

Module 4: Interview with Sarah Ebner | Head of email and editorial newsletters | The Telegraph

[00:00:10] **Jospeh Lichterman** Hey everyone, I am Joseph Lichterman, we are here in the fourth module of our newsletter, course. This is improving your newsletters, how to optimize for the long haul. And I'm here with Sarah Ebner, head of email and editorial newsletters at The Telegraph in the U.K. and we're excited to dig in. So, anyway, this interview is for this newsletter, of course, we're teaching with Caroline and Emily at the University of Texas. It's going to be a virtual online course, it's fully remote. We're doing four modules, and so we're each doing a series of interviews for those modules. So the module we're speaking for is the last one in ongoing maintenance and evolution of newsletters to show that they really aren't static products, but can evolve as circumstances change and things like that. And so I think the example, the global health newsletter and how it evolved to meet the needs of COVID was sort of a great example of this. I'd be super curious to speak with you about that and as we're emailing, generally broad stuff, but the origins of it and how it evolved.

[00:01:23] **Sarah Ebner** A few things came about from that springtime. I mean, with global health it was an interesting example, because we had a small global health team, the experts in global health. And from a newsletter point-of-view, was a it was a very small audience for that newsletter, and it did OK but it seemed like why would you need a global health newsletter at that point for the year before that? And then, of course, once the pandemic happened, it was, oh, my God, we've got this incredible expert global health team publication with proper team with, I don't how many people, five? To do videos and really expert stuff. And we saw obviously, like everyone else saw, masses of traffic on the site to considered a pandemic. So it seemed, to be honest, a kind of no brainer to say to that team, could you turn your weekly, very general global health newsletter, which covers anything to do with global health in any countries in the world to a specific coronavirus daily newsletter? So it was a big ask of the team, obviously took a lot of their time and they said yes. And we did it very quickly and very early on and a lot earlier, which was nice to see then people who've done it since. So lots of people did it all because they introduced them later on. And I think we already had the team there. We knew they could do it. So originally it was seven days a week and immediately we saw massive growth in that newsletter list, which I think started at around the ten thousand is now about sixty thousand. And what was also interesting was the open market went up, which you would not expect for a newsletter to grow so much as what was do in terms of newsletters. You got your list to grow, but often you see less engagement unless you get the totally the right kind of people. And it was a very good news that we did it very simply. It was the latest news, a bit of the latest news and some stats and data. And we made sure it went out we had a discussion about where and to send it. Should it be first in morning, should it be up of the day before, which some people do, as the Times of London do, should it be a lunchtime Thanksgiving evening? And we decided evening was better to wrap up the day, especially as the government was doing and are now doing again press conferences at 5:00 pm so we could bring that in. So we've got that list up. We we got full of advertising around it as well with adverts in the paper for print ads and I'm pushing it on social. And also we've got another nice way to get in on it. We have automated sign ups. We have automated online sign ups for nearly all our newsletters now. But that was, I think, the first. So every article that was tagged with Coronavirus would get a sign of popping up at the bottom saying this newsletter and you could sign up from that module. You didn't have to go to sign a page. So that really helped. And that's what happened with that. We've had reader surveys done about it all, very positive, very clearly, and keeps us in the know it's what we want. The only negative has been we would like to submit that we and I said this

to them this week. I said I fail again at that point where it would be nice if we could put some positive news in every day, whether it's a sort of charity thing that someone's done or fundraising or whatever. So we're looking at that. Just something at the bottom, on the right side, on the side kind of thing. But it hasn't really changed. What we did change was, I think in the summer when I looked down at it and it looked like we're going back to some kind of normality and things had settled. We stopped doing it seven days a week, which the weekends have proved to be a bit of. The problem in terms of staffing and if there were any kind of issues and it wasn't red quite as much, so it's five days a week this Monday to Friday, very habit forming, always the same time, that kind of thing. Yeah, it certainly and also led to lozes description descriptions. I mean, we were a subscription first business now and that newsletter that had not led to a handful of subscriptions the year before, partly because of lack of content free to read um, excuse me. And not all rhinovirus, the number, the global health things content is free to read. And this year, despite that last year, retrenchment is led to hundreds of subscriptions and very much, I think, in the top five for the subs overall.

[00:05:55] **Jospeh Lichterman** Oh, wow. That's really remarkable and clearly a case of, it seems like, adjusting a product to meet the moment. You touched on this a little bit, but I'd be curious to go more in-depth in what this newsletter was like pre-COVID.

[00:06:14] **Sarah Ebner** It's funny, I was thinking that when I said it. I mean, I felt before, do people actually know what global health is before this happened? So when we launched this global health newsletter, I was kind of unsure that people would know. There are called the global health security team, and I just didn't think people would even know what I meant. But it would have the biggest stories from their sections. There's a global health security section on the site, so it might be about malaria in a country. It might be about something to do with water somewhere else. It was just stories from around the world, mainly non-European stories. It would have a graph in it of something that people thought was interesting. It was very much set to push you up back to the site, but it was more detailed with pictures in it, because it was a weekly and it was a summary of what that team is working on, to be honest, and what they saw as the biggest stories. So it might push you back to a video one of them had done. The correspondent in India might have done an interesting video, it would push you back to that. It might be something about vaccinations. So it was quite general across that topic, you see what I mean? It was whatever they were working on, and the things that did well in terms of open rates tended to be things that were a bit scary. But it sort of, for a very, very british word, poodled along, it was fine. But it wasn't a newsletter that I particularly thought was very important, and then it turned out to be very important to have that team and to be able to do that newsletter, because I then saw them coming later. And I think we had already established that we had the expertise. And we also use that team well into my marketing emails, because we could - inaudible - we also used well in our marketing teams. So we got the head of our global health committee security, Paul Nuki, to write some emails that we then sent out to people saying, you know, we have this expertise, this is why you should subscribe to the Telegraph. So that whole team went from being a team that people were like, well, that what's that team doing in the office, to oh my God, this team is amazing! So it's interesting. I think great for them, because they always had the expertise and people were unsure what they did. The other thing that we pivoted a bit to the bottom is because all their stuff was open. We did start then to get--the science editor started writing more of that kind of stuff because her stuff wasn't open. We obviously wanted some stuff that would be subscriber only. So it was a kind of interesting balance.

[00:08:48] **Jospeh Lichterman** So you encourage people to hit the meter or the paywall?

[00:08:51] **Sarah Ebner** Yeah, yeah. And in fact, the most read stuff from newsletters last year, the most read piece for for newsletters was a piece by science editor Sarah Knapton. I mean, it led to something like 400 subscriptions just from that piece.

[00:09:06] **Jospeh Lichterman** Oh wow, that's really fascinating. And so, I guess I'd be curious to hear more also about what those conversations were like in those early days. So you knew you had this team of experts--

[00:09:19] **Sarah Ebner** It's funny, you're expecting some great insight. It's very funny, we were we were in the office, seems a long time ago now. It literally was someone saying, don't you think it would be a good idea, looking at the the traffic? I mean, this is March, before lockdown and everything. "I'm looking at the traffic it's really, really strong for everything coronavirus, why don't we do this?" And me going, oh God, that's really good idea. I think we should do that. The global health team literally next sat next to the newsletter team, and went, "would you be interested in doing this?" And them saying yes. I mean, it was as simple as that. And it then was OK, so one member of my team, you're the person who looks after this newsletter. Can you talk to them about turning it into a daily newsletter? Let's talk to the tech team so that we know we can go out every day. That decision about when to send it. Which was it did go out in the evenings, originally global health went out in the evenings on Thursday, so that was another reason to keep it in the evening. And it was a very quick and easy thing, because we've got quite flexible templates. I think we took out the pictures to make it quick for them to get to the information more quickly. And that was it. It wasn't a kind of, sit down, months to talk about it. It happened very quickly when we were still in the office and, you know, we were in lockdown by the 23rd of March or something. So it's all a bit of a blur now, but it must have happened in the weeks before that. Yeah, it happened just before that and happened quickly. And there were many teething problems, the only teething problems came for the things at the weekend, the people (INAUDIBLE) at the weekend. And the (INAUDIBLE) up straight away.

[00:10:55] **Jospeh Lichterman** Oh, interesting. So it sounds like there wasn't that much of a workflow change even to go from a weekly to a daily.

[00:11:02] **Sarah Ebner** I mean, they just got on with it, I think, because they had enough people in their team. That was the other thing. They had always been a team that there were enough of them that you thought, there's quite enough people in that team that they were able to do this newsletter. Because they were writing this stuff anyway. The other thing we introduced very quickly, which is not newsletter related, but we interviewed a live coronavirus blog very early on which got masses of traffic that we also used to promote this newsletter and obviously we would put this at the top. So they were looking after that, they would take stuff from that particular newsletter. So it was all a quite simple process, it was a team that was used to working both with us and with each other. So it wasn't complicated, actually. Pretend it was, but it wasn't. It shows that we worked well together, I think.

[00:11:52] **Jospeh Lichterman** No, I think that's great. And I think a lot of the folks who are going to be taking this course are from smaller newsrooms, are independent journalists. So I think that's heartening to hear that it doesn't need to be a big, heavy lift, that you can, as you go, respond to reader needs and adjust to meet the moment.

[00:12:11] **Sarah Ebner** There's a couple of other things that we did. I don't know you if you want me to start talking about them--.

[00:12:13] **Jospeh Lichterman** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:12:14] **Sarah Ebner** Yeah, I mean, this is not so much coronavirus-related. It's just another way we changed something. We introduced some new metrics last year, we actually just introduced a morning metrics now that looked at much more engagement to do in newsletters. And they sort of separated people out to cohorts. They would be people who don't engage. The people who engage, say if it's a daily, you know, seven days a week, five days a week, three times a week. It was to see what your engaged audience is, it tells you much more than just open rate. And we noticed that with our cookbook newsletter, it was a massive audience that opened every single one. It went once a week on a Friday. So we suggested to Amy, who is a one-woman band, and it's been a lot of work for her, that she should perhaps think of doing this every day and sending out every lunchtime. And we did that, I'm trying to remember when we did that, I think that might have been during the coronavirus stuff when we were all at home, because I've seen the same over there. Over here, people became very obsessed with cooking and baking and it became a massive thing here. So it also seemed a good idea to capitalize on that. So we said, could you do it every day? We simplified, it was a similar thing, went into the template. We made it slightly, slightly more simple, a little bit at the top, and then basically recipes. And she themed it. So there would be a kind of meat-free Mondays, and a dessert on a Tuesday, that kind of thing. And the numbers have gone up hugely with the open rate, which is about 40%, which is really impressive. It's about 55,000 now and it goes out five days a week. And it was just interesting. It was experimental work because we saw there was an engaged audience. And so that was an interesting thing. Also very easy to do, obviously you need someone to put in the time. It does take a lot her time, but it's led to over two million page views last year as well from that newsletter. So that was pretty good. And we also, we have a puzzles newsletter and it went out monthly. When the pandemic started, I spoke to the guy, Chris, who runs it and said I think it should go out weekly, because people love puzzles and they're all stuck at home. Can you change it to weekly? We just changed it to weekly. So it was, newsletters are great, they're such a versatile product, you know? That's so amazing for engagement, and we've got all the stats. You know, with our newsletters, you're 50% more likely to retain as a subscriber if you subscribe through a newsletter after 12 months. So they are really important. But you can just do things with them quite easily. I mean, sometimes some of the things that I can't do that I need tech to do are out my remit, but literally using an existing newsletter and changing it is quite easy to do. And I know you know we introduced two new newsletters for the pandemic, I don't know if you want me to talk about them or not?

[00:15:01] **Jospeh Lichterman** Yes, absolutely.

[00:15:02] **Sarah Ebner** Yes. Also early on in the pandemic, our features director came up with a whole idea she called You Are Not Alone. Which we were going to change the whole feature section of the paper, print and online, actually, to be called You Are Not Alone and bring the community together. We did masses of community stuff off the back of it. So, it was, you know, to set up a Facebook group and do quizzes and do lots of events and have our journalists on there every day talking about different things. Q&A's or, the culture department did a whole armchair arts. There was a whole massive thing, but it seemed obvious we should also add a newsletter. So I said, okay, we should do a You Are Not Alone newsletter. After it was so busy, because the newsletters became very, very popular because people were at home and all our numbers went up and the open rates

went up as well. It was very (INAUDIBLE) from that point of view. It was a terrible time, it was nice to see people getting something they wanted from us. I don't have lots of staff, I have a three person team, so I thought that I would have to do the newsletter and I hadn't written a newsletter since I've been there, actually I've written newsletters before, but I'm head of newsletter so I've got a quite a lot of other things on my remit. But I said, fine, we'll do this. We'll do it five days a week. I don't mind Friday, so one member of my team will do it on a Friday. And it just, people really liked it. We just called it You Are Not Alone, and it was intended to be a pop-up. People would contact me, I made it very obvious early on I wanted it to be a community thing, very much concentrated on that letter part of the newsletter, you know, writing to you in your home, locked in. We have an audience that skews old. So I knew there'd be a lot of elderly people who would be shielding, won't be going out. And I put in stories that I liked, things that made me laugh. But also, people contact me and I would talk to them about who had done amazing fundraising, or their child had done this, or they had taken up poetry and written this. And then I would just get more. It was a kind of nice, virtuous circle. I introduced to Community Spirit section for those stories of even big companies donating food and donating money. It just did really, really well. The numbers went up and up, to the extent that in July when I was rather burnt out after doing it five days a week on top of my normal job, I thought, and we would discuss whether to stop it, we thought it was probably a bit stupid to stop it because actually people really liked it, it was serving the community. The coronavirus hadn't finished and it was leading to later subs. I mean, that as well and engagement. So, I suggested changing it to twice a week and we changed the name, which interestingly now it probably would be quite good again if it was called You Are Not Alone. But then it seemed to me slightly negative as a name, since "you are not" - it was like we're moving out, were moving on. Who knew what was going to happen? So we spent a long time on it, I said it should be good news I think, it should be obvious what it is and a lot of time trying to come up with a name. And then I said, I think it's should just be called the Good News newsletter, let's make it obvious. I think newsletter names should be quite obvious? I find some of them that you just don't know what it's about, a bit unhelpful. I think, especially for a media organization when there's lots of them. Fine, if it's your own newsletter, you want to give some funky name, fine. People will work out what it is. So we did that, that's on a Monday and a Thursday. And it continues, so and it continues with lots of people contacting me. It's very nice way for me to interact with people. I renamed the top section "you are not alone," so it's still there. That was one thing, and then we spotted that lots of people were looking for non-coronavirus content on the site. And we were like, god, there is a lot of people. So this is probably May, that sort of time. And I think probably a lot of people noticed this, but we noticed there was a lot of looking for please, can you not tell me anything bad and, so we decided to set up a newsletter. We spent ages trying to come up with a name for this one that would be non-coronavirus, and it was also meant to be a pop-up. And it also went to someone in my team, because it was no one else obvious to do it. She's done a really good job with it. Eventually, we called it In Other News, because we just were not sure what explained it well enough. And it was, you know, it was tagged as non-coronavirus. That also was slightly re-tagged in the summer as the five best, five great articles across features, TV culture, travel, and we've also kept it. So it actually was supposed to be a pop-up, but people really liked it and it had a really high open rate. And to my mind, I know some people were like, I guess pop-up then end it, but I thought what was the point of a pop-up that's serving the community and that they like and has a very high open rate? I think it was 50%, not huge numbers, but in a really positive newsletter. So they both survived. They both wouldn't have existed without coronavirus it's a very strange thing for both of us, but neither of us expected to have our own newsletter, so I think it was an odd experience as well. So that is an example of if you need people them, you can have these ideas. But there was no one else we could go to to say, we've had this

great idea, can someone do it? It was like, well, if you've had this great idea, you need to do it. There are no spare people in the newsroom just waiting to be given something to do. Everyone's working like a maniac.

[00:20:32] **Jospeh Lichterman** Yeah, I can only imagine. That's so interesting, talking about how to make the decision of when to end a newsletter, roll it back in terms of frequency of publication. And I'd be curious to hear, with these products or other newsletters, how you make that decision, is it sort of looking at the metrics or other types?

[00:20:51] **Sarah Ebner** Yeah, I mean, it is really looking at the metrics. When we started looking at these engagement metrics, they did give us another view of the newsletters. I mean, you can see something from open rate, but it is really interesting. You've got a list and you see that huge number, look at every single one, you know, it's got a proper dedicated audience. We had a newsletter, we had two newsletters that I didn't think were performing particularly well, and actually we scrapped both of them last year and partly that was to do with when I looked at these, I could tell from the open rates and things, but I wanted to dig into a bit deeper. And actually, when I did look into these engagement metrics, they both were very poor for people we definitely want, and these were weekly newsletters. And very poor for really nearly all of them. So I think the top cohort for a weekly newsletter was four out of four in a month and the next one was three out of four, you know? It was kind of one out of four or they just weren't engaging. And we did a list cleanse on one of them. One of them had a big list, it didn't really make any difference, and that was the first time that had really happened, that we've done a list cleanse and it didn't have a positive effect and it just seemed pointless. I mean, there were people reading it, it had a big list, but it just to my mind it just wasn't what it should be. It was dragging down the metrics overall, and I felt the serve that audience better in another way, The other one was one that she did a good job with, she was writing a nice newsletter. The audience was tiny, and the open rate was also not great, even though it was a nicely written newsletter. It was targeting an audience that was not a natural Telegraph audience, and I'm not sure for that audience a newsletter was the right way to target them. It was a much younger audience and I thought, you know, we had lots of conversations about that newsletter. And I just thought maybe the audience is better served by the fact that we've got, you know, we're really successful on TikTok. We're really successful on Snapchat. It might be that they're just not going to go for a newsletter. So there was conversations about that. It wasn't that she could have done it better, because she did a really good job, actually. I just I don't think that that audience was, a newsletter wasn't the product for that particular audience from our point of view. So, it is really the metrics. I'm trying if we done, we did a pop-up for Game of Thrones, obviously, for the series. We've done perhaps for Strictly Come Dancing with Dancing with the Stars, we do it for the series. So that's obviously and then we try and push them onto something else. We don't actually have a TV newsletter, so it's not so obvious what we push them to after, probably the film one when we try to. We haven't done that many pop-ups like that because the two that we did, we kept. I mean, I'm up for doing it, we will do things. If it happens, we'll do one for the Olympics. We did have plans for, there's a big football tournament, hopefully this summer it was supposed to be last summer. We will do one to that. But that will probably be repurposing the football one we already have and making it daily, which is what we did for the World Cup a few years ago. So I think you have to look at metrics of these things. And I think metrics are really important for newsletters, you know, but I think we have this thing, sanity metrics, not vanity metrics. So they need to make sense and you need to make sure they are about more than just open rate. There's more you can take from a newsletter than just that.

[00:24:18] **Jospeh Lichterman** Yeah, absolutely. I think then the one last thing I would hope to ask about, I think is other efforts you notice that maybe an audience might be flagging, you're going through the list cleansing process. A little bit about that, you try re-engagement efforts, spend time, hey, you haven't opened this in a while if you want to come and check that.

[00:24:41] **Sarah Ebner** So I obviously look at the metrics a lot. And we've just changed the way we list cleanse, actually. And we just about automated, which will be much, much easier. It was very manual up until now. So I'd look at a newsletter and say, oh, you know, that's not for me. And these people, there's clearly a sizable number that don't open it. So originally, we would send two emails. We would say, "Hi, we noticed you've not opened this newsletter," from the person who writes the newsletter, which I always think is better anyway. And it was a bit of a weird email, because it kind of went, hi, you don't do anything, if you want to unsubscribe, you can unsubscribe. And that was kind of it. And then we said another one of them saying, oh, so we've noticed you still haven't opened it, we're going to cleanse you off the list. And I just thought to myself, why are we doing two? I think because of the way this (INAUDIBLE) was set up, they had always done two. So I'd inherited that, because I set up this department. So we just changed it to a more positive one, which I prefer the message anyway, which is now, "Hi, I noticed you haven't read my newsletter for a while. Here's a reminder of what it is (link to the most recent one) and I'd love you to read it. And if you're going to continue reading it, please click here." If you want to continue being on the list, that takes you to a page which says, "Thanks so much for continuing to read it! Here are our other newsletters if you want to see them." And then it says, but if you don't want to do anything and we will just get rid of you in two weeks, basically. So we've just done our first one, which I think is a much nicer way to do it to the reader. Obviously, if they don't open it, they'll get cleansed anyway. And we always, except for this one, see an increase in open rates. But it can be sizable numbers that come off, you have to have a kind of, this is what I mean about vanity and sanity metrics, you have to not get really stressed about the size of your list. I mean, we have some newsletters which have, you know, our biggest newsletter goes to over 3.5 million people, and then we have some that are in the hundreds of thousands, and then we have some that are, you know, 5,000. So we have a massive difference, probably. I mean, it's more than five thousand, but it's between five and 10, we have some. And, you know, sometimes you say to someone, OK, we're doing list cleanse on your newsletter, you're going to lose 10,000 people and you're you're going to go from 70 to 60 thousand. And they go, "*gasp*", oh my God, I loved having 70,000 people!" You say to them, no one's reading it, of those ten thousand. You don't want those people, because once you get rid of those people, you've then got people who care about a newsletter and they're going to read it and engage with it, maybe pass it on to their friends, and organically you'll get more people. And that's fine, people accept that, absolutely. But I think it's a very good thing to do. We do it every three months now, the newsletter automated thing will go every 90 days for each newsletter. But each list cleanse email is from the person who writes that newsletter, which I always think the personal touch is a good idea.

[00:27:36] **Jospeh Lichterman** Absolutely. And that's what I tell myself whenever I send a newsletter and get a bunch of unsubscribes. And say it's a good thing, they don't want it anyway. It's better not to have them.

[00:27:44] **Sarah Ebner** I mean, you just don't want people who don't want the newsletter. Absolutely. I mean, we had a problem with unsubscribes in that we had a convoluted way to unsubscribe. And it made me very, when I started, unhappy because when people want to unsubscribe, you have to make it easy for them to unsubscribe. You don't want those

people, because otherwise they won't unsubscribe. They'll put you into spam, which is much worse, or they will just never open it and it will end up moving your email, moving it to the wrong kind of tab. You just want them to go, if they don't want it, that's fine, We've all unsubscribed from newsletters. Not yours, obviously, but other newsletters.

[00:28:22] **Jospeh Lichterman** Well with that, I think that's a perfect way to end it. Thank you so much, Sarah. This was wonderful, insightful, and I so appreciate you making the time.