



LAUGHING BEAR 131 NEWSLETTER

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The Surviving Small Press: Taking Over a Newsletter

A situation that comes up often in messages from the web site is that someone has been assigned or volunteered to take over an existing newsletter, or they have acquired one, and they don't have any idea where to start.

The nice thing is, to use a cooking analogy, you don't have to start from scratch. It's like cooking from a recipe. You (should) already know what the newsletter looks like – how many pages it has, how many illustrations, if any, and approximately how many articles you're going to have to write and what to write about. With an existing newsletter, the format is in place. You just have to fill it.

The first thing to do is gather all the existing files, electronic and otherwise, you can find. Get all the back issues. And above all, make sure you have all the mailing lists of subscribers, media, sources, and suppliers. Then, make sure you have all the software you'll need to use those files. If you have access to the previous editor's notebooks and records, so much the better. Gather everything you can.

An old issue of the newsletter can be used as a template for your first issue. Simply delete the text and any illustrations, and replace them with your own. You'll find that in most software programs, formatted text like columns are done using text boxes that can be linked so the text flows from box to

box. Once you get a feel for this it's pretty easy to manipulate them, but when you are deleting the old text just be sure not to delete the boxes with it.

If the old editor is still around, they may be willing to help you by describing their routine for getting an issue out, making introductions to sources, suggesting suppliers, and basically showing you the ropes. Find out their quirks, theories, ambitions, and reasons for doing the newsletter as they did.

The key to taking over a newsletter is to hit the ground running. You're going to want to make the transition from the old editor to you as seamless as possible. You may have new ideas about format and content, but to start out keep doing the newsletter the way it is.

Let your own personality take over gradually. But first, you need to find out what your readers already like about the newsletter. It is a huge mistake to assume you know what's best for your readers and then change everything. The only thing that can result from that is resentment and defection.

You need to study the old regime's newsletter. If readers have sent in letters, treat them like gold. Find out what the readers had to say and work from there. Also, take note of what the readers didn't write in about. Those are the weak points.

Don't be afraid to ask the readers what they think. Take a

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September 11th

It has taken me a long time to get this issue out. It was going slow before September 11th, but the end was in sight. I had surgery earlier this summer and spent a long time recovering. It wasn't anything serious, but still it slowed me down.

When the attacks took place, however, it just became difficult to do anything. Laura, my wife, and I took part in the America: Tribute to Heroes telethon September 21st manning phones at Verizon's call center in Dallas. It helped considerably to talk to the people calling in with pledges, and we didn't want to leave the phones when they closed down at 1:00 am.

Other than that, like everyone else, I obsessively watched the news, talked to family and friends, and waited for the next shoe to fall.

I am in the travel business in that the company I work for provides software and ticketing fulfillment for airlines and agencies. We handle 25% of all the tickets booked on the internet, and the royalties from those tickets provide a lot of our revenue. Our company took a big hit when sales dropped to near zero, and now we're facing layoffs of 10% of our people next week, with more to come if things don't get better.

My stepson, Joseph, is in the Navy, stationed in Naples, Italy. Fortunately he lives off base and is probably as safe, or safer, there than we are at home.

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Taking Over a Newsletter *(continued)*

poll. Ask them what they like and need, and what features of the newsletter they have found useful. Make them a part of the transition. Let them know you are open to their suggestions.

When you are established with your newsletter, the only time you'll hear from readers for the most part is when you have done something to upset them. This is your one chance to really find out what they enjoy and find most useful about the newsletter.

If you are doing a company or organization newsletter, try to figure out which features the powers that be are most fond of. They will have their pet features and causes, and those cannot be eliminated without you being eliminated with them. Try to come up with some new ideas that will make the newsletter more productive to your management and more valuable to your readers.

Taking over a newsletter involves a serious consideration of politics. While the newsletter may be in your hands, it carries with it certain responsibilities and commitments that cannot be ignored. In a very real sense, the newsletter has a life of its own.

Research. Read all the newsletter back issues you can get your hands on, then go further. You are going to need to be an expert on your subject, whatever it may be. Use the library, the internet, and anybody who knows anything. You'd better know about what you're supposed to be talking about before you write and publish it.

I've seen newsletters taken over in the past. Usually it's for the wrong reason. The company purchasing it sees the newsletter as a money maker. Then the publication gets slicked up to look like whatever is the current trend or dilutes the content with whatever is

trendy for generic newsletters. The personality of the newsletter is lost, but that often is the heart of it.

It isn't always possible, but try to get the old editor to stay on, if only in a small way, through the transition. Or get them to offer some sort of transitional message, explaining the change. Even if you are doing an organization newsletter where you have a captive audience, your life will be much less stressful if you can explain to the readers that the change didn't come about because the previous editor was fired or perceived by management to be incompetent.

People do not like to hear that someone they feel they know was relieved of a duty or lost their job. They'll stubbornly stand up for the person even if they didn't like them. So don't lay blame – it'll just boomerang back on you.

Instead, emphasize, in the newsletter and press releases, that the previous editor did a lot to build the newsletter and now they've taken it as far as they could and they are going on to better things. They've passed on the baton to you and you are going to try to make them proud. That may or not be the case, but at least you aren't seen as some upstart who stole their job.

This may seem like a little thing if you are taking over the newsletter for the Catholic church bulletin in a small Texas town, and 95% of the parishioners may never notice, but I guarantee you the other 4% will be after your head if you don't handle the transition with sensitivity and grace. The last 1% will hate you no matter what until someone takes over your position; then they will remember you fondly and hate the next person.

Many newsletters these days have a web site associated with them, and that is usually the editor's responsibility as well. The web site can be a very valuable tool for you. You can post back issues

instead of having to maintain copies for people who ask for them, and it can be used to promote the letter. Don't be afraid of the web. You can always bring in an intern to maintain the site. Beginning webmasters are often willing to work on a site for free just to get the experience. Doing it yourself is not all that hard, but it can be time consuming if you are already burdened with getting the printed newsletter on its feet.

Most of all, when you are taking over a newsletter take a deep breath, let it out, and just do it. You can make any changes you want, but don't hurry them. Find your own pace. You'd got plenty of time to get comfortable with the job. Just make your deadlines – you can always do better in the next issue. ●

Newsletter Resources

There are plenty of web sites dedicated to newsletter publishing. Unfortunately most of them want to do your newsletter for you, but here are some helpful sites to check out, and a couple of outstanding print resources.

- The Newsletter and Electronic Publishers Association is at <http://www.newsletters.org>.
- <http://www.newsletter-tips.com> is a site with lots of useful tips and trivia on newsletters.
- <http://publishing.about.com/cs/newsletters> is a part of About.com. They have archived dozens of articles and have links to everything you could ever want to know about newsletter publishing.
- *Publishing Newsletters* by Howard Penn Hudson is the best book on newsletters I have ever found. I'll be reviewing the latest edition in the next issue. The web site is <http://www.newsletter-clearinghse.com>.
- *Newsletter on Newsletters* is a wonderful newsletter and I'll review it next time, too. ●

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Moving on from a Newsletter

There can be any number of reasons for bringing a newsletter to an end. You may have run out of money, lost subscribers, taken another job, or just decided you've done it long enough and want to try something new. But how you go about ending the publication can affect your options in the future.

Too often a newsletter will simply disappear with no explanation. That leaves its subscribers and media champions feeling abandoned and confused. It will also make it very difficult for the editor and/or publisher to ever start up another publication again.

It is no better idea to burn bridges in publishing than it is in anywhere else in the job market. Hopefully you would never just walk out on a regular job without so much as a good-bye. It's that much worse when you've expended considerable energy building good will for a publication. Yet, it happens all the time.

You seldom hear about them since newsletters usually keep a lower profile than magazines, but the people who read and subscribe know and don't forget. In fact it can be worse for a newsletter than a magazine, since newsletters are personal. It's me talking to you about something you're interested in, not a team of staff writers and freelancers trying to catch your attention while you're waiting in line to buy groceries.

Factsheet Five is a good example, though it was technically a magazine. Still, it was/is (the last I heard from them) similar because it was very reliant on its publisher/editor's knowledge and whims, and it served a niche that commercial magazines have never been able to satisfy.

Factsheet Five was a phenomenon of the 1980's. When the home PC became common, the

Gen-X'ers discovered that anyone could put out a personal magazine for practically nothing but postage. *FS5* documented that era with a monthly magazine that reviewed, at its peak, over 1,500 of those little personal zines in each issue. It was an outstanding feat, and a huge success – but one the publisher couldn't keep pace with for long.

Subsequently the frequency dropped from monthly to quarterly and then irregularly. The magazine changed hands several times, sometimes with a burst of success. But ultimately, the internet took over. There still personal zines being published, but the interest has waned. Several months ago, I heard the *Factsheet Five* was starting up again. The next I heard a different owner was going to try, as you can see in the Announcements section of this issue.

In the meantime, subscribers just know that it tends to change hands without a new owner putting out a single issue. Why would they want to subscribe? Why would an advertiser invest? *FS5* will be stagnant until someone takes over who understands that they are going to have to put out quality issues regularly with no income until they can build respect for the magazine again, and that may well take two or three years. Granted, some of the owners of *FS5* announced beforehand that they were quitting, but not until the bitter end.

A newsletter that is having a bad transition is our church bulletin. It may not seem like much, but it has a circulation larger than most newsletters (we have 15,000 parishioners) and a web site with the current bulletin posted as well.

Two weeks ago the previous editor was laid off and, although she was in the office for another week, she wasn't allowed to help with the bulletin.

The powers that be, in this case some pretty powerful powers,

wanted the new editor to do it herself, and the result was a lot of blank space and nothing was posted to the web site – which, of course, lead to gossip, suppositions, and un-Christian ill will.

An example of doing it right is *Boardwatch*, the former newsletter I wrote about in issue 116. The newsletter started very small, grew into a magazine, and was ultimately sold to a major publishing corporation. The editor/founder was kept on for awhile, creating a comfortable transition for subscribers.

For those publishers, the results are similar to those of their publications. Once you leave subscribers and advertisers in the lurch, you will have to win back their trust if you ever want to publish a periodical again. For Jack Rickard of *Boardwatch*, however, he may never want to publish anything again, but if he does, it will be much easier than the first time. He did his best to do right by his subscribers.

What I have been leading up to with all this is that this newsletter will be coming to an end with issue 150. That's about two years away, but it's time to let you know. I have subscriptions in place through issue 148. Any new subscriptions or renewals that would extend past 150 will be prorated to stop then.

I intend to keep the web site going, eventually posting everything Laughing Bear has published and adding more articles and information at my own pace. I've been doing this over 25 years and would like to have the time to do other things. I'd like to gather all this information into a book, write mystery novels and stories, concentrate more on my career as a webmaster and programmer, and have more time for my family.

Anyway, now is not the time to say good-bye – that's a couple years away. I'm just giving you notice in advance. ●

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September 11th (continued)

I've received a lot of e-mail from people with opinions on what we should do, from nuking the entire Middle East to protesting any aggressive solution. Personally, I believe in the way our government is handling the situation and I believe this is one of those times we have to have faith in the people we've elected to lead us, whether they are who we voted for or not.

There is a banner ad on the Laughing Bear home page at <http://www.laughingbear.com> that you can click to go to a site where you can donate to several different charities. It was heartening to hear when I went to give blood that the Red Cross was so overwhelmed with donations you have to make an appointment to donate. I have never heard of that happening.

When I was taking calls for the big telethon September 21st I got a call from a woman who had only \$4.38 in her checking account, but she wanted to donate \$4.00 with her debit card. Another woman, 95 years old, called Laura. She didn't have anything to give, but just wanted to talk. Those people were just as important as the ones who gave \$100 because they felt the pain in their hearts and reached out. I got donations from people that night who were out of work, or were in the military and waiting to be called up, or were facing hard times themselves.

It is devastating that a single attack could cost thousands of lives, tens of thousands of jobs, and jolt our economy, but the strength that has been shown in our response in coming together has been much more powerful.

We are in a different world now, but it's not necessarily a worse one. For the first time in ages we are unified and helping one another. If we can stay that way through this and once it is over, this will be a better world. ●

Announcements

● **Factsheet Five** (PO Box 4660, Arlington, VA 22204; <http://www.factsheet5.com>) is back again. A new editorial collective has taken over and hope to have the first issue out by the end of the year. Review copies can be sent to the address above. Although *FS5* has been on hiatus the past three years, active subscriptions will be honored.

● **Favorite Haunts** (100 Trade Centre Dr., Ste 204, Champaign, IL 61820; <http://www.favoritehaunts.com>; \$19.95/4 issues) is a quarterly travel magazine with a twist. All its romantic destinations are reportedly haunted. The full-color magazine covers sites including Hollywood, Chicago, Gettysburg, and more. They also have *Favorite Haunts' Spirited Travel Guide* available for \$5.95 + \$2.00 p&h.

● **Writerscape.com** (<http://www.writerscape.com>) is a web site where writers can make their work available to publishers and agents.

● **National Publishing Conference and Book Industry Trade Show** (Publishers Association of the West, PO Box 3759, Boulder, CO 80307; <http://www.pubwest.org>) will be held November 8-10, 2001 in Snowbird, Utah.

● **BookExpo America** (800-840-5614; <http://bookexpo.reedexpo.com>) will be held May 3-5, 2002 in New York City. This is the largest book fair in America.

● **Murderous Signs** (Grant Wilkins, ed.; PO Box 53106, Ottawa, ON, K1N 1C5 Canada) is a new literary magazine. Issue #3 has a very good article on the adventure of starting a previous small literary magazine and their unfortunate experiences with the Canadian Magazine Publishers Association (CMPA). *Murderous Signs* is looking for poetry, essays, commentaries, fiction and articles, and pays on acceptance.

● **Black Bear Review** (Ron Zetlemoyer, ed.; 1916 Lincoln St., Croydon, PA 19021-8026; <http://www.home.earthlink.net/~bbreview>) is holding their annual "Poems for Social Concern" poetry contest. See their web site or contact them for details.

● **Fragments** (Fragments, PO Box 28253, Santa Ana, CA 92799), a new literary magazine, published its second issue this summer.

● **Benjamin Franklin Awards** (Publishers Marketing Association, 627 Aviation Way, Manhattan Beach, CA 90266; <http://www.pma-online.org>) is the most respected awards program for independent publishers. Deadline for books published July 1 to December 31, 2001 is December 31, 2001.

● **Rapid Result Referrals** (Centre Publishing, Croft House, Clapton, Midsomer Norton, Bath BA3 4EB, England) is a book on marketing by Roy Sheppard. To promote his book, he came up with the interesting idea of including a form with his books asking the reader to review the book and send the form on to their friends and associates. He's offering the form for free at <http://www.royspeaks.com/sellmore.htm>.

Advertising: Insert ads, in the form of flyers to be 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. Contest and other events or promotions that solicit money in the form of reading or other entry fees will not be accepted.

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