



LAUGHING BEAR 110 NEWSLETTER

January/February 1999; edited by Tom Person; Copyright © 1999 by Laughing Bear Press; ISSN 1056-0327
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<http://www.LaughingBear.com>; \$15/12 issues, \$17.50/Canada, \$15/UK & Eire

The Surviving Small Press: Starting a Magazine

Since Fall I've noticed many of the requests that come in for sample newsletters are from people either thinking about or actually getting started in magazine publishing. The most frequent comment they make is there isn't much information available on running a magazine, and they want advice, so this seemed like a good time to touch on periodicals again.

Publishing a magazine is a very different animal than publishing books, though they can easily go hand in hand. Books can be compiled from the magazine, and the magazine can support the books, bringing in not only a consistent revenue, but keeping you out front in your field as well.

To do it right, magazine publishing is less a one-person operation than self-publishing books. There are more hats to wear. You've got submissions coming in that have to be answered, schedules to keep, and most magazines rely on selling advertising or obtaining grants for operating capital. Not to mention carrying on a long term relationship with printers, distributors, and probably a fulfillment house.

A magazine also requires a well thought out commitment to sticking with it until it starts to pay off. That can mean carrying expenses for a year or more until it starts paying for itself. The single biggest problem I've seen with

magazine startups is they put everything into the first issue expecting it to sell when really you end up giving the magazine away for several issues.

My advice is always to work on a someone else's magazine before starting your own. For pay or as an intern, either way you are going to save yourself the time and expense of a hundred mistakes, large and small. You'll have a much better idea what you are getting yourself into, and what you need to do to make your own magazine work.

The kind of magazine you work for isn't as important as just getting your feet wet in the day to day business, though it would naturally be preferable to work on a magazine similar to the one you envision starting up.

There are at least four types of magazines based on audience and funding. The simplest to start and toughest to sell is literary. A very successful literary magazine will have a circulation of a few thousand, but most have a couple hundred. You will be overrun with submissions while fighting an uphill battle for subscribers. The reason: There are just too many literary magazines, and too much variety, for any to build a substantial circulation.

Literary magazines, the ones that can afford promotion and longevity, rely on grants from agencies, corporations, or patrons for funding. They often also sell

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ISSN

When you publish a book, you need to assign it an International Standard Book Number (ISBN) if you want it to be listed in *Books in Print* and show up on a bookstore's computer when someone wants to order a copy. For a magazine, you need an International Standard Serial number (ISSN). ISSNs can be obtained for print, electronic, and online magazines and newsletters. Mine is in the masthead above.

Besides making the magazine easier to find for distributors and bookstores, the ISSN is used by libraries and interlibrary loan systems, the post office for special rates, and by researchers, scholars, abstracters, and librarians to assure accuracy when citing serials.

The Copyright Clearance Center, Inc. (222 Rosewood Dr., Danvers, MA 01923; 978-750-8400; <http://www.copyright.com>) uses ISSNs to monitor royalty payments to publishers for photocopies made from their publications.

The good news is it is much easier to get an ISSN than an ISBN, and you only have to do it once for the life of the magazine. And it is free in the United States.

The Library of Congress has a web site for the US ISSN Center at <http://lcweb.loc.gov/issn/issnhome.html>. There is also an international site at <http://www.issn.org>. You can also write to the Library of Congress, National Serials Program, Washington, DC 20540-4160, or call 202-707-6452. ●

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advertising, publish books, hold contests charging reading fees, and sponsor community events.

The first thing the naïve beginning literary publisher assumes is their writers will become subscribers. Forget it. Since they usually receive payment in the form of contributor copies, and they are sending work off to dozens of magazines at all times, this just doesn't happen very often.

Another kind of magazine publishing that has become popular is the trade magazine. In this case, you build a circulation within a given industry by giving away free subscriptions, then the magazine is paid for purely by advertisers who want to reach the people on your mailing list.

For instance, there is a trade magazine for magazine publishers called *Circulation Management*. Anyone publishing a magazine should get on this mailing list. Call 1-800-775-3777 or e-mail circ@intertec.com to get a subscription. It is a slick magazine with a lot of ads, but very good articles on magazine circulation issues. The magazine is free to anyone involved in magazine circulation. You just fill out a form that tells how large your company is and what your responsibilities are (i.e., the person who makes decisions about buying *CM's* advertisers' products).

At the other end of the spectrum are magazines that rely solely on subscribers. These are by and large newsletters. The production values are minimal, but then the subscribers are paying strictly for information. For a regular magazine to subsist on subscribers alone, the subscription price could not be competitive.

The vast majority of magazines rely on a combination of advertising and subscriptions for

revenue, with a balance set between the going market price for subscriptions versus the amount of advertising subscribers will put up with. And this is where most of the start-up magazines I've heard from fit in.

The ideal mix for a magazine is to write about a product subscribers will also want to buy through advertisements in the magazine. One of my favorite examples is *Chile Pepper*, a magazine published independently in Fort Worth, Texas.

It covers restaurants serving and recipes for cooking spicy foods, and most of the advertisers sell designer hot sauces and other items related to cooking those foods. *Chile Pepper* hits on all the requirements for a successful magazine:

1. A unique subscriber demographic. In this case, people who love exotic and spicy food, the hotter the better. And in their quest for this stuff, they'll order ingredients by mail because this stuff just isn't available at the local grocery.
2. A unique advertiser demographic. The companies that sell these products are usually small mom and pop operations that cannot afford to advertise in general interest magazines. The hot sauces are relatively inexpensive and lend themselves to impulse and gift buying. *Chile Pepper* gives the producers the opportunity to put their ads in front of exactly the people who want to buy unusual, hard to find products like theirs.
3. The magazine is attractive and unusual enough to hold it's own on a newsstand, plus it has appeal for specialty shops that carry the kind of products advertised. There are plenty of opportunities for point of contact sales, which can lead to subscriptions.
4. There isn't much competition in this niche market. The closest competitors in production quality

and content are gourmet magazines which cover a wider variety of foods and so are less focused.

Other ways any magazine or newsletter can make money is through renting their mailing lists, publishing books that either grow out of their content or are compilations of articles from the magazine, and other ancillary products like T-shirts and software.

There are many types of magazines, and there are many ways they can make money, but even more so than in self-publishing a book, this is a serious and unforgiving business. It can be fun, fulfilling, and a money making enterprise, but also demands a lot of work and financial risk.

The most important assets you have in the magazine business are your mailing lists. The number and demographics of your subscribers are what sell advertising and make your lists worth renting. Lists have to be kept clean (free of expired addresses) and, as you grow they need to be audited to qualify for special postal rates and for you to sell advertising. A fulfillment house can handle all that, but then you need to watch over them, too.

There are not a lot of books or resources to find out about magazine publishing, like there are for book publishing. Apprenticeship is really the only way to get hands on experience without putting yourself at risk. Do lots of research on the competition, get someone to teach you the ropes, and have a business plan to get you through the start-up period.

Look at who is advertising and ask the magazine for their ad rates. Make it your business to find out everything you can about them, and use that information to build your own business and marketing plans.

If necessary, start small with a less slick, more information packed

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version of your magazine. Then as time goes on, add the more expensive touches. The nice thing about periodical publishing is it evolves.

A guy I worked with at a big corporation in the 1980's started a little newsletter called *Boardwatch* out of his desk to cover the growing interest in computer billboards. It is now a full color magazine you can pick up at Barnes and Noble, but for years it stayed small as his reputation, resources, subscription list, and ability to attract advertisers grew. Then, when the time was right, he quit his job and he and his family have been living well off the magazine ever since.

The lesson to be taken from him is patience. He was passionate about his subject and built a small, but growing, number of subscribers who were willing to stick with him. As he grew, the computer companies heard about him and took notice. They began sending him equipment and buying advertising.

Check out magazines like yours. Find out what their circulation is. This is available in *Writer's Market* and other directories, and it's published at least once a year in the magazine to comply with postal regulations if they have a second class permit, along with a breakdown of how many copies are sent to paid subscribers, how many are sent out free, how many are sent to newsstands (and how many are returned), and how many are kept for office use or trashed.

I've seen a lot of small press magazines that started up either too grandiose or with a lot of assumptions, but no clear plan. They seldom make it past the first couple issues. There are far too many magazines being published for this to be a business for the timid or faint-hearted. But with planning, research, training, and above all patience, it can be done. ●

E-Zines

There is another kind of magazine that has come along: Online magazines, called e-zines, are a media form are in the development stage. Many are nothing more than a web site that is a magazine in name only (i.e., there are no periodic issues – new material is added to update the site, but not in periodic, standalone installments like we'd expect from a magazine).

Some are online versions of print magazines; some are purely web-based. And some do a good job of serving the function of a magazine, but they are in the minority.

Some e-zines can be read at the web site; some need to be downloaded and viewed or printed from your computer with software like Adobe Acrobat.

Regardless of the format, if you are going to do an online magazine for profit, your revenue will most likely come from banner advertising (the standard source of revenue for web sites). And to get advertisers, you need to be able to identify visitors to your site.

The favored way of doing that is by having visitors register before they can access your site. They don't have to pay, but they do have to register for a password so you can keep track of who they are and how often they visit.

The program saves the data to a log file, which can be used to identify demographics, show advertisers how much traffic your site does and how often people come back. And you can send out automatic e-mail notification to visitors when a new issue is available.

Of course, keeping track of all this information does no good if you don't have an online magazine compelling enough to make visitors want to register for it and bring them back on a regular basis. And by all means, get your own domain name so people can find you. ●

Magazine Publishing Resources on the Web

There isn't nearly as much information about magazine publishing online as there is about book publishing, but here are some sites worth looking into.

The Magazine Publishers of America, at <http://www.magazine.org>, includes the Magazine Handbook, a collection of articles and studies on magazine publishing, circulation and editing, and the American Society of Magazine Editors.

The Periodical Publishers Association (<http://www.ppa.co.uk>) is a British site with information about careers and training, publishing news, and an especially good section on how magazine advertising works at <http://www.ppa.co.uk/adverts>.

The Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC) certifies circulation of over 3,000 magazines around the world. Their site is at <http://www.accessabc.com>.

BPA International (<http://www.bpai.com>) provides independent verification of business magazine circulation and web site traffic.

The Publishing Business Group is a consulting firm for magazine, newsletter, and e-zine publishers. Their site, <http://www.publishingbiz.com>, features articles, books on magazine publishing, and an online forum where you can post questions, find answers, and find out what other publishers have to say.

Publishinghelp.com (<http://www.publishinghelp.com>) is a publishing consultant's site that offers special reports on magazine publishing issues.

The Newsletter Publishers Association is at <http://www.newsletters.org>. They offer numerous services through membership and there is a substantial links page to information about newsletter publishing. ●

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CoffeeCup Software

I don't often recommend software, but I have finally found an HTML editor and related programs for web page building and maintenance that are so good and so inexpensive, it'd be selfish not to let you know about them.

Besides CoffeeCup is a small business in Corpus Christi, Texas. They started as a actual coffee-house that provided internet access with the cappuccino. They were run out of business when the city wanted them to add a parking lot, so they turned the building into a software company instead.

The flagship program is CoffeeCup HTML Editor++. I love this program. It lets you insert ready-made Java, DHTML, and CGI script into your pages without being at all intrusive, which is much more than can be said for MS FrontPage. Everything is automated, but you can do your own code as well. Cost: \$40.

At \$20, their CoffeeCup Image Mapper is a steal. It is the easiest one I've found to use, and like all their programs, it integrates into the HTML editor.

CoffeeCup Style Sheet Maker++ costs \$30 and is the one program I haven't tried.

CoffeeCup Direct FTP will make you wonder why you ever bothered with downloading stuff from the web to edit it. This gives you the capability to edit pages while they are up on the net. Saves time and works like a charm. It is the best \$30 I have ever spent.

There are also Java applet programs and CoffeeCup HTML Express. Visit their site and download anything free for 30 days. You'll love them, and once you register you'll get regular updates. There are also special prices for combinations of software.

CoffeeCup Software, Inc., 801 Elizabeth St., Corpus Christi, TX 78404; <http://www.coffeecup.com>.

Announcements

- **Midatlantic Publishers Association** (Eileen Haavik, President) has a new address: c/o Summit Crossroads Press, 126 Camp Harmison Dr., Berkeley Springs, WV 25411; 800-362-0985, fax 304-258-9282, e-mail SumCross@aol.com.
- **The PMA Publishing University** (<http://www.pma-online.org>), a popular of workshop program for small publishers, will be held April 28-29 at the Los Angeles Marriott Hotel. As in years past, it is scheduled for the two days before the BEA (BookExpo America), which will be at the Los Angeles Convention Center, April 30 to May 2.
- **Protooner** (Joyce Miller, ed.; PO Box 2270, Daly City, CA 94017-2270; 650-755-4827) is a monthly publication for cartoonists, gagwriters, and anyone who enjoys humor. Reviews zines.
- **Read Across America Day** is March 2, 1999. In conjunction with that, Target is sponsoring a chat series with children's authors March 2, 9, 16, and 23 in cooperation with Talk City at <http://www.talkcity.com/educenter>. All chats take place at 1pm on those Tuesday afternoons. March 2 will be Mary Pope Osborne (Magic Tree House Series). March 9, Barbara Park (Junie B. Jones Series). March 16 and 23 will feature Ron Roy (A to Z Mysteries Series). Talk City's EduCenter is an online educational forum dedicated to the learning experiences of students and educators alike. Special activity sheets are available at <http://www.randomhouse.com/teachers>.
- **Alexa** (<http://www.alexa.com>) is a free add-on for Internet Explorer and Netscape that is really worth adding on. It is a little toolbar at the bottom of the screen that gives you stats on the site you are viewing, like traffic and related sites. And I have found some really cool sites through their ads.

- **I apologize** for how long this issue has taken to get out. I started a new job as a technical writer for a software company in November and have also just been made their corporate webmaster. Our dog was diagnosed with Addison's disease over New Year's, my stepson joined the Navy, and Laura and I were sick with the flu and bronchitis for three weeks. We're all fine now, even though Joe is still in boot camp. He claims he's finally learned to make his bed.
- **Bueno Books** (Elisabeth Reid, ed.; PO Box 637, Campo, CA 91906-0637) has some cool new Spanish publications, including Las Mañanitas (Latin America's birthday song) birthday cards, an electronic Spanish/English translator, and a less than half price deal on the Sierra Club's *The Wild Country of Mexico: La Tierra Salvaje do México*. Write for a catalog.
- **ConSeal PC Firewall** (<http://www.signal9.com>). If you have a cable connection to the internet (I am on TCI's @Home), you will need a firewall to keep hackers out. I like this one. It doesn't cost too much and it gives you control over who you let into your computer. There is a free 30 day trial period.

Advertising: *Laughing Bear Newsletter* does not accept classified advertising. However, press releases, review copies, and samples of products can be sent to the editor at the address below. If deemed useful to *LBN* subscribers, they will be mentioned in the newsletter.

Insert ads, in the form of flyers inserted in newsletter mailings are welcome. Send 150 copies of the ad with \$50, and the ad will be mailed with the next issue of the newsletter. There are no deadlines. Contests or any other events or promotions that solicit money in the form of reading or entry fees will not be accepted.

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