



LAUGHING BEAR 116

NEWSLETTER

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P.O. Box 613322, Dallas, TX 75261-3322; 817-858-9515; e-mail: editor@laughingbear.com

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The Surviving Small Press: Newsletters

Lately I've been receiving a lot of messages from people visiting the web site who are starting or taking over a newsletter. Some will be selling subscriptions; some will send their letters out free to clients, customers, or organization or family members. What they all have in common is they don't know where to start.

The first thing to do is realize how newsletters work and how they differ from other periodicals, like newspapers and magazines.

The function of a newsletter is to keep its subscribers informed about a subject that is important to them when they don't have the time or resources to keep track of all the literature and trends themselves. The newsletter is a digest of that information with editorial commentary to make sense of it.

The earliest English language newsletters, in the 17th century, were for merchants and investors. Correspondents at different shipping ports would report to the editor on the cargo of ships entering and leaving their ports. The editor would take that information and write a letter to his subscribers advising them on what to sell or prepare to buy so they could keep a step ahead of the competition.

Because of the timeliness of the information, newsletters were simple and styled to read quickly. That is still the case. As a rule, the fancier the newsletter, the less valuable it is and the less valuable

it is perceived to be. A \$2,000 per year financial newsletter will probably look like a typewritten business letter on office letterhead, while a corporate employee newsletter can be an expensive, 4-color tabloid.

The financial letter publisher can certainly afford to print up a newsletter that could put any company's annual report to shame, but that would send the wrong message to subscribers. The publisher would be perceived to be more interested in looks than content.

Likewise the corporate newsletter is meant to project wealth and stability. The content, while useful, is secondary to the image it projects. It is not so much a "news" letter as an image builder.

Each newsletter format serves a purpose, and if you are starting one up, you need to be aware that such conventions are in place.

You also need to be aware that newsletters are personal and subjective. You are the one who decides what your readers need to know from the information you collect. And your readers count on you to comment on it.

It is this subjectivity and personal voice that sets newsletters apart from newspapers and magazines. Newspapers are by definition objective. Magazines may take a stand one way or the other but are a collection of opinions and points of view. The newsletter, however, has only one point of view – yours.

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Writing Style

Good news for the grammatically challenged – effective newsletter writing breaks the rules.

In a book or magazine article there is room for long, drawn out sentences and paragraphs that stretch out over the pages in symphonious waves. Newsletter writing comes in short, staccato bursts. Just long enough to shove out one thought and make room for the next.

Here are a few guidelines for writing newsletters. Forget them when you write anything else:

1. Write in short sentences, even if that means some are incomplete. Long, run on sentences take longer to read and are more difficult to retain. In this medium, the idea is to communicate quickly. Concisely. And to make sure the reader absorbs the information.
2. Write in short paragraphs, especially if your newsletter is formatted in columns. Long paragraphs that fill entire columns are difficult to read (and look bad). Short paragraphs that provide readers' eyes with a break every couple inches cause less eyestrain and better retention.
3. Write to your readers directly, like I am writing to you. I've tried other voices over the years, but being impersonal just gets in the way when you are trying to get a message across in limited space.
4. Use the newspaper's inverted pyramid format as much as possible in articles. That's where the

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Newsletters *(continued)*

That gives newsletter publishing a different perspective on the role of advertising as a source of revenue as well. Newspapers and magazines can carry advertising because they are perceived as inherently fair and objective.

Newsletters traditionally do not publish ads because everything in the letter, including advertising, implies the editor's condonation. As editor, you take responsibility for everything in your newsletter's pages, whether you are writing for subscribers, group members, or your family.

There are cases, however, where advertising can work. If you are doing a homeowners association newsletter and take ads from local restaurants, there probably wouldn't be a conflict of interest. But the focus is still taken away from the subject at hand.

You can take advertising on your web site. That is a completely different publishing medium than your newsletter. You are allowed more latitude in what you put up there. Likewise, electronic newsletters are really more a function of a web site than newsletters per se.

I take insert ads occasionally if someone wants to send a flyer for their book with the newsletter, but that is really more like a co-op mailing. It is not printed in the newsletter.

My advice to anyone starting a newsletter is to concentrate on your subscribers and what they need from you. Then try to give them more than they expect.

The secret to maintaining enthusiasm for your newsletter, and maintaining your own interest in publishing it, is in discovery of new ways of looking at your subject and keeping on top of the news concerning it.

I've been doing this 23 years this month, and still can't do it in my sleep. ●

Finding Your Sources

If newsletter publishing is all about taking information from a wide variety of sources, then digesting and commenting on it, you'd better have some sources.

At first, before you've made a name for yourself on your subject, gathering information takes footwork. You'll need to read everything you can get your hands on. Build a library of reference materials and subscribe to the trade journals (which are often free, but difficult to find). Then begin identifying the publications, organizations, and people who will be your sources.

Networking is key to obtaining the information you need to publish a cutting edge newsletter. You need to read books and magazines on your subject for sure, but by the time a magazine comes out the information in it is old news. Your subscribers expect you to have a solid knowledge of your field, but also be at the forefront.

The only way to know what's going to happen before it goes public is to be in touch with the leaders of service organizations, consultants, and other people working in the field. And the best way to do that is to send them your newsletter as a professional courtesy.

Once they get to know you through the newsletter, they will start sending you information. It may take months or even years for a source to pay off, but when they do, it is well worth the wait.

Try to get the organizations in your field to exchange newsletters with you. In some cases, you may want to join an organization, but be careful of being influenced too heavily by one source.

I get newsletters from small press organizations all over the country, but I'm not a member of any of them. I have belonged to a few organizations in the past, but at

this point I feel I can be more fair to all of them if I don't belong to any.

Organizations can also be useful in putting you in contact with the people working in your field. Offer a free copy of the newsletter to members of the organization through its newsletter. And send copies to columnists in the organization letter who spark your interest.

It really helps to meet the people involved in your field, so go to conventions and trade shows. Take seminars, workshops, and classes.

Use the internet to track down sources. This is where you can find some of the free trade journals, consultants, and other people writing on your subject. It also helps to have a web site so they can find you.

It is a good idea to join online newsgroups and e-mail lists. If you get stuck for a topic for the next issue, use those sources to see what people in your field are concerned about and how they are addressing those concerns.

Watch for stories about your subject in the broadcast and print news media. Better yet, watch for a lack of stories if there is something going on they should be covering, but haven't picked up on.

Build a list of people who you'll send complimentary subscriptions to. This list should keep changing as new names are added and weak ones are dropped. If you send the newsletter free to everyone who wants it, you'll go broke. But if you are too stingy, the information flow you need to write the letter will dry up.

After you've been doing your newsletter for awhile, you'll find that sources come looking for you. ●

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A Newsletter Success Story

Once upon a time, there was an ex-sailor turned technical writer who wrote a little newsletter about computer bulletin board systems (BBS) and ten years later sold it for roughly \$30 million.

Normally I'd classify this as another high tech fairy story, but I worked with Jack Rickard at Martin Marietta when he started *Boardwatch*, and have loosely followed his story ever since.

When he started out, Jack would write the newsletter in his free time, at lunch or after work, and print the newsletter on a photocopier. He only had a few subscribers for awhile, but gradually he made a name for himself and manufacturers began sending him hardware and software to try out.

Once he began writing about equipment and software that weren't in the stores yet, *Boardwatch* began taking off. (Remember, this was before Windows caught on, when the computer companies were still trying to establish standardized operating systems, a 40 mb hard drive was huge, and home computers cost a fortune).

After leaving Martin Marietta in the late 1980's, he expanded his newsletter into a home-based magazine and began hiring employees. By the time the internet became popular, he had positioned himself to be one of the early gurus of the world wide web.

The magazine had grown to 18 employees, the monthly print run was 125,000, and the company produced four directories and two trade shows a year, when Jack "hit the wall on what a small office could do in the face of hyper-growth". He decided to sell.

Jack sold the magazine to a larger publisher for \$14 million cash and another \$16 million in stock, and as the second largest

stockholder continues to play a key role in the magazine and work the trade shows.

What I like about this story is that Jack didn't start out to make money. He was just doing something he loved in his spare time. But when layoffs loomed, he left Martin Marietta and instead of looking for another job, he expanded his newsletter into a magazine and a full time business.

Most "responsible" people would have given up. After all, he had a wife and (I think) three small daughters to support. But he had the drive to teach himself to build his business from the bottom up and make it work.

But that, of course, isn't enough to explain a one page, photocopied newsletter transforming into a \$30 million magazine in just over 10 years. The key ingredient to Jack's success is Jack.

An article about the sale of *Boardwatch* in *Peak Computing Magazine*, October 16, 1998, gives some insight into Jack's talent as an editor:

"A large part of what makes *Boardwatch* a success is Rickard's ability to sort the wheat from the chaff so far as press releases go, and for his knack for picking out technologies and trends that will more likely impact his readership, such as the internet. 'We have the best track record in the world in predicting what will happen next, most of our readers think that anyway,' Rickard said. 'We give them (subscribers) an edge and a strategic vision.'"

And that's about as good a description of successful newsletter publishing and effective newsletter editing as I've ever come across.

For the complete article on the sale of *Boardwatch* go to <http://peak-computing.com/buscomp/colorado/981016colorado.shtml>. *Boardwatch Magazine* is at <http://boardwatch.internet.com>. •

Writing Style (continued)

main point of the article is made in the first paragraph. The paragraphs that follow then support the main point in decreasing order of importance. This format ensures the reader gets the gist of the article even if they don't read it all. And it makes it easy to trim some inches off the story if you run out of column space.

5. If you do run out of space, try deleting as many the's and that's as you can. They are way overused and can often be deleted without changing any meaning. In fact, the text will often flow more smoothly.

6. Define acronyms the first time you use them. If I say, "It's time to get ready for the ALA", you probably know what I mean. However, if this is the first time I've used "ALA" in an issue, it would be more clear to new readers if I said, "It's time to get ready for the American Library Association (ALA) convention." Once the acronym is defined I can use it by itself from then on.

7. Put content over eloquence. No one is going to complain if you have so much useful information crammed into your pages that you have to cut back on adjectives.

8. Stick to your subject. If you wander off on a tangent and it applies to the subject of the article, make a sidebar or separate article. If it gets off the subject, set it aside for a later issue.

9. Focus. If you find an article is going off into a lot of different directions, it is probably on too broad a subject. Focus on an aspect of it for this issue, and save the rest for later. The newsletter writer's greatest fear is running out of things to say. Keep your focus tight. Your writing will be more interesting and you'll always have something to use in the next issue.

10. If you find yourself stuck when writing an article, try looking at it from a different direction. •

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Taking Credit Cards On Your Web Site

In issue 112, I stated that one way to sell books over the internet if you cannot take credit cards is through affiliate plans. Since then I've found a better way.

CCNow (<http://www.ccnow.com>) lets you take all major credit cards on your site for a flat fee of 9% of sales (8% during November and December). There are no other fees and no startup costs.

There is no sales tax to worry about since CCNow operates out of Delaware. You are in effect selling the books to them as a wholesaler, even though you ship orders directly to the customers.

All you have to do is register with CCNow and then follow the instructions to list your books on your site any way you want and link them to CCNow.

When a customer selects a book, they are sent to CCNow's shopping cart. When that item is added to their order, they are returned to your site to continue shopping. When the customer is finished, CCNow sends them a detailed order confirmation by e-mail. At the same time, they send you a copy of the order.

When you've filled the order, you go back to CCNow site and mark the order as shipped. Then CCNow bills the credit card and posts the amount of the sale (less commission) to your account.

Twice a month you get paid, either by check or direct deposit into your checking account.

CCNow handles all billing disputes and inquiries, and they provide customer service and secure online shopping for your customers.

I signed up with them, and now you can renew your subscription, order gift subscriptions, and soon buy back issues and Laughing Bear books and issues of the magazine (1976-78) online. ●

Announcements

● **TheBookShelf.org** (<http://www.thebookshelf.org>) is a web site where self-published, small press, and non-published authors can market their work. For a nominal one-time fee, authors can display the following information on their book: title, author, author bio, summary, excerpts, reviews, purchase information, and contact information.

● **Dream Network** (H. Roberta Ossana, ed.; PO Box 1026, Moab, UT 84532-1026; <http://www.DreamNetwork.com>; \$22/4 issues) is a magazine of concerning the healing powers of dreams.

● **Traverse Bay Display and Packaging** (4366 Deerwood Dr., Traverse City, MI 49686-3810; <http://www.TBDisplay.com>) has a huge selection of corrugated countertop and freestanding displays for point of sale and exhibiting. They also feature acrylic and plastic displays, graphic and structural design, and fulfillment supplies.

● **Poetry Bone** (Howard Austerlitz, pub.; 12 Skylark Ln., Stony Brook, NY 11790), a biannual literary magazine, has just come out with its third issue. Issue 3 is a double issue featuring S. Perchick, Karen R. Porter, and more than 40 other poets. Issue 4, which is in the planning stages, will feature work by Robert Bly. They seek poetry of the highest quality with no restrictions on form or style. Length is limited to one page, and no more than three poems should be sent per submission.

● **Bathtub Gin** (Christopher Harter, co-ed.; P.O. Box 2392, Bloomington, IN 47402; <http://www.bluemarble.net/~charter/btgin.htm>; \$6/single issue, \$10/2 issues) is a literary magazine, but their next issue will be devoted to interviews, essays, discussions, rants and raves concerning small press and self-publishing. See their web site for Q&A topics.

● **National Publisher Freedom Awards** (American Self-Publisher Association, P.O. Box 232233, Sacramento, CA 95823; <http://www.BooksAmerica.com/AmericanSelfPublisher/awards.html>) recognizes excellence in publishing as well as the first Amendment to the Constitution. For books published during 1999, the deadline is Jan. 5, 2000.

● **BookTech 1999 West Conference and Expo** (BookTech the Magazine, 401 N. Broad St., Philadelphia, PA 19108; <http://www.booktechexpo.com>) will take place December 13-15 at the Hyatt Regency in San Francisco. There will be workshops on all aspects of publishing, from electronic books to book design.

● **Web Cards** (<http://www.printing.com>) are full color postcards of your home page. I'm using them for correspondence, renewals, and sending them out with sample newsletters.

● **Ebb and Flow** (Pamela L. Sheffield, ed.; Blue Rock Publishing, PO Box 5246, Niceville, FL 32578; \$8/4 issues) is a quarterly journal of essays and poetry on health, gardening, food, animals, eco-politics, and new sciences.

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 200 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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