

Lackluster Publications

by

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Every association and non-commercial organization, no matter its size, is a publisher. Each one-page letter, monthly newsletter, quarterly scientific journal, annual convention brochure, and membership recruitment packet is 'published' to communicate important information about the association to a member or someone who is (or should be) interested in the association. "You never get a second chance to make a first impression" is an old maxim about personal appearance that applies equally well to any organization every time one of its 'publications' leaves the office. The following fundamental flaws are those of an association that does not care about how it looks nor about communicating with its members.

Sloppy image

Emerging associations and other membership organizations tend to have an untidy and uncoordinated appearance. Letterhead is usually black print on white paper, with no modern graphic appeal. Newsletters are often single sheets, stapled at the top left-hand corner, with 'wall-to-wall' text. And the association brochure describing its mission and membership benefits, if one exists, is printed using typewritten camera-ready copy, on cheap, colored, lightweight paper.

To attract a reader's attention and to communicate effectively, an association has to compete against a host of high quality publications and other business pieces. And members continuously make *unconscious* comparisons between slick promotional materials received from for-profit companies in their field and the latest mailing received from the association's headquarters. So, even the president's form-letter accompanying the annual subscription notice must stand out as worth reading, not by screaming for attention but through a professional and *unique identity*.

An association logo (or mark) needs to be distinctive and easily recognized, and incorporate the name and some symbol to represent the mission of the organization. Don't be locked into the 'traditional' look. A modern logo, perhaps with an abstract symbol, for an association that is on the cutting edge of a new technology is more appropriate than a replica of the royal seal! The design and selection of typefaces for the letterhead, brochures, the newsletter masthead, and other printed pieces requires a professional touch. Do not cut corners when creating an association image, and do not let a volunteer or a committee take over this project. Too much is at stake. Frequently a capable young designer will develop a co-coordinated image at a reduced fee, if the association can be identified as a client in his or her own professional marketing. Or a graphic design student at a local art college would be pleased to work on this project as part of an academic exercise.

While association leaders should not be the hands-on designers, they *must* take the time to brainstorm the *message* the association is trying to communicate in print. Is it modern and progressive; traditional and old world; relaxed and casual; or formal and elitist? A capable designer will be quick to focus ideas and bring a discussion group to a consensus. Then, from

several sample proposals of an overall 'look', a final selection can be made. After that decision, give the designer a free hand.

No publications budget

Previous articles in this series have stressed the need for careful budgeting, and this is especially critical for publications. Apart from the staff-time involved, an association can spend as much as 25-30% of its operating funds on this one effort. Consequently, projecting and then protecting these costs can be the difference between a year-end surplus and a deficit.

Each functional area in the budget, such as membership development, conferences, newsletters etc., should be carefully analyzed to determine a *total* cost estimate for all typesetting and printing. Instead of thinking of the association's six newsletters each year as individual items, consider them part of a larger publications program, along with letterhead needs, conference flyers, membership brochures, and other promotional pieces.

With this research in hand, seek out a printer who is willing to negotiate for a certain amount of business throughout the year. The designer selected frequently knows which printers are good and reasonable and who are worth working with. Look for a printer who, while not large, has a full range of services, including typesetting. Avoid quick-copy centers, except for making multiple copies of typed documents, e.g., minutes. With a guarantee of a significant amount of annual business, a printer will often write off the typesetting costs. This can overcome the temptation of being seduced by desk-top publishing. While an association with an established communications department benefits considerably by adding this technology for flexibility, a small association often *loses* money when all the direct and indirect costs, including staff time are calculated.

Once a good designer and a good printer have been selected, always seek their advice. This will not only save time and money, it will provide a learning experience that will increase the association's understanding of this specialized field.

Boring copy

Even with great design and high quality printing, turgid and long-winded prose can destroy a publication. When a board is so grateful that one of its own agrees to be the newsletter editor because nobody else would volunteer, it loses all objectivity about the quality of the publication.

If an association announces, in a serious and meaningful manner, that it is seeking a volunteer editor (by a mailing to the membership, explaining the need to upgrade the newsletter or journal, and how the board will support the one selected), there will be a surprisingly positive response. Once selected, make the editor a member of the 'inner circle', even if he or she is not on the board, as access to information is critical if the editor is to produce publications that are interesting.

Also, make sure that the editor develops back-up capability through guest editors. In the event of a sudden resignation, or removal from office, the association needs capable people waiting in the wings. Publication policies and guidelines should be established in co-operation with the editor. For example, whether to accept advertising and, if so, what to charge. And remember that even though the editor is a volunteer, he or she is subject to the supervision of the elected leaders.

This avoids the havoc that can occur when an aggressive, even though capable, editor with his or her own agenda takes editorial license with hot association issues.

New volunteer editors, struggling with the enormity of their ‘calling’, sometimes lapse into a formal and stilted style that they would not ordinarily use. A competent volunteer editor who wants to improve will usually welcome outside review by a seasoned freelance editor. Outside review is particularly important in addressing the ‘interest’ aspect of publications. The volunteer editor and others who might write for the publication all know what is going on. But articles that are confusing and ambiguous to the outside consultant are likely to be confusing and ambiguous to the intended audience also. Association insiders, including volunteer editors, tend to ‘fill in the blanks’ in a story from their prior knowledge. Not so the new reader, the very one that the association is trying to convince.

The need for clarity and punch particularly applies to marketing brochures. Not only must they look good, but they must interest and convince the prospective member. As few association leaders can write to achieve these goals, the cost of the outside editorial help will be more than offset by the increased number of new members recruited over those responding to the usual bland and tired ‘please join us’ appeal.

No commitment to schedules

As in the business world, even if a person looks the part and has an important message to deliver, if he or she does not show up or is late, the impact of the message is lost or even negated.

All publications must be published according to a strictly-held schedule. Newsletters, particularly, are subject to inconsistent publication dates. This is because they are easy to start, as usually there is a flush of enthusiasm for the first issue or two from some involved volunteers. However, once the initial excitement has worn off, the schedule is ignored and often the newsletter becomes, literally, a periodical. Then members begin to infer that the association does not care, or has nothing to report.

Once a newsletter begins attracting lengthy articles of a more technical nature, consider publishing additional ‘special’ issues as a vehicle for these presentations. Don’t try to convert the ‘news’ letter into a mini-journal. It will not be interesting or scholarly. And be realistic about the potential of a real journal. Board members are often totally mystified to learn about the costs of such a publication, and that industry support from advertising cannot be attracted as the circulation is limited.

A more viable alternative is to identify an existing independent magazine or journal in the field, and propose to the publisher that it becomes the ‘official’ journal of the association, with editorial input from the association. In scientific specialties this is often well received as the publisher can agree on a reduced rate for members, which can be incorporated into the annual membership subscription. The association gains a journal, and the publisher receives increased credibility and built-in circulation.

Not encouraging reader response

To help with membership maintenance and development, publications (especially newsletters) should generate some interactive behavior. A regular survey of one aspect of the association's program can be a useful feature in each issue. The newsletter following the latest annual meeting could ask a number of questions about the program, i.e., what appealed to those who attended, and even more important what did *not* appeal to those who decided not to attend. Once the annual audit has been accepted by the board at the end of the fiscal year, publish a summary and encourage questions about the use of funds. At the very least this will open up lines of communication and might expose some potential problems.

Even form letters sent with dues statements should prompt a reaction, in addition to the one sought, i.e., payment. All payment slips should allow for comment and recommendations of prospective members, or the addition of personal demographic data to improve the association's membership database.

Most members of an organization are a silent majority: they are seen but not heard, like all good children! If they are dissatisfied with something they will not take the time to write a letter. But many will pen a note to the bottom of an invitation to comment, if they are prodded and if they believe that their comments will receive serious consideration.

Summary

1. All printed pieces (including letters) are publications, and present the association's image to the world. Professional help is required to identify and convey the message, and to help the association achieve a unique identity.
2. Publications are a major association expense item, which needs careful control. Negotiate annual printing for *all* publications, and include the designer and printer in discussions on how to work within the budget set.
3. Poor copy can destroy the impact of well-designed and printed publications. Editors can be developed with the help of outside freelance review, which also adds interest to the copy.
4. Publication schedules are sacred, and should never be violated. It is better to publish fewer issues of a newsletter than to miss deadlines. Be realistic about the potential of a journal, as this is a costly venture. Try to 'adopt' an existing journal in the field.
5. Publications are for communication, and communication is a two-way medium. Encourage reader responses to all publications, even dues invoices.

While an association has every right to look poorly turned out if it wishes, don't expect it to receive the respect and attention it deserves. Publications that add to a member's skills or understanding are true membership benefits. But they must be attractive and interesting to be appreciated.