight like hell against the very strong parental urge to share those stories with anyone else. Things like mastering potty training, making the honor roll or getting accepted into the school's gifted and talented education program are never interesting to anyone other than your spouse and possibly the grandparents, as long as it doesn't interfere with their tee time or attempt to book cruise tickets online. After all, you've heard of the acronym GATE, right? Gifted And Tell Everyone.

Rule 2. In very specific cases, go ahead and break Rule 1.

If your child has been suspended or expelled for reasons such as releasing lab rats in the school cafeteria, by all means include that in your letter. Also, pranks that involve farm animals or streaking are always entertaining.

Rule 3. Trips to Iowa, Oklahoma or Ohio should be, without question, excluded from your letter.

For that matter, so should any trips undertaken in a Recreational Vehicle, unless you are being filmed by a crew from MTV. Come on, you know it's true. Vacations are only fun to the people taking them, and at times, even that's questionable.

Rule 4. It's always acceptable to say you're "exploring new career options" if you've been fired.

However, if the new venture is run out of your garage, involves accosting people as they walk out of the supermarket or requires you to say things like, "the more you buy, the more you earn," it does not qualify as a promising new business opportunity.

Unless you want your neighbors, friends and relatives to suddenly have an urgent errand to run when they see you, you're better off taking the temporary holiday job at the mall, in which case they can at least hit you up for the employee discount.

Rule 5. Dogs do not rate their own section.

Pets are part of the family, right? So how could you leave them out? Try. Try hard. Unless your dog has just won Westminster, everyone already knows that dogs don't do much other than sleep, eat and slobber. So resist temptation and never devote more than a passing mention to your pooch.

And whatever you do, do not send photos of your pet wearing reindeer antlers, especially if you've had the photo professionally taken by a photographer at Sears or JCPenney.

Rule 6. Cats and other small mammals like hamsters and rodents should be left out entirely.

Ditto for birds, turtles and snakes, unless one has accidentally gotten free and eaten the others, in which case it might be worth a line or two.

Rule 7. If it bleeds it leads applies only to TV news.

Avoid detailed descriptions of medical procedures or afflictions such as Montezuma's revenge or gout. In fact, all surgeries are a major downer. Who wants to be blissfully strolling the aisles at Target or Wal-Mart, buying toys that you definitely won't find out are contaminated with lead until after the kids have had the joy of putting them in their mouths a hundred times, only to be shaken back to reality by news of your battle with

some scary-sounding disease? We all watch "House" and "Grey's Anatomy." We already know just how many horrible things can go wrong with the human body.

Rule 8. In the case of plastic surgery, ignore Rule 7.

If you've suddenly sprouted a head of hair or are looking exceptionally fresh and perky, please share. Ditto if you've had surgery that now requires us to call you Joan instead of John. Definitely include pictures, preferably from multiple angles.

Rule 9. If your pet has had surgery, refer back to Rules 5, 6, 7 and 8.

If your dog is suffering from a disease that sounds all too human (diabetes, kidney failure, heart disease), please spare us the details. Of course, if your dog has gone to the great grassy field in the sky, you'll want to mention it, but keep the reference short and bittersweet. Try something like: "He was a good ol' dog and one day he up and died. We'll miss him."

Rule 10. By all means, before you seal the envelope, take a few minutes to write, using an actual pen, a few lines wishing the recipient peace and happiness in the coming year.

While you're at it, sign your name, also using an actual pen.

So what if the most exciting thing you had to share was that you finally got around to cleaning out the garage? So what if we all know your kids are really a little on the bratty side?

If you take the time to make even the most self-aggrandizing missive personal, we'll be glad to hear from you.

Because deep down, we're happy for you. Really. Even if you did single-space the page.

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