



Association
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ASSOCIATION MAGAZINES – WHY? HOW? AND WHAT FOR?

Professional Guidance: Marcom 1

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INTRODUCTION

Some professional and trade associations are of sufficient size and resource to be able to produce their sector magazine in-house with their own dedicated staff team.

This guidance note is aimed at small to medium sized associations who need to utilise outside organisations and personnel to produce a magazine.

For all associations this is a major and complex commitment. Start-up associations, particularly those with no in-house expertise or experience in publishing, need to consider carefully how to gather the necessary resources. This can constitute a considerable investment in time and money and cannot be done “on the cheap”.

So the very first thought should be:

WHY HAVE AN ASSOCIATION MAGAZINE AT ALL?

A sector magazine is the primary showcase for the association; a shop window to the world beyond. By picking up a magazine, an outsider gets an immediate impression of the stature and professionalism of the association... even if they have little knowledge of the particular sector. A magazine projects the association to governments, industry bodies, international partners and the general public.

To members it is often the prime reason for joining the association in the first place and for continuing to be a member. Given that, in most cases, only some 20% of members actually engage in the activities of the association, the remaining 80% get a subliminal message that a regular, quality and authoritative magazine is good value for money for their annual subscription. The value to the association in all these aspects is enormous so getting it right is imperative.

The key elements that need to be considered are editorial, printing, advertising, mailing/postage and electronic publication.

MAGAZINE OR NEWSLETTER?

In many associations “people news”; retirements, job changes, awards, events, even golf matches and other social activities are important to members and provide an essential social “glue” binding association members together.

The problem is that such “newsletter” information is of little interest to anyone outside the association. There is also the danger that there can be an overemphasis on people and social activities to the detriment of technical and professional projection.

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A combination of newsletter and professional magazine does not always sit comfortably and careful consideration needs to be given to splitting the two which serve equally important but very different functions within the association.

The current trend is to differentiate the publications, producing the newsletter in-house and online. A professionally designed house style template is important and it is essential to designate a competent employee to garner news from members and branches to keep the newsletter topical and interesting. Frequency of the publication is an important consideration and the usual method of circulation is via the website and also via a link emailed to subscribing members.

The importance of the correct relationship between magazine and newsletter cannot be over-emphasised. Getting it wrong can seriously damage the image of the association in the outside world.

EDITORIAL

The major point to consider about association magazines is the need for absolute editorial control. There are some horror stories where associations have contracted out their magazines in toto with sometimes the result that editorial messages do not coincide with the official views of the association. Absolute editorial control is vital.

The relationship between editor, publisher and association is essential to ensuring that the magazine projects the association's messages in a joined-up and consistent way. In many cases it can be best for the editor to be employed directly by the association.

However, there are advantages in having the editor employed directly by the publisher who will have experience of dealing with editors on a daily basis. Adherence to copy deadlines is essential, especially if the magazine is carrying paid-for advertising.

Bear in mind that the editor will be working on several publications so time management is vital if deadlines are to be met. Whilst associations may find it better for the editor to be managed directly by the publisher for this reason, it is of fundamental importance that editorial output is controlled by the association. Whatever model is adopted this criteria is paramount.

An important mechanism is to establish an editorial panel or board comprising key association staff but also rank and file members. This can be a powerful tool in developing a sense of "ownership" amongst the members whilst also providing a useful bank of intelligence, information and articles from the industry sector.

Choice of editor is another key consideration.



Association
Network

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There can be advantages in employing someone from the sector although, in many cases, it can be difficult to find someone with both industry experience and journalistic skills and training. There is also the danger that a person from the sector may have entrenched views about the industry or profession which may not always be in line with those of the association's policies. The other alternative is to employ a professional journalist, perhaps, with little or no knowledge of the sector. This is not necessarily a disadvantage as a good journalist will be trained how to glean and sift information. It does, however, make the deployment of an editorial board even more important to the production of an authoritative magazine.

PRINTING

There has been a revolution in the world of print in recent years. What once required the services of a contract printer can now often be produced on demand from a PC and an in-house copier. The result has been the demise of many of the small printing companies which once dotted the streets of all towns and cities. In terms of magazine publishing the number of printing companies with the expertise and capacity to produce a sizeable quality print run is now far smaller than it once was. This means that competition is fierce, which is to the advantage of the association but the choice of printer is crucial to ensuring that the finished article projects the right image.

Utilising a print consultant or contract publisher, as opposed, to directly, appointing a printer, can provide substantial advantages. A consultant or contract publisher will have the background knowledge of the capabilities and experience of specific printers and also be up to the speed with variable factors such as the price of paper which can fluctuate quite dramatically. They have the power to get the best deal for the association and the knowledge to choose the right time to move to a more competitive or experienced printer thereby taking advantage of current market conditions. If an association publishes its magazine in this way it can reap considerable benefits not least in having the use of a qualified third party expert in the field who knows what the quality of the published magazine should look and feel like and, just as importantly when it does not meet up to the required standard. Print consultants will also either employ or have access to professional designers. The look of the magazine is as important as its content and needs to be revised and freshened from time to time. A good consultant will recommend changes for discussion with the editor, editorial panel and association management to ensure not only quality content but a consistently engaging and attractive format which gets the association noticed and appreciated.

ADVERTISING

The cost of producing an association magazine can make significant inroads into financial resources and the obvious way to offset these costs is via paid for advertising. Again, a print consultant is probably going to provide the best deal and will liaise with the editor and the association management to garner market intelligence as to where potential sources of advertising revenue may come from.



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Negotiations between publishers and advertisers can be ruthlessly commercial and, if the association is a trade body or has company members, a consultant provides a link in the chain and also provides a buffer between association and advertiser thereby potentially nullifying commercial negotiations which could possibly jeopardise that relationship.

The alternative is to use a professional advertising agency; the starting cost is likely to be at least 25% of revenue and it must be borne in mind that the association may be only one of a long list of clients. It is, of course, possible to fulfil this function in-house but few associations could justify employing a full-time sales professional with the requisite experience. Again, there is the problem of potentially compromising those important member relationships if the service is in-house.

Management and control of revenue is another important consideration for associations. Contracting out to either a print consultant or advertising agency obviously saves staff time. However direct invoicing by the association enables efficient control and reporting.

It is quite feasible to contract out the professional sales function whilst retaining in-house control of revenue.

Another key issue is VAT. Publications are exempt from VAT but advertising is not. Some print consultants may offer packages which include publication and advertising which may avoid VAT payment altogether. Clearly this may significantly reduce the overall cost of producing to the magazine to the benefit of the association.

Whatever model is used there will be times when advertising revenue will fall; it is often the first casualty in any economic downturn so associations must be prepared to take the hit when times get hard. Nevertheless, advertising income is a key element of successful association magazine publishing given that members will want to be appraised of the latest available products and services in addition to the important financial contribution it provides.

Always remember that the magazine copy provides value in several ways. The features, articles and news do more than just inform the membership.

Copy can be put to work to promote the sector and improve visibility. All content should be considered as a tool for website promotion. Developing blogs and exposing text on the website continually refreshes the site; Google will pick this up with a likely rise up the rankings. Similarly, if text is reproduced there is an additional opportunity to sell advertising alongside the article. Digital copy has a different shelf life to print and may be attractive to a different type of advertiser.

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MAILING/POSTAGE

Before the magazine gets anywhere near publication the logistics of getting it to members and subscribers need to be put in place. Whilst this can be carried out in-house the complications, potential pitfalls and time commitment should not be underestimated and use of a professional mailing house is strongly recommended. For example, the weight of the packaged magazine is likely to vary for each edition and this requires careful checking. There can be significant penalties for incorrect banding which can have a strong impact on income so engaging a professional has definite benefits.

The material and method of packaging will also vary so cost will also be a factor in this respect. Like printers there is a choice of mailing houses who compete with one another so ongoing changes need to be monitored.

Most print consultants or contract publishers will do this on behalf of the association, often changing mailing houses from time to time in order to obtain the best deal; part of any cost saving should, of course, fall to the association .

Of course, the actual mailing lists will remain in the control of the association as they will vary from edition to edition. Mindful of the requirements of GDPR, it is likely to be most efficient and cost effective for the association to contract out the mailing and postage functions whilst retaining in-house management of distribution lists. Most print consultants or contract publishers will offer this service as part of the overall production deal.

This should be a key part of the negotiations when identifying and engaging the association's provider.

HARD COPY OR ELECTRONIC PUBLICATION

The death of hard copy publications has been predicted for many years. The argument is however, as over-stated as the "paperless office" and a quality, well written, well produced association magazine is just as important today as is a similarly professional website.

It is also false to assume that this will change over time as research suggests that younger generations are not as permanently glued to screens as their older peers might imagine.

Printed copy is still a key part of the service an association provides to its members for all the reasons described.

However, the role of electronic media is, of course, very important and plays a vital part in any association's persona. It can provide the outlet for the "newsletter" element of association publicity as described and may be a more timely and convenient medium for that type of information.



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A halfway house might also be a “page turner” on a website whereby the magazine is essentially available on a screen as well as provided in hard copy. This can be helpful for quick reference by the reader “on the go” who may also have the hard copy version handy for reading when required. The website element can also provide additional revenue as advertisers can be provided with a direct link to their own websites; for additional cost of course.

It is important to ensure that search engines will pick up your “page turner” if this route is pursued as not all do so.

For newer associations thinking of creating a magazine, “toe dipping” via an electronic newsletter can be a low risk, low cost way of gathering market intelligence into the appetite for a hard copy magazine and there are instances of associations beginning electronic publications as a precursor to hard copy in response to demand from members.... The exact opposite of what some pundits might have us believe.

All associations are slightly different and the balance of the mix between electronic and hard copy will naturally vary. Getting that balance right can be tricky but it is essential both in terms of the service provided to members and the quality of projection of the association.

CONCLUSION

The benefits and advantages of producing an association magazine are many. Proper resourcing and funding are essential. Just as important is a professional but flexible management structure to oversee the whole process and the required input to do this successfully should not be underestimated especially if the magazine is a monthly publication. The process is not static; it changes as the association changes and it is crucial to ensure that a regular review mechanism is put in place.

In short there are real rewards to be gained; image, influence both within and without the association and the publication can be a stimulus to member growth.

Always remember that association magazine publication is not an add-on to the other business of the association. It is an integral part of it and must be treated accordingly.

