

Module 1 - Interview with Bent Freiwald | Krautreporter

[00:00:10] **Emily Roseman** Hello everyone, and welcome to week one of newsletter strategies for journalists. We are so excited that you're joining us today. In week one, we're going to be focusing on everything you should know as you get started with your newsletter. A really big, important part of getting started with newsletters is knowing about your audiences. Who is your newsletter going to serve? What do those audiences want to know? What format do those audiences prefer their content or stories to be in? These are all things that can be answered through audience research with your current newsletter audiences or your potential newsletter audiences. So, I am thrilled that today we have an expert in all things audience research and newsletters. This is Bent and he is the engagement editor at Krautreporter. Krautreporter is a super innovative digital news site based in Berlin, and they are really known in the field for being pros at all things audience research. So hi Bent!. Thank you so much for joining us today.

[00:01:26] **Bent Freiwald** Hi Emily, thanks for the invitation.

[00:01:28] **Emily Roseman** Yeah. So just to get us started today, Bent, would you mind telling our listeners a bit about you and your role at Krautreporter?

[00:01:37] **Bent Freiwald** Yeah sure. So, first maybe a bit about Krautreporter. So as you have mentioned, we're a German-based online magazine. We are five years old now. We started with a huge campaign, a huge crowdfunding campaign and we got I think it was like one million euros together. Then we started an online magazine, and now changed a bit, actually. So what we're doing now is, our claim is to understand the bigger picture behind the news, roughly translated. And that is actually what we're trying to do every day. So, we are publishing only one article every day, that article should be long enough and it should include all the possible perspectives of the important perspective, at least. That could be an analysis, that could also be a report or some poetry or some personal stuff. But it should also always explain the bigger picture behind the news because we're not doing news at all. So that is Krautreporter and we have three principles every article should include. The first principle is pretty straightforward, something that every journalistic product should do - explaining something. That's not that confusing. So that's our first principle. The second principle at Krautreporter is personalization. So, we as reporters, we don't claim to be objective. We are subjects, we have people doing journalism and that is what we are transparent about. So, if we think you have a strong opinion about something, we just write it into the article, and then we can see if during the research our opinion gets changed. So the personalization is always there. Third, and probably the most unique principle, at least in Germany, is engagement. So whenever it is possible, we should engage our members into the research, into our work. And that is where I come in and play. So that's my role at Krautreporter as engagement editor, and I'm also a reporter. That's actually what I'm doing most of the time. I'm just a reporter covering the topics education and the scientific system, but also the huge field of engagement at Krautreporter.

[00:04:13] **Emily Roseman** That's awesome. Thank you so much Bent for telling us more about what Krautreporter does. I'm curious, if you could tell me a bit about why email newsletters are important for your news room and tell us a bit more about how your role as engagement editor involves working with newsletters.

[00:04:35] **Bent Freiwald** So, our principles is every reporter has to have a newsletter. This newsletter isn't always about one specific topic, but it's about the reporter. So, what

we're doing there is we are giving insights into our work, right? So not only the articles, but also into the work behind the articles. We are writing short analyses, that's what we're doing there. And we are showing podcasts, interesting articles from over seas, interesting books we're reading. That's what we're doing in our personal newsletter. That is very important, because personalization is such a big deal at Krautreporter. We really need these newsletters to make members feel and also see that personalization is not some random thing we're trying to do, but that we are doing this every day. So these are our personal reporter newsletters, and we also have different other newsletters that we have in Germany. In Germany, we call it "Die Morgen Post". That's the daily newsletter, basically every morning. The reporter actually sits in New York. That's why we can publish it every morning at or at a time in Germany when most of the people are still in bed. So that's one of our newsletters. We also have a community newsletter, and that's maybe also very interesting for you guys, because that is where all the reporters we have come together once a week and report what they are working on. And we still have our weekly newsletter. This is basically just our stories of the week. So, when someone is not really into checking the website every day, they still get to know which articles we have published the week before. So these are newsletters, and maybe one important thing already - so we are not only doing audience research to conduct to a new set of products, but we are also using our newsletters to get into audience research, right? So, what we always have in nearly every single newsletter we are publishing is one question for the audience. We don't want only to put all our thoughts into the newsletters and then it's done, but we also want to know what people think about our newsletters and about our thoughts about them on topics. So this is what we're doing, and a lot of my work is based on these surveys we are doing and the newsletters actually the perfect place to spread surveys to your audience and we are using that.

[00:07:35] **Emily Roseman** That's fascinating. So just to be sure I'm understanding, you're both conducting audience research on the newsletter itself by asking readers, like, what did you think about this newsletter? But then you're saying that you also use your newsletter email list to conduct audience research, perhaps, for other newsroom products?

[00:07:56] **Bent Freiwald** Yes. So, of course, we're doing audience research for the newsletter. So we are asking them, one big survey was, "what kind of newsletter do you want to read next?" This was very important, because we had like five or six ideas and we were not sure about which of these ideas were the next big important thing. So we asked them, and it was totally a huge range of topics. So one year ago or like nine months ago, one idea was to have a newsletter about the US and about, actually, I think the pitch was about the madness of Donald Trump or something. Something like that, but also about the election, of course. And we had to have the idea of having a newsletter about mobility, and something about smarter living and stuff. What we found out is that people, even though we thought the U.S. is the next big thing this year, and (Coronavirus) and stuff, but people weren't that interested, actually, into the election that early. So we didn't launch that newsletter. But also, and maybe that's what your question was about. We are always using the newsletters to get to know the opinions of our members, to write, of course, to write in the end articles. We have all the surveys in the newsletters. So for example, I did research about people in German schools, and I didn't want to talk to parents. I didn't want to talk to teachers, but I wanted to get to know what are these children are thinking about how the school system is running. And then I put this survey into the newsletter, and I was pretty sure that I had not that many children in the group of my subscribers, so I begged the parents to spread the survey to the children and to ask them if they could contribute. And they did that, I had like 200 children doing the surveys, and that was not for the newsletter

to get to know something, what their needs are or not, but really to work on a specific research, to work on a specific article.

[00:10:28] **Emily Roseman** That's super interesting, and I want to go back to this US newsletter that you decided not to do, because I think that's so important that people decide not to do things as well as decide to launch a new newsletter. But I want to go back to this really interesting point you made about all of the newsletters that Krautreporter produces, which is each reporter has their own newsletter. Then you have this kind of organizational-wide, daily news newsletter and the community newsletter. I'm curious, how do you think about the audience research processes for each of those newsletters, is each reporter responsible for learning about their audience, or how does that all work across your newsroom?

[00:11:25] **Bent Freiwald** So basically yes, we are all responsible for our own newsletters. We are also totally free in what we are doing in our own newsletter. If you follow one reporter, then it's something totally different from if you follow the newsletter from another reporter. So we are totally free in that. That's also because we all have different audiences, right? So we all cover different topics and therefore we all have different audiences, and therefore we need to get to know our audience. That's why, for example, I did it in my newsletter. I did a survey in my newsletter, one year after I started it. I did a really quick survey, how do you like this newsletter? What do you like? What do you not like? Of course, when you don't open the newsletter, why? When you open the newsletter, why? What would you like to see in this newsletter? Of course. And that really helped me to understand what the needs are, They said, I really like your personal tone. That's really good for us, because that's what we are doing. And they said, I really like these short analysis about the education system and your short thoughts about what's happening in the news. So I really understood what I should do in the newsletter, but then my colleague Rico, our editor-in-chief, did the same for his newsletter. And of course, the audience was different and they also want to have different things in their newsletter. So, if you know one audience, you definitely don't know the other as well.

[00:13:21] **Emily Roseman** That is super fascinating and such an important point to realize that even within one newsroom, different reporters are going to have different types of audiences of different needs. And newsletters are such a great way to meet those specific needs because it's sent to a targeted list. Yeah, OK, that's super fascinating. I'm curious, going back to what you mentioned before about considering launching this Trump-based, US-based newsletter. Can you tell me more about what you learned in that audience research process that led you and your team to say, you know what, let's not launch this newsletter after all?

[00:14:04] **Bent Freiwald** So first, I forgot to mention that we have all these audiences, but are already launched newsletters, right? So, how to get an idea of which newsletter comes next? I mentioned already the survey, but the ideas we had wasn't all about our own ideas. And that's because we are in a constant conversation with our members, right? So we have this constant survey where people can ask a question. So the survey has the name, what don't you understand? Right? And, I think that's a really good question, by the way, because sometimes we used to ask, what do you want us to do research on? But that's a bad question, because people aren't thinking like journalists, they are thinking like people, of course. They don't know which research is a good research question, and so on. But what I do know is what they don't understand, and that is what they can tell us. And that is also why we knew which of these topics are already the topics our audience is discussing about, right? So we knew that there are all these questions about smarter living, there are

all these questions about mobility, about the U.S. election and stuff. So these topics are not coming out of the blue, but we are we are in constant conversation and that is why we we already knew these topics are important for our audience. Yeah. I don't know if there was a second part of the question.

[00:15:50] **Emily Roseman** Yeah no, that was super interesting to know how you're generating those insights continuously about topics that could maybe be the bedrock for future newsletters. So I'm curious if you could tell us a bit about your decision to not lean into or move forward with this US-based newsletter, because I do think it's so important for people to also stop doing things that they shouldn't do for their audiences as well.

[00:16:20] **Bent Freiwald** Yeah, so we actually had one reporter, the one that is doing our Morgen Post from New York, and he, of course, wanted to have this newsletter because he, of course, already thought it's going to be so confusing, it's going to be so important to know about what is happening in the U.S.. So he was thrilled to do this newsletter. And our editor-in-chief was a bit more, I don't know, calm, and a bit more realistic about it. And he said, OK, if you are so thrilled to do it, let's ask the audience, not just imagine what people think about it, but just ask them. And that is actually why we did this survey at first. So what came out is that people wanted to have a smarter living newsletter. Of course, that's not only in the US a big topic right now, but around the globe, I guess. And people also were interested, and that was really odd idea, about architecture. To not compared to the US, but it's just a small topic, actually, but people were really interested in that. And then we had the survey, "please vote from one to five, which of these newsletters would you like to read?" Like, really, really simple question. And they did that, and then we thought, OK, the newsletter about the U.S. was like fifth place from six at all. But we still had this reporter who was so thrilled to do it. So the solution was, we didn't launch it at Krautreporter, but he launched it himself.

[00:18:14] **Bent Freiwald** But no, it's really important if you ask your audience, and your audience tells you something you don't want to hear. I mean, it's a tough decision, right? But you have to take it seriously, and I mean, it was the right decision to make at the end.

[00:18:40] **Emily Roseman** That is such a good point. It's interesting having to balance what reporters are interested in covering, and what people think people want to know versus what you actually hear from your audiences.

[00:18:53] **Bent Freiwald** Yeah, I once had this really, really troubling survey myself. So I had an article, and then I asked people what article should I write? And then it was really clear, I mean, I had five ideas and one of these ideas was first place by far. But then something changed, and I thought, "oh wait, but this other article is like the more important one right now." So I told my audience in the newsletter, "Hey, guys, I know I promised you to look into your answers and I promised you to do this article that comes on first place next, but I have really good arguments not to do it right now." They were really understanding of my point, so nobody was angry and I got like, I don't know, 10 to 20 emails that day from members who were just, encouraging me to just do what I think is best. That was a really good experience.

[00:20:03] **Emily Roseman** That's awesome that you can use your email list to also communicate with your members and readers why you're implementing some things you're learning from them, but not all things. That's really cool. So you've mentioned surveys a few times now, and I want to pivot to talking more about the nitty-gritty methods

of conducting audience research. So does Krautreporter mainly use surveying for audience research, or could you tell me a bit more about what that looks like?

[00:20:36] **Bent Freiwald** Mhmm. So, I think the most important thing when you want to work with your audience, is that you create touching points right? So, we have different touching points. One touching point where we and the audience members meet is obviously the newsletter. But it's like a one-way direction, right? So, we put it into the world, they read it, and then if they want, they can answer to it. So the survey is another touching point. But in that tool, we're not putting it into the world and then they have to read it, we really want to get something from them, right? So we are just asking questions, and that is where they can come to us and ask or tell us about their experience with something. But of course, we also have our own Facebook groups. For example, we have a Facebook group with like 7000 members. And that is the most, I mean, obviously or honestly, no one likes Facebook from these members, right? So we are only there because it's such a nice function to have this huge group of 7000 people discussing all these different kinds of things in a really gentle way. So this is like one of the most important meeting points right now, and we are using these groups every day. So for example, a pretty tough example for you, maybe, but of course, there was the US Capitol (riots) last week. Yeah, I think it was last week, right? So there was the U.S. Capitol (riots), and then we had our morning conference and we thought, OK, well, all these other media outlets in Germany, they also covered it, of course they did it. What are the open questions? And we discussed it for 30 minutes. And of course, it was my job to stop the discussion and say, if we don't know it, ask our members. Let's go into the group, and ask them what they need. What are your questions about this huge event? And that is what we did. There were like 150 comments in the Facebook group and we met again a few hours later. We crawled through all these answers, and then we thought a really interesting question about the backgrounds of these people. I mean, who are these people going into the Capitol like this? OK, but what are their ideologies? Right? That is what our members wanted to know. Then we did that, and we wrote an article about exactly that.

[00:23:29] **Emily Roseman** So it sounds like you're gathering information about what your audiences want, both in these kind of more formal surveys to them and within your newsletters themselves, but also in these other touch points, like Facebook groups or however else you can kind of reach your readers, is that right?

[00:23:47] **Bent Freiwald** Yeah. Yeah, totally.

[00:23:49] **Emily Roseman** That's great. I'm curious, too, I think I had a conversation with Rico earlier about how you make sense of the data you collect from your audiences and these processes of sending them surveys and learning about what they want. So could you speak a little bit about how, like once you have the data back from your audiences, how do you kind of go through and find trends in it or find kind of actions in the data?

[00:24:22] **Bent Freiwald** Mhmm. So that is actually where it gets tricky. We have a survey about, so for example, one survey was about why do you wake up in the morning and go to work? Pretty simple question. And then my colleague Theresa had, like, 500 people answering that question. And of course, they all had their reasons and stuff, but it was a lot of text to go through. So this is where it gets really difficult, but what she did is she put it into a huge Excel sheet and first of all, just scrolled through it just to get an idea of what the arguments are. Then once she did that, she just searched for certain buzzwords, right? So one buzzword was, for example, to make sense or to have a purpose, write one buzzword was also just to have fun, I'm just going to work because

that's fun. And then she saw how many of these answers or how many of these people are using the word fun, how many are using the word purpose, and so on and so on. Then created like groups of answers, so she had like five different answers from all these 500 answers that always came every now and then. And that is where she made sense of this huge database. That is where a database gets into a story. So you need to understand the database, and you really need to dig deep into it, look deep into it. But then at some point, you have to start finding something, right? And yeah, that is what she did.

[00:26:27] **Emily Roseman** That's fascinating. So I'm just curious, based on what Teresa and you found through that process, what did you end up doing with that learning, like the group of people who go to work just for fun, are they best served by newsletters on, like, sillier topics,? How do you make sense of that knowledge about your different audiences?

[00:26:55] **Bent Freiwald** So the survey wasn't actually about finding out what product these people need, but it was just to write an article. So the article, the headline of the article was "Why do people wake up in the morning, go to work?" And then 500 people told us why they're doing that, and these are the five top reasons. So it was not really about launching some product or getting an idea of what they are interested in, but really a research question we wanted to investigate for an article. But of course, one option always is, and we're doing that a lot, one option always is that we are asking them in these surveys, if we have questions, can we contact you, and would you like to give us your email address just to to to make sure we can reach out to you. And then we get the best stories, right.? So, someone who is just writing three or five sentences about something, but it's kind of sounds interesting, and we write an email and then we're having them on the phone, and suddenly it's a huge, huge story because people have stories to tell, but they're really shy. That is that is something we learned a lot with this surveys.

[00:28:19] **Emily Roseman** That's really cool that you can use your newsletter lists to also find sources for stories. It's not just about improving the product, as you said, it's also about improving the journalism of your organization as a whole. So I'm curious, so you have so much good advice here on how to, you know, conduct audience research to think about the topics for your email newsletters. Have you received any feedback from your audience in audience research or otherwise that changed how you thought about the format of your newsletters or like the presentation of your newsletters, anything like that?

[00:29:06] **Bent Freiwald** Yes, actually we did. So, when I did my survey about my newsletter and Rico did the survey about his newsletter, we had a colleague here in eastern Germany also having an her own newsletter and she also did a survey. Something that came up a lot was, they are reading these newsletters not because of us, but because of the topics we are covering. So that, of course, there was the big question of, is it a good way to personalize these newsletters that much, or should we maybe switch to make it not Bents newsletter or Ricos newsletter, but maybe we should switch to make it the newsletter about education written by Bent Freiwald? And that was a huge discussion in the newsroom, actually. And Rico and I had an evening, and in the newsroom we had like two beers and we had this huge sketch about how we change all our newsletters. And then we slept two nights over it and then we thought, no, we are not doing that. I mean, OK, people like the topics we are covering, but we should not change this basic principle of our news organization. So we stuck to it and and it never came up again.

[00:30:39] **Emily Roseman** That's a benefit, though, of having so many openings and touch points with your audiences is I feel like you can, you will uncover if your audience

does want you to make that change at some point, but for now it seems like it makes the most sense to leave it as is.

[00:30:56] **Bent Freiwald** Yeah, I mean, they also didn't say that they don't like the personalization, they just say they read the newsletters because of the topic and that is what we needed to understand. Just because they like the topic, does not mean that we should stop personalized newsletters and we stop having a strong voice. And that is something to we understood.

[00:31:16] **Emily Roseman** Right. So, another theme that you have been expertly hitting on throughout this interview is the importance of newsletter's kind of having this personal voice, personal tone and kind of being focused on specific topics. So I just wanted to highlight that for everyone listening. But Bent, I'm also curious, apart from that advice that you've kind of been mentioning throughout, what other advice would you have for someone just starting to learn about their audiences and kind of just starting to think about launching a newsletter?

[00:31:54] **Bent Freiwald** So basically two (pieces of) advice. The first advice is pretty straightforward, you need to understand the needs of your audience and you need to get an idea of how to fulfill these needs, right? I mean, if you launch a product and nobody really needs this project, it will fail, right? So this is what you understand. So this is the first advice, the second advice is even more important in order to understand what the needs are. You have, of course, to do audience research and I have this small story. I went to talk to the editor-in-chief of the biggest news page, online page here in Germany, T-Mobile.com or .de, I don't know. And he showed me an example article he was really proud of because it was seven questions about any topic I don't know. And what he was proud of, was that the journalists changed his perspective and asked himself, what questions could readers have right now? And I told him, yeah, that's a good idea, but don't do that. Don't change the perspective and do other stuff. Just ask them, why should you think about what questions readers? Just asked them. And that is my biggest advice - ask the people. I mean, therefore, you have to have already touching points, but we all have social media, right? We all have Twitter, we all have Facebook, we all have our groups and so on. Unless you're working for an already big news organization or unless you have already established newspaper where you should you could do that, that is our situation right now. You have to find other touching points with your audience and ask them just what you need. What do you need right now, and how could I contribute to that?

[00:33:58] **Emily Roseman** Yeah, that's so well said, that is great advice, thank you. I'm also curious, if you have any other advice, too, for people who are just getting started with surveying or creating surveys. What would you have to say to someone who is kind of just starting to conduct audience research of their own?

[00:34:21] **Bent Freiwald** So, one thing I think some media outlets in Germany do misunderstand is that, or what they understand is that you can make money out of surveys, right? You can have these surveys with one question, one simple question, "What do you think about the U.S. right now?" Here is your answer, and then please give us your email address, because you can subscribe four weeks and you don't have to pay for it, but then you have to pay for it because you always forget to unsubscribe. So this is one way to use surveys, but I hate it. I hate it that much, because if you do surveys, the most important thing is you really want to know something about your audience, right? And I mean, it sounds simple, but that's really like the most basic thing to know if you do a survey. So what is the things you want to know, and how could these answers help you

find new products or help you write good articles and stuff? And these are really the thought processes before launching the survey you have to make, always, right? So when we are doing surveys, we are always discussing, sometimes fighting, about the lead question, because the lead question is the most important one. And people need to understand that we take them seriously. We don't want their money because they are just giving us information. That is what we need. We just want to know about them, we want to know about the experience, we want to know about the needs or something, right? So they have to understand we are taking them seriously and we are hearing them, right? We hear their voices.

[00:36:22] **Emily Roseman** That's really well said. Bent, thank you so much for all of these incredible insights and all things audience research and email newsletter. I think my one takeaway is just how interconnected emails are with conducting research, and then also, sometimes applying those findings back on the email itself. So thank you so much and to all of you listening to this interview, thank you so much for joining us. We're going to get into more audience research tactics and tips in the course itself. Stay tuned for more on all things audience research and newsletter. So Bent, thank you again for taking the time and we'll talk to you soon.

[00:37:09] **Bent Freiwald** Thanks for having me.