Ann Handley: 00:03 The thing I love about email as a "newsfeed" is that it really does put you in control. It's you deciding, "I wanna hear from this person."

Lee Price: 00:14 What's really powerful about email is that, unlike other forms of digital marketing, you're actually going into someone's inbox and that's a really personal place.

Hung Lee: 00:23 We need to think about the inbox experience. That's something that we often don't consider the inbox is having, because it becomes such a mundane thing. But I think we've forgotten a little bit about how we experienced that place.

Lee Price: 00:40 From Managing Editor magazine, this is Margins. If you're using content to solve business problems, we made this podcast for you. We'll explore what it means to communicate in the digital age. We'll share stories about the messier side of content marketing; what works, what doesn't, and the big questions we're all asking at work. In this no-advice and no-checklists zone, you'll hear from marketers, creatives. You won't walk away from this podcast with all the answers. Instead, we hope we help you think about the questions you should be asking. I'm your host, Lee Price.

Mary Ellen Slay: 01:21 I'm Mary Ellen Slayter, and y'all get ready because Lee and I are about to wax poetic about email.

Lee Price: 01:31 Is it lame and 2019 to admit that you really love email? Mary Ellen, I know that email is special for us because we met at an email company back in what I think of as emails' heyday. When we worked at SmartBrief together, our work every day was about delivering really great emails to millions of subscribers.

Mary Ellen Slay: 01:53 Yeah, sometimes I actually tell people that is our superpower. It's like Lee and I are really good at getting people to open up and sign up for emails, right, which what a thing to brag about. I think email is a really powerful tool for people to connect. I know it's easy to say that email's dead. It's been replaced by all these other channels. But, for me, email can be quite calming. I feel like it's the channel that I have the most control of both as a sender, right? I control what goes in that, that my audience sees. There's no other ads in it. There's no other intrusions. It's just me to your inbox. Then also, as a receiver, I feel like when emails come to me, it's there because I gave you permission. It's there because I invited you in. If I didn't invite you in, I'm completely ruthless about deleting you. Or if you send me
things and it's boring, I have no feelings about it. But good emails, I love a good email newsletter.

Lee Price: 02:49 I agree. When I say I love email, it doesn't mean that I love the minutia and the constant communication about work details that happens in my email a lot. I think I like email. I think it's calming because it's like the original inbox, right? We used to all just have one or maybe two email inboxes. Those were the days, right? Now, I have LinkedIn messages, Twitter notification. Oh, I didn't see that Facebook message someone sent me two weeks ago, based campaigns where people have questions for me, Google Doc comment, different Google tag that I didn't see. I don't know how anyone keeps up with all of it, honestly. Some days, I literally just wanna throw my laptop out the window. I think that maybe it's not that email is great in its bone, right? Email hasn't really changed that much in 20 years. It's just that it's a throwback to those simpler single inbox times.

Mary Ellen Slay: 03:43 You know what else I think is interesting is all of those other platforms that have supposedly replaced our email, they're gonna kill email, what do they do? They send alerts to your email. That's the only way you see them, right? If it's just in there, you don't even see it. You don't even see it. It's all back to the inbox. It just give me that one central place.

Lee Price: 04:02 I think in the last couple years, we're really seeing email have a renaissance. Five or 10 years ago, I used to follow people's blogs on my blog reader. I don't really do that that much anymore because I get their email newsletter instead. I'm seeing a lot of email newsletters that are really funny, personal, and unique even if the person is talking about work. For today's love letter to email, we talked to three people who think a lot about your inbox. We called Ann Handley, Liz Willits, and Hung Lee. Like I said, I'm really enjoying the trend of authentic personal email newsletters that make you feel really connected to someone out there on the other side of the internet.

Lee Price: 04:51 Ann Handley's newsletter always makes me feel that way. Her email is called Total ANNARCHY. It comes every other Sunday. It's consistently my favorite email. It's all about writing. It's really 100% Ann. You know what she's thinking about, what she's reading, really whatever's on our mind. It's safe to say she loves email as much as we do. Thinking about email, I thought it might be interesting to start kind of big picture. Why don't you tell me how do you use email, as a consumer of email, as someone who uses email for work to find new information?
Ann Handley: 05:28 I’m actually using email as essentially my source of news and information, and really what’s going on in the world. At the beginning of the year, maybe actually further back than that I’m talking 2018, I took myself off of Facebook because I couldn’t handle so much about it. I just stopped enjoying it essentially, I guess, is the easiest way to say it. I decided, "All right, that was a pretty major source of information to me. How am I going to fill that gap? How am I going to stay informed and connected?" That was really the start of my journey to rethink email. I’m talking about as a consumer more than somebody who was writing and sending emails. From a straight-up consumption standpoint, as a consumer, that’s really what I started realizing how important email is and should be. Of course, that cascades into marketing too. But just from a consumer standpoint, I really started to value email and look at it through a slightly different lens.

Lee Price: 06:37 It was your new newsfeed.

Ann Handley: 06:40 Yeah, because, first of all, the thing I love about email as a "newsfeed" is that it really does put you in control. It’s you deciding, "I wanna hear from this person." It’s not an algorithm deciding that I’m going to hear from that person. It’s really me opting into whatever it is that I have to say. Then I can go and shape my own experience with it. It’s just a much more, it’s a cleaner experience for me. I really feel I can understand where somebody is coming from as opposed to this tsunami of a newsfeed or tsunami of information.

Lee Price: 07:16 That made me wonder what are the emails that Ann can’t wait to read.

Ann Handley: 07:20 I wanna know that it’s from somebody. I wanna feel a person behind the email newsletter. I wanna see the person who’s writing it, who’s putting it together, who’s carrying it.

Lee Price: 07:30 Right. I think that’s why people like your newsletter so much because they feel, like you’ve said, you focus on the letter part of the newsletter. It’s from you. I want to ask you, do you think it’s been easier to write the newsletter every week, since it’s from you and it’s not from a brand voice? You’re not writing as a MarketingProfs’ leader. You’re not writing on behalf of the brand. You’re just writing on behalf of yourself.

Ann Handley: 07:57 I mean this newsletter is brand new. I’ve only done it directly from me, but we’ve been publishing a MarketingProfs' newsletter for a very long time. I like to think that that email
newsletter has a sense of the MarketingProfs' team, of us more collectively, as an organization. I don't know. Honestly, I think sometimes brands get really hung up on we can't show people who we are. We can't just be honest, and open, and vulnerable and human in our email newsletters or in any other content, more broadly. But since we're talking about email newsletters, I guess I'll contain it to that. I feel like it's a cop-out because I feel it's much better to use that personality, to use the things that make you human and vulnerable and accessible to an audience. Why wouldn't you?

Lee Price: 08:48 To your point, right? You have to be you and you have to be authentic. You can't just copy what somebody else is doing.

Ann Handley: 08:53 I think there are elements. What you can take away from that is that it's a personal approach. Take that. What does a personal approach mean for your own brand, for you and company, for your own person? You've got to figure that out. Like I said, I think a personal approach is not just warranted. I mean, I think it's an imperative with email newsletters.

Lee Price: 09:16 Really, it's about what is funny or interesting to you as a human. I think that's a really good first metric to make sure that it passes because if it doesn't pass that, what's the point of any of that?

Ann Handley: 09:28 Yeah, absolutely. I wrote about this. I think it was actually just last week, just about the need to really love what you do, right? Just to really think about whatever it is that you're producing, I think, especially for writers, for those of us working in content marketing. Does it bring us as much joy as it brings other people? I don't see that as a pass to ignore the audience. I'm not saying that you've gotta delight yourself before, and not worry about anybody else. That's not what I'm saying. I think your approach and what you're doing actually brings you joy. I think, ultimately, that can be felt by the reader, by the audience. I feel you've got to get that right. That was a big takeaway for me over the past year.

Ann Handley: 10:24 I mean the best thing you can do really is just to serve the customers, or the serve the audience that you have. I've talked about this in the past too, but I always think about one person who my newsletter is designed to help that week. In the back of my brain, I always think of one person who I am writing that week's letter to. I think, automatically, that makes my newsletter feel a little bit more personal, but yet, at the same time, it's universal. I'm not saying, "Dear, Lee," and writing out
exactly what's something very hyper specific to you. It's in my head. It's to you, but it's generalized to the audience. I think the more specific you can get. The real magic in that is that the more specific you get, the more universal you sound, right? I think if I write something to you about a problem that you have, that's a problem that can be generalized to a lot of other people.

Ann Handley: 11:29 To me, that engagement starts with who you're writing a letter to. How do I know that? It's because when people sign up for my newsletter, I asked them. A good number of them write back. They tell me why they signed up, what problems they have, what they hope that I can help them with. I collect those, and I refer to them for inspiration. That's really where it comes from. The other thing I do is that when I hear from somebody, I always write back to them, which always blows people away. It's like, "I can't believe you're writing back." "Well, I asked you to write to me. I'm not going right back to you." Sometimes it takes me a little while to get back to people because I get a lot of email, ironically. But I always do. I think that's an important step for me, because it keeps me engaged. It keeps me in touch with the audience. I think a lot of marketers are chasing that next lead, right?

Ann Handley: 12:27 They're always chasing that next email address. I am more interested in serving the people who I have on my list because, ultimately, those are the people who are gonna help me grow it. They're gonna be partners for me. Certainly, there's other things that you can do. If you are curating a list, for example. I mean if you're curating a newsletter and you're getting articles and links, and videos, and sources from elsewhere, certainly tagging them on social media or reaching out to them directly. Any of those things are always a good way to get on the radar of other people so that, hopefully, they will help. They will amplify it for you and you will get in touch with their audience as well as your own audience. There's all those things. Everybody knows that stuff, but I feel it's actually much harder to just switch your mindset to serving the people who you already have.

Lee Price: 13:25 Well, yeah. Do you think it's harder to switch to serving the people you already have?

Ann Handley: 13:29 Yes. I mean I think the mindset being, because I think we're always thinking about the other person, right? We're always thinking about how do we get that next name as opposed to really focusing on the name that we already have. I think it's what I'm trying to say.
Lee Price: 13:41 Right. Well, and I think there's a lot of pressure from leadership that companies too, even marketing leaders. Instead of saying, congratulations. We have, let's say, a startup and we have 1000 people who wanna hear from us every week. We're sending them stuff they really love and they're responding to us. That feels the moot point because it's not 10000.


Ann Handley: 14:01 Yes, that's true. That's true. But if you're serving those 1000 people super well, I mean, what's the point of 10000 people? If those 1000 people are clicking on your links, if they're spending money with you, if they are referring you, what is the point of getting bigger, just to get bigger. I feel that we really need to focus more on who we have versus who we don't have.

Lee Price: 14:29 I love that. Ann Handley is one of the best-known marketers in the world. She has a huge platform. She's been talking to an audience online for a long time. That's her advice for us, right? Prioritize who's already in your audience, instead of focusing on that next subscriber you wanna get.

Mary Ellen Slay: 14:47 That really is the future of marketing, right? It's not so much about that old school sales funnel where we're just constantly trying to jam people through the pipeline. Just to move on to the next stage so we can check off a box. If you think about it this way, we can think about the signing up for that email is really an engaging with that email. It's all about building and taking care of your relationships. That's a slower process but in the long run, I think it's a more meaningful one.

Lee Price: 15:14 Yeah, that's the vision of marketing I can definitely get behind. If you're a marketer out there listening, maybe you're thinking, "This is all great but this is a little too Kumbaya and touchy feely." Relationships are awesome, but you wanna know about the data. How is email really working now? What do we need to know to improve our email game? I hear you. Ann Handley's newsletter is sent through the platform, Aweber. I called someone at AWeber. I talked to Liz Willits, a marketer who spends a lot of time thinking about the science of email. What would you say to people who are still saying that email is dead?

Liz Willits: 15:59 I would actually say it's more alive than it ever has been, especially in the last two years. I think email's going through a renaissance right now. Not only have there been a lot of studies
that have shown that, that show that email use increases. But if you look at a lot of newsletters right now, there are ton of newsletters popping up that are extremely successful. Their whole business model is actually built on email newsletter by itself, which is interesting that they can make revenue to support entire business just off email. Also, if you think about it, observationally, who you know that doesn't have an email account? That makes that audience huge. Another thing about email, which is awesome is it's actually through data been shown to have the hardest highest ROI of any marketing channel.

Liz Willits: 16:50 It's for every dollar you spend on email, you earn, on average, $38 in return. That beats out Facebook. That beats out Twitter. It beats out a lot of social channels. It just pays for itself, and that's 38 times over it pays for itself. It's a no brainer for businesses. It's also been shown that email is one of the most effective ways to actually get customers compared to social media. The inbox, I think is a much more personal place than social media sometimes is. When I receive a personal email from someone, it means much more to me than an Instagram message. When a brand is doing email really well, I think it has that same feeling of a letter to one person that's really meaningful.

Lee Price: 17:38 I mean, the other benefit for marketers is it's a channel that you own, right?

Liz Willits: 17:43 Yeah, so I often compare email. I compare social to having an Uber. You don't own it. You're renting it. Then email marketing is like having your own car. That power, that control is has a big impact on your business. For instance, if Facebook makes a change tomorrow to their algorithm, that has a huge negative impact on your business. You've spent all this time and maybe even money growing a Facebook following. Now that huge Facebook following might not be worth anything to you. With email, you have to spend time to grow your email list. Once you have that email list, you own it. If my email marketing platform does something I don't like, I can move to a different email marketing platform and take my email list with me. Also, another thing is, I've heard from a few businesses I've been talking to that for Instagram, they're having a much harder time getting their own followers to see their posts in their feed.

Liz Willits: 18:43 With email, when you have a subscriber and when they opt into your list and you send them an email, they'll see it. There's no algorithm determining that only 8% of my followers are gonna
see this message. With email, you can be much more certain that the majority of your audience is actually gonna see your email.

Lee Price: 19:00 Right. That's a great point. For you, as someone who works at an email platform, and who likes email and reads a lot of email, I just wanna hear what your daily email routine looks like.

Liz Willits: 19:12 I subscribe to every email list possible. I do that because I love to look at emails, and as a marketer research, what other companies are doing to be successful with email marketing. My daily email routine is checking a bunch of emails, a bunch of my favorite emails to see what they're doing that day. I really don't unsubscribed from emails very often, unless it's something that's providing me no value at all. I mostly stay subscribed to everything. My inbox is filled of emails, and I'm okay with that.

Lee Price: 19:48 That's interesting to me too, because I also subscribe to a ton of emails. I'm super perplexed by this whole idea of Inbox Zero because I mean I have thousands of emails in my inbox. It just seems a crazy goal to ever think that I would have zero emails in my inbox. That's never gonna happen. I'm wondering if you feel the same way about Inbox Zero.

Liz Willits: 20:10 I don't really get Inbox Zero. When I first stumbled upon it, it was a surprising thing to me that people were actually going for this because I go for the opposite. I try to subscribe to more and more emails so that I always have examples. I can always find the emails that have the research or the articles that I found fascinating in the past. I'll save them in a folder and keep them for later.

Lee Price: 20:35 Liz and I have both admitted to being anti-Inbox Zero. If you wanna try to convince me otherwise, I don't know. Send me an email. But I wanted to hear more about her company's research, about how to make an email people really love. I asked her, what surprised you about the data?

Liz Willits: 20:52 Another thing we found that's surprising is that a lot of people open their emails weeks and maybe even months after they sent the email. It's not just in that first 48 hours are people opening emails. Even a month later after that, they might open an email. We can see that by looking at jumps and click-through rate.

Lee Price: 21:14 What are you seeing in terms of where people open their emails? What devices they're using?
Liz Willits: 21:19 We found is a lot of people, nearly 50% of people are opening their emails on mobile devices, which makes it really important that you consider how your emails look on mobile. Definitely, send yourself a test of your email and see if it’s actually optimized for mobile. You might be surprised what you see. But another thing to keep in mind when you realize how many emails are open on mobile is what does my email subject line look like. Email subject lines get cut off when they reach about 30 to 40 characters, depending on where they’re opened on mobile. Short subject lines might be better because they don’t get cut off.

Lee Price: 22:00 All this data is interesting. It actually makes me think. We were talking about how email as a channel that doesn’t change. Email might not have changed that much but the devices we used to read email have. I guess one takeaway that I’m hearing from you design wise, is you have to make sure that you’re continuing to test your email on different devices and web browsers. Just making sure that no matter what size screen people are reading on, it still looks good.

Liz Willits: 22:25 Actually, something that's funny that will happen. Well, it's funny, or it might not be funny, depending on what happens is when subject lines get cut off, they can make strange or even an inappropriate words in your subject lines. I always look at my subject lines and my emails on mobile because of a certain word gets cut off in the inbox, it becomes another word that you really don't want people reading from your brand.

Lee Price: 22:52 That's hilarious. Well, I'm wondering if you have any takeaways for people who are sending a lot of emails. How can they upgrade what they're sending, so that people start to really love their emails?

Liz Willits: 23:05 The number one thing you can do is send valuable content and give your audience something that's valuable. That can be educational content. It can be something that makes them laugh. Something that just entertains them. That's the number one piece of advice I give to people. If you look at almost any successful newsletter, it's giving value. There's all kinds of ways you can give value. I've even seen people have trivia questions in their newsletter. Value can be all kinds of things.

Mary Ellen Slay: 23:37 I've got two emails related to work that I open every Sunday right, which is supposed to be my day off. The first one is Hamleys, and the second is Hung Lee’s Recruiting Brainfood. He started the Recruiting Brainfood newsletter in October of 2016,
and it's just rapidly grown to over 10000 subscribers. His newsletter is unlike anything else in HR tech. It mixes curated links with politics and more than a few of his unfiltered thoughts about what's going on in the world. I wanted to know what it took to create a newsletter that so many people clearly find valuable and walk them into their inbox. Even like me, on a Sunday morning. I started off by asking him why he started Recruiting Brainfood in the first place.

Hung Lee: 24:22 Well, it's quite simple, Mary Ellen. The internet got too big for us. I just found that it was just becoming a noisy place to be. It became very difficult I think to focus on the great stuff that was out there because you're always being interrupted. What Recruiting Brainfood is all about is really my attempt to make the internet smaller, if that makes any sense. Hence, the idea of Recruiting Brainfood came out is really just a place I wanted to cover off for myself to begin with. It's to make the web a little bit more manageable for us.

Mary Ellen Slay: 24:56 One of the things I also really enjoy about your newsletter is it's a curated newsletter, right? You're gathering up. These are things that you want it to read. Yet the writing, it's still very much sounds you to me. I hear it as I read it. I hear your voice basically as I'm reading it. You're not afraid to put personality in it. Sometimes you even get a little political, right?

Hung Lee: 25:16 You noticed that.

Mary Ellen Slay: 25:16 Tell me about your process. Oh, yeah. Tell me. I mean, there was one moment where a few weeks ago I was reading something, because again, we're writing about recruiting tech which could be super dry. But you look at it. There was one moment we're just in the middle of it, you snuck in this line. You said something about the free movement of people being the defining political movement of our time. I mean that's not what people are talking about in recruiting tech newsletters. Tell me about that. How do you decide what to write about? How do you decide how much of yourself to put in this? How are you doing this?

Hung Lee: 25:46 You know, Mary Ellen, one thing that is hugely surprising to me, but I've discovered it quite early thank God, was that people enjoyed my commentary on it. For the listeners out there who might not be familiar with it, a curated newsletter literally could just be a bunch of links, right? It could just be, "Here's 10 links. Go an read that." But I realized that actually, I should make my observation on these lists and justify why I'm putting it in there.
Those explanations what I put in, just five or six lines per link. I find that people seem to enjoy it. It is linked with getting economic security. It is linked with dealing with a change of which the changing workplace is a big driving force. If we think back four or five years ago, everyone was like old politics, economics, dry stuff. It just keeps on going as it is. But now everyone is switched on and everyone is motivated because we need to care.

Mary Ellen Slay: 26:55 A newsletter like Recruiting Brainfood doesn't just happen. It's a lot of work. I asked Hung exactly how long it takes him to put it together every week.

Hung Lee: 27:04 One of the promises that I guess, written promises, behind Recruiting Brainfood is that it's definitely me doing it. The good news is that I read a ton anyway. I'm not in increasing my reading in any way really, because I've always done that. What really takes the time is to sort out which bits, which post will go in that week. What I've tried to do is to keep things current at the same time balanced the content. So it's not all focused on one type of thing. There's always different bits for different people in Brainfood. It's always something that's high level on that political sphere, society level, economics type of level as well. The salt through it is probably where the time commitment is. Yeah, it definitely takes time.

Mary Ellen Slay: 28:06 Tell me about how do you read all this stuff? I open this, I figure ... I do read. I interpret it as you hand selected these things because you're vouching for them. That's why I know that they're worth my time. How do you fit this in? Do you read first thing in the morning? Do you read throughout the day? Is it something you do at the end of the day? How are you absorbing all of this information and deciding what's good?

Hung Lee: 28:27 Honestly, I've got the ... It's multi device so I've got lots of ways in which this information is accessible. It's got to the point also that people send me stuff analysis of the communities actually supporting me a great deal in terms of sourcing the information. The reading, I tried to do as soon as I encounter it. I know that means that typically there's a lot of interruptions going on. But if you're able to time box you day, which I'm trying to develop, then it can work quite well. In other words, you create space in the day where you getting on with, say, administrative work or whatever it might and you time box that so you never gonna be interrupted. Other times, when you're having dialogue with people or you wanna be in a more exploratory mode, then it's okay to have lots of things out there.
Hung Lee: 29:18 So that when you do encounter something, you can capture it, you collect it, and then you can read it there and then. Then either decide to put it in or you archive it for a future date where you can go back to it and then reread. Typically, what happens is half of the newsletter gets done during the week through this process. Then towards the end of the week where you need to finalize the edition, that's when I'll go through and give it a reread. Then I'll finalize it as late as I can in the week. Usually, some time on Saturday. That's when it gets done.

Mary Ellen Slay: 29:55 Do you look at the analytics for the email to decide what kinds of content to produce going forward? Or just strictly your gut?

Hung Lee: 30:03 Yes, it's kind of my gut. It's not just an ego trip, where I'm just throwing out, "Okay, Hung is interested in this." The aim is to do variety, right? Because, usually, there's 10 to 12 articles in there every week, I wanna make sure that whoever receives it is gonna get two, three things out of it. That's gonna help inspire them for the week ahead.

Mary Ellen Slay: 30:25 I asked Hung where he thinks email is going next.

Hung Lee: 30:29 You know what, I would say we need to think about the inbox experience. That's something that we often don't consider the inbox is having an experience, because it becomes such a mundane thing. I think we've forgotten a little bit about how we experience that place. A big part of that is simply we are interrupting people that any form of consent in recruiting, in particular, engagement is the big story. Really, there is no trick. In fact, if you have to trick someone, there's obviously something fundamentally wrong. What we need to do is get to a place where both parties consent for that communication to take place.

Mary Ellen Slay: 31:18 I think now you're getting political again.

Hung Lee: 31:19 Maybe, maybe. I can't avoid it, Mary Ellen. What can I say?

Lee Price: 31:31 Our takeaways about email; sharing your authentic voice matters. People love email, because it's a feed of information they can control and organize. Just like literally any other content format, creating a great email takes a lot of time and love. There's no trick or hack to creating a popular email newsletter. If you were looking for that here, sorry guys.

Mary Ellen Slay: 31:56 That's it for this episode of Margins by Managing Editor. To hear more from us, subscribe in iTunes. Or wherever you listen to
Thanks to the team, who helps make this episode. Our guests Ann Handley, Liz Willits, and Hung Lee, CEO of Red Cap, Mary Ellen Slayter, Editor and Producer Wes Kennison, Assistant Editor Taylor Stoma, Writer Rex New and me, the Managing Editor of Managing Editor, Lee Price. We'll see you next time.

I'm gonna shut off my email. Hold on because I'm hearing it doing in the background. I don't know if you can hear it but speaking of emails, it's irritating. Alrighty. There we go. Cool.

Do you wanna know how many emails are in my inbox right now?

I don't want. It would probably make me want to vomit.