

Module 3: Interview with Annemarie Dooling | Engagement Experiences Product Lead - The Wall Street Journal

[00:00:10] **Caroline Porter** Hi everyone, thank you so much for joining us. We are very excited today because we'll be talking with Annemarie Dooling about her thoughts and ideas around the strategy of newsletters, especially newsletters as a product and a platform. Two things that we're really excited to dig into are around how we think about an engaged subscriber base, and also how we want to think about pathways to monetization. So without further ado, Annemarie, thank you so much for joining us. To start, could you just give us an overview of your role at the Journal and how it touches newsletters?

[00:00:49] **Annemarie Dooling** Yeah, so I am the engagement product lead at the Wall Street Journal. I sit at the intersection of content strategy and product development. So, I came to the Journal to migrate our email platform and run revenue products, leading an engineering team, working very closely with our backend systems. And now I do a little bit more of the front-facing work with editorial team. So I take everything that we apply to products like an agile workflow and strong KPIs and monitoring and use that in our editorial capacity as well as our workflow there.

[00:01:30] **Caroline Porter** That sounds so exciting, the intersection of, you said content product and --

[00:01:37] **Annemarie Dooling** Content strategy, newsroom product, yeah, right, in that that little intersection right there.

[00:01:43] **Caroline Porter** I feel like that's everything, you know? So I was looking at the Wall Street Journal's newsletter sign up page, and I counted about 40 newsletters, which is incredible. And to kick things off, I was hoping you could just give us an overview of how you see newsletters fitting into your broader strategy at the Journal.

[00:02:07] **Annemarie Dooling** Yeah, yeah, that's a great question, because as you mentioned, you counted probably 40 newsletters. But I would say we have closer to about 100 email products in total, and actually maybe even a few more than that, depending on your subscriber level. So we have a portfolio of newsletters, which if you close your eyes and someone says email newsletter to you, you know pretty much what that looks like. It's got some text, someone saying hello, a few links at the bottom. But then we also think about email as a platform for receiving other types of communication and information. So one way that this might sound familiar to you is an email alert where you are simply getting an update on something that's happening, a link maybe. We have a great alert system with some of our top columnists, Joanna Stern has an email alert. So any time she publishes anything, you'll get an email that says Joanna has a new article and you can click right into that. So that's one type of alert, we also have some activation alerts that if you have not been an active subscriber for too long, we might show you how to use the Journal or products you may not know about, or we might group some content that you like and say, hey, maybe you haven't been to this section yet, but we know that you like Joanna, so how about you come and read the tech section? Here's what you might see. So we have several email products run across, I think, two or three content management systems at the moment with one big backend system. So we really think about the full ecosystem of what an email product is. Newsletters are really just the tip of the iceberg when you think about all the ways that you can be reaching out to your audience with email.

[00:04:03] **Caroline Porter** Yeah, that's a terrific transition into, if I may, a shout-out for a great piece you have on Medium that I recommend everyone go check out, and we can include a link where you talk about email as a distinct platform. And, I think that for all of us, you know, I'm a really big fan of email. I live out of my email. I consider it sort of like a living room. Who do I welcome into my living room? And, it'd be great if you could sort of take that piece and talk not just about the thought initially with it when you wrote it about a year ago, but what's changed or what you're thinking about now since you wrote that piece in the spring of last year?

[00:04:46] **Annemarie Dooling** I think last year or early last year. No, it's so funny that you call your inbox the living room, because I think constantly about all the ways I you know, I think I'm a little bit archaic when I'm sitting next to my other product managers. But then I think about my readers, and, my gosh, of course they do the same things. Like, I use my inbox to jot notes down when I'm walking, grocery store lists, I send myself updates. My partner is downstairs right now, and I know he's not looking at his text messages. He's working today, so I would probably email him, like, can you bring up some more coffee? So it's sort of like text messaging almost. I mean, we use email for so many things, and yet when it comes to media and information, our minds are sort of stuck in the idea of taking a blog or an article or a newspaper and just putting it into this platform. And that is just not the way that everyone uses email. So I really try to think about that, and actually, since then, I've been trying to broaden my thinking just a little bit more with deliverability. When someone takes an action inside of your email, it sends a signal to the email service providers that you are legit, that they like you, that they want to see more of you in their main inbox. And so I'm trying to think about all of the ways not just to click back to an article, but should you send yourself a reminder? Do you send yourself a calendar update or are you downloading something to read later? We have a great email course, the WSJ Money Challenge, which was put together by our innovation team. And, my very small contribution was like, please, I just said, please let them download something, because we're asking them to think about personal finance. And of course, we want to give them a printout that they can take to their accountant, take to whoever they're doing their finances with, and they don't have to go through their inbox scrolling to find this email. So I'm really thinking about how many opens, are they saving this email in their inbox? Are they coming back to perhaps save a JPEG or some file that we've given them that can help them later on? So, thinking a little bit now beyond even what is within those contained walls of the email, and how does that apply to the device that it's being read on, and just the everyday life of the reader.

[00:07:22] **Caroline Porter** Yeah. Oh, gosh. I feel like once you go down that rabbit hole, there's so many.

[00:07:28] **Annemarie Dooling** There's so many. Yeah, we're launching one Tuesday, I think. I'm going to knock on my desk here.

[00:07:37] **Caroline Porter** OK, so I'm going to chime in. That will be in January 2021?

[00:07:43] **Annemarie Dooling** Yes! So you'll already be reading it and you'll be done with it, it'll be great. We are launching another one coming up hopefully this week that is similar to that and has many more offline components. So usually you do like maybe one or two passes of content when you're writing a newsletter, I stopped so many times, and then sent myself drafts on my phone, and then went for a walk around here, and was at my desk and read it there and just trying to figure out where the person is when we are asking

them to take whatever action is in that email. So, I hope you're already reading it now and already know what I'm talking about.

[00:08:28] **Caroline Porter** Cool. No, that's exciting. So, when you think of all these different actions that can be taken, it can be difficult not to get lost. What would you say are key metrics to pay attention to when you're thinking about an engaged subscriber base?

[00:08:48] **Annemarie Dooling** That's a really good question. I think obviously, people want to think about list size and open rates just as a general metric to be aware of, but I think that we perhaps lean on them just a little bit too much. With list size, for example, the list size means nothing if any of those people are not engaged. So you can have two million subscribers who at one point signed up, but that doesn't mean anything if they're not actually opening the newsletter. Similarly, a lot of e-commerce sites will buy lists. I think some people in media do as well. You can buy people's email addresses. So when you're comparing list numbers, it can be very daunting if you're talking to someone else who manages a list and they're like, we have four million subscribers. Well, how many of them are actually active on a daily basis or even a monthly basis? So it's good to know how many people you have and then really, really thinking about how many of those people are even opening their newsletter. And I think that's your starting point. From there, you really need to say, how often are they opening? Are they opening every issue, which, no one's going to open every issue. I don't open everything that I send out myself. Like, no one's reading all of those emails, but are they engaged enough? And then, are they clicking? Are they forwarding? Have they replied back ever? That's sort of my favorite metric. I think, God, three or four years ago at this point, when I was at Vox Media, we did personal stories in our newsletters and I wrote about how I'm never wearing jeans ever again. I think I was ahead of my time on that one. But I was like, oh, God, I don't know how this is going to go because everyone was wearing those Everlane high waisted jeans, and I was like, man, I'm really out of the loop here. And we received about 40 emails from older women who were like, "I haven't worn jeans since the 60s, you're going to be great!" And we had no idea we had that kind of reader. So it's just getting that feedback, and it is very anecdotal, but just seeing that response from readers can be so rewarding that I do think it's something to consider and something to think about, even if they're nasty emails. If you're constantly getting emails from people saying they can't unsubscribe, what's wrong with your unsubscribe function? You then need to look into it. So to answer your question in a very laborious way, I think there's not one or two metrics. I think it's sort of a string or a formula of metrics that you need to look at together. You're not going to have a great open rate without a steady list that has gone through list hygiene. You're not going to have great click through without an engaged reader base, and you might not have an engaged reader base without asking readers what they want every once in a while.

[00:11:43] **Caroline Porter** Yeah, absolutely. And it's really neat to hear, you mention how you discovered that there was a, I guess, an audience section that you didn't know about. Like, that's really cool. I wonder if that's the kind of thing that can then deliver new ideas and new ways to reach different pieces of the audience. Actually, it makes me think about, how do you, you know, when you are considering starting a new newsletter, what are some of the things that you're thinking about? Whether it's like, have you tested an audience already, or is it kind of like we'll test it as we send out the newsletter? I am a big fan of the, I believe it was the Journal. You evolved a health weekly newsletter into a daily COVID newsletter, which I read religiously. But how do you think about whether you want to launch a new one, and where the audience may or may not be?

[00:12:43] **Annemarie Dooling** Yeah, that's a great question. I tend to, well, first of all, thinking about being in an organization, I think about who is going to do the work, because it is so cute and, at this point, sexy to own a newsletter. And then five weeks in, something happens, the person's busy, and they lose track of writing this email. So, that's kind of an internal KPI. It's just, who is going to be writing this and are they going to stick with it and can they do it? Or, are we adding an unnecessary workload to this person's plate? So that's first and foremost, which is never a popular answer. Everyone always thinks they are more than prepared to take on a weekly newsletter. From there, I try to look at KPIs of whether we have that audience or whether it's something people are interested in. The one that I mentioned we're launching soon as sort of a wild card, it's not a topic that we are known for. But looking at the article KPIs, any article we have on that topic does extremely well. We've got a new audience growing for it., we have a younger audience base reading it. It seems to be an area where we have just untapped potential. I know of a really good example, a few months back when a team that was so enthusiastic said, we want to start a new newsletter, we have an alert in this topic and the alert does fantastically. And now we want to spin this out to be a full newsletter. And I was so sad to fight against it, but the thought process was just that right now, you are doing nothing to get this audience. They love it. They love the alert that we have set up for them, our content in that area doesn't do well except through this alert, why would we add more work to your plate when what we have given this audience seems to be doing well? So instead, why don't we every once in a while do a special edition? I think we did a Thanksgiving special edition. Like, there's plenty of areas where you can experiment or go beyond the idea of this weekly email inbox address, and go from there because you don't ever know until you're in the soup that someone's not going to want to write it, there's no audience for it, the tones not hitting right, it could have been an alert that was automated instead. So I think all of those things go into that, and more often than not, I try to be the bad guy because it's a lot of work. It's not easy work. It seems easier than writing an article, but you are maintaining an audience and writing content and looking over a product. So it is a lot of work to maintain a newsletter.

[00:15:35] **Caroline Porter** It's like its own news stream, news source. And just one note, KPI -- key performance indicator. I'm sure that many of us know that, but just in case. So that's really interesting, and I think something I'm gleaning from this is how sometimes there's beauty in it and if it's not broken, don't fix it. And not everything needs a newsletter. So that's really helpful, and also, if, you know, your audience is receiving an email one direction, it doesn't necessarily mean, meaning alerts, we don't necessarily need to also tack on a newsletter, and being aware of just how much work it can be. So let's kind of pivot here and talk about paths to monetization. I think it would be really helpful to just get your brain on how you see different revenue streams for newsletters.

[00:16:31] **Annemarie Dooling** Yeah, I think we're in a really interesting point right now where ads for newsletters are such an untapped resource. We've got all kinds of ad tools, and I mean, we've got internal tools at the Journal. I know Vox has great work with Chorus. There's so many ad tools, but email is always a separate product that is not included in your ad buy. So it needs to be sold by itself, which then means the hurdles are what is the content? And I mean, we've had thankfully, it's not any work that I have to deal with, but we have had ad sales people say, "So-and-so bought this newsletter for next week, can we make sure there's not going to be any articles about this company?" Of course, we can't. No, never! But it's funny the way that you wouldn't think of that on the website, because there are so many tools that would keep that ad away from that content. We don't have that for email. Right now, the tools we have are extremely limited to tools like LiveIntent, which is just sort of a string of code that you put into your email, your template,

and that pulls in ads from a database that you maintain. So at the Journal, we've actually taken most of our LiveIntent boxes out. The ads that are served through those kind of boxes are called programmatic ads. And if you don't have specific ads to put in there, LiveIntent will just pull through its list of whoever has bought through LiveIntent. And everyone that has LiveIntent has the same ads, basically. I remember at Vox when we first started using them, we were getting, in a very feminist newsletter, we were getting ads for Ivanka Trump and it was just such a mismatch of content that it was jarring to think that these tools that could tell so closely online what the content was based on, still cannot do that in email. I'm sure Ivanka wouldn't want her book in that newsletter, the readers of the newsletter wouldn't have wanted that ad, just such a mismatch. So thinking about that, like at the Journal, we do a lot of native ads now. We are not trying to worry about do the programmatic ads match up to that specific audience with a native, because you are manually putting that ad in yourself. That also means that we can feel free to sell based on not just one newsletter, but maybe you're buying a tech package and you're buying three of our tech newsletters. Maybe you are buying only newsletters for subscribers or for non-subscribers. Maybe you are only buying newsletters that have this kind of progressive young audience, or an audience that reads our opinion newsletters. So you can obviously be way more in control of that tailoring in that audience, because everyone wants an ad that performs well. You don't want something that's just going to offend your readers or just doesn't fit or they don't understand it. So, really thinking closely about that. But when we're talking about independent newsletters, I'm wary of things like Substack, because it seems like everyone tries to do this every few years. Substack has gotten the most grandiose pomp and circumstance, I'd say, but every few years someone comes along and says, "Pay this independent creator to make this content and you'll subscribe to them as an entity." What we see with Substack is that it really is taking people that already have an audience and giving them a platform. So it's very, very hard, the same way at some point with blogs. You couldn't just make a blog and be like, hello world, here I am, and expect an audience after a certain point, because there were gatekeepers like Facebook or Twitter or other websites. We've reached that with email now where if you are an entity that will get traffic wherever you are, that might be a great option for you. However, if you wake up tomorrow and decide that you're going to write the best newsletter about pasta that anyone has ever read, you're going to have to work pretty hard to find that pasta audience regardless of being on Substack or whatever platform you pick. So I don't think that it's the catchall answer for monetization that we like to think it is. I would like to see that sort of resurgence of newsletters working together to sell us a package. We did it in the blog days where I would email two of my friends and say I've got such and such and they want to buy a placement and they want X amount of views. I can't do that on my own, can you put this out on your site and we'll split the difference. And you would just manually go into your little WordPress and put the JPEG in and that was it. I would love to see that, because a lot of these newsletters are sort of hitting that mid-level audience mark. Not everyone has a million subscribers, and that's OK. Maybe not a million people want to read about bucatini all the time, you've got your audience and you should feel free to work within that audience. So I feel like working together, independent creators could really build something out to really get that sort of native ad monetization without having to rely on a LiveIntent that, again, really has no idea what your content is.

[00:22:09] **Caroline Porter** I recall, a couple of years ago, that the Journal relied on sponsorships for newsletters. Like, there was a logistics newsletter?

[00:22:18] **Annemarie Dooling** Yeah, we still have some of those. We've got a suite of newsletters that Deloitte sponsors. Interestingly, we created an entire new native ad system just for that, and the reason was because I had to put the ads in and it was like a 4

a.m. situation. You don't want to rely on me to make us money at 4 a.m. for anything, frankly. So I was like, oh, we should probably automate this. So we did, we were able to work with our sponsor and now we do that for many of our native sponsors.

[00:23:00] **Caroline Porter** Could you break that down a little? Let's just say you're a viewer and you don't necessarily have resources galore to build your own systems. What would that look like so that you could set up a sponsorship or native ads? Do you have thoughts on that?

[00:23:16] **Annemarie Dooling** Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's pretty easy, depending on who the sponsor is to add their content into your template. I automated it because it was four a.m. when they were sending over their content. But if you're not a daily newsletter, there's no need to do that. You could very easily figure out, you know, reach out to people, figure out using comparisons what your your number should be, and then add a logo to the top of your newsletter for a month or so. You could have a JPEG of an ad or something that looks like an HTML element. This is a little bit sneaky, but a lot of people have their images turned off in email. And of course, that's a big problem because most ads are JPEGs or come through as images. So you could add it as an HTML element within your newsletter, and that ad is not going anywhere, which drives the ad-blocker people absolutely crazy. Me, I'm an ad-blocker person it drives me crazy. But when you do that, it also means that the ad is not a beautiful shiny image, it's text. So it's not as abrasive. There are lots of ways to work with a sponsor to add their elements inside of a newsletter, and of course, always saying, "this is sponsored" "brought to you by", any sort of verbiage that leads you to understand that this little box here is from Deloitte or whoever else and not from you.

[00:24:55] **Caroline Porter** Yeah, I love the idea that all is fair in love and ad blocking.

[00:25:02] **Annemarie Dooling** I mean, I'm like the worst offender because I turn all images and ads off and then at the same time I'm like, read our ads! They're very good! I work hard on them! So I get it. I get like 50 emails a day. So I my eyes at this point glaze over the ads just because everyone's got the same ads. Everyone has a LiveIntent box, and I know it's going to be in the third paragraph of every newsletter and my eyes flip right over it. So, the challenge we have is to create an ad that is not abrasive, that is related to the content, and that is not going to make someone glaze over it.

[00:25:38] **Caroline Porter** So that's like a really great insight as well, when it comes to thinking about advertisements for your newsletter. You want there to be an alignment between content in the product you're providing and the revenue that you're gaining from the advertising. You know, just to kind of do an overview, we've talked about native ads and sponsorships, bundling. Are there any other monetization methods that kind of have your curiosity piqued that you're thinking about, or are interested in experimenting with, as you think into the year ahead?

[00:26:19] **Annemarie Dooling** Yeah, I'm really interested, I mean, it wouldn't be a newsletter conversation without mentioning Morning Brew at least once, I think. I'm so jealous of them and I love them. I remember when they were like nothing and working in WeWork, and I would see them in the morning. And now they're, like, the best newsletter out there right now. So they've done a lot of work from multiple angles, and I think one thing that they do extremely well is figuring out what sponsored content or ads look like for them, where several times I am reading an ad in Morning Brew without realizing it's an ad until I get the "brought to you by" mark at the bottom. And that's because a lot of times, their ads are things they would be writing about anyway. They've had ads from Campaign

Monitor, an email service tool. Revue, another email service tool. Their ads are things that are related very specifically to that audience of young entrepreneurs who want to learn and want to grow something and want to make money. So their ads are really, really tailored to that. It's something I think about a lot. Then the other thing I'm really thinking about quite a bit is Girls Night In, which is a yeah, amazing.

[00:27:39] **Caroline Porter** They did that pre-pandemic, but they really nailed that.

[00:27:42] **Annemarie Dooling** I mean, Alisha Ramos has been thinking about this for years, about sitting home doing nothing and like her time is here, I think. She lucked out extremely with this. Those of us that like sweat pants, were all there. And they've started a community out of their newsletter, which is amazing to me. So they've got this Slack community, and it's like if you've ever read a newsletter and now the in-thing is to have so much tone in your newsletter, dripping with tone. But, you know, you get to the end of it and you're like, oh, that's it. My friend is gone. Like, that's just the end of it. And they want so much engagement from you. So she's totally capitalized on that and said, you're done reading this. We're we're speaking to you in our voices. You know who we are, come pay x amount of money per month and join our Slack. So it's just a Slack channel, it's so calm, there's no demands or notifications. It's just like, hey, do you want to talk about plants today? Here's some plants. So and so is going to be here at 7 p.m. talking about the best pots and pans to buy if you're cooking. And it's just an extension of the newsletter, but gives you the element that email does not, which is actual community and community in the way of peers discussing with peers, not you discussing something to an audience and them maybe emailing you back. It's actual community of readers speaking to readers on a platform that you have given them. So they are really one of the only newsletters that I can say has a real community. Many people want to say their newsletter is a community, that is a falsehood. There's no readers. Like that's email, right? It's a box and you can't get out of it. So, I'm really interested in people who are taking these email, pseudo-communities and making them into actual groups of flesh and blood humans, discussing things with each other and building up a platform.

[00:29:42] **Caroline Porter** Totally, it's like giving your email legs so it can walk.

[00:29:44] **Annemarie Dooling** Exactly. It's like, I always think of that - God, aging myself - that A-ha video "Take On Me" where they're in the comic book and he goes through the wall. That's email, it's black and white and then she has brilliantly pulled us through in color and built a community.

[00:30:04] **Caroline Porter** Yeah. No, that's really interesting and I think that does foster a lot of thought around these terms engagement and community and conversation and dialog and so on and so forth. Yeah, well I think with the time we have left, inevitably, my last question is not only what is your favorite newsletter that you recommend? But also, what is something that I didn't ask that you wish I had or something that you think is important that we didn't get to talk about?

[00:30:41] **Annemarie Dooling** Yeah, I think I'm going to have to think about that favorite newsletter one, I just get so many.

[00:30:48] **Caroline Porter** We can reduce the superlative quality. We could just do one I like.

[00:30:54] **Annemarie Dooling** Yeah, a bunch of things I read before I go to bed. Well, the thing that I would love people to think about is deliverability and send a reputation and list hygiene. I think they're very under-thought-of. And I think, no matter what kind of email you have, if it's community, if it's content, if it's e-commerce, you need to know what your list hygiene is. You need to understand DMARC and DKIM. You need to understand Google postmaster tools. You need to know that email is not a direct send, the same way that you may put something up on Facebook and you understand that there is an algorithm that determines who and when the content is seen. The same applies to email. You have black-and-white listing, you have different kinds of purgatory boxes where your email may sit while they are verifying that you're a legit sender. There is absolutely no one-to-one direct point with email. I mean, how many times have we sat there and we're like, I never got that email, I didn't get this newsletter today. It's because of things like DMARC and DKIM and list hygiene. I wish people just took a few minutes to think a little bit more about those things and kept our inboxes is a little bit cleaner and happier.

[00:32:14] **Caroline Porter** Totally. Let's say those words are new. Where do you recommend someone start in finding out what those words mean, and how to how to tackle them?

[00:32:24] **Annemarie Dooling** I will send you a document, because I had the same question and when I took over email at Vox, I had only ever been writing content. And I thought, I'm taking this over as a product. I don't know anything about how email sends. I just knew nothing. So, I made a big document for myself so that I wouldn't feel silly in meetings where I could properly understand what those words meant and how building a template works. The exact cutoff size for when Gmail truncates an email and everyone's unsubscribe buttons are under that truncating, which can get you in trouble with hygiene. All of those little technical things I made sort of a cheat sheet, so I'll send you the list and it's open so people add links all the time.

[00:33:11] **Caroline Porter** Yeah, that would be amazing thank you!

[00:33:13] **Annemarie Dooling** Yeah. And this is an uncool answer, I think my favorite newsletter is not a handwritten one. It is The Strategist. It is just a list of things I should buy, and I do. I actually have it open in another tab, because the one today was like things to buy to social distance in cold weather. And I'm like, yeah, I do need that. It just answers the question. So I will read other newsletters. I really like The City. I really like Popular Information. I really like Girls Night In. I do read those, but I probably open The Strategist almost every day, because there's sort of a hole in smart e-commerce content where if you need to know how to shop for something intelligently, where are you going? Like Racked is gone, Wirecutter is it's own little thing and it's so specific and Strategist is all that's left. So, they're very good at figuring out what day and time it is and what you need at that exact moment.

[00:34:21] **Caroline Porter** Anticipatory.

[00:34:21] **Annemarie Dooling** Exactly. And I mean, their newsletter is not handwritten with someone's voice. It is literally just, it's cold, you've been inside, these are the things you want. So I think that's a really good lesson to learn, that not everything needs to be this bespoke Shakespearean monologue. Sometimes just figuring out what the audience need is and the best way to fill that is enough.

[00:34:46] **Caroline Porter** Yeah, I think that is a great ending because it really ties with the bow a theme through all of this, which has to do with alignment and making sure that there's a real purpose and reasoning behind whether it's the tone of your newsletter or the advertisements for your newsletter. Yeah. Wonderful. Well, thank you so much. This is fun. I could keep talking, but we really appreciate it. I am sure that we all viewers are really excited to check out those documents, so thank you for that in advance. We look forward to following your work. Awesome, thank you so much.