

# Is a Print Magazine Right for You?

## 6 questions to consider before embarking

**Producing a magazine** is work, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise – whether it's semi-annual, quarterly or monthly, print or digital. So, whether you already produce a print one and are considering going all digital, or if you are thinking about incorporating one into your communications program for the first time, you might want to go through the following check list before making your final decision.

### 1. What type of information do your members want?

Before you know whether a magazine – print or otherwise – is right for your members, you must ask what type of information they expect and want. Are they more interested in hard news, legislative topics and the latest research? Or do they prefer a lighter read with feature stories on trends/best practices, keeping up with “who's who” in the industry and accessing a calendar of events?

Also, how much time do they generally spend keeping up on trade news – 30 minutes a day, an hour a week or more? Do they read competitive publications? If so, which ones? At this early stage, it is also a good idea to gauge how members feel about an advertising-supported publication. We find most members look favorably upon those companies that support the association by contributing to industry publications either through advertising or editorial. But this is something you'll want to know before deciding whether a magazine is a good choice for delivering your message.

### 2. What are the goals of the association?

Equally important to understanding what your members want is analyzing the over-arching goals and objectives of the organization, and determining how a magazine can help you achieve them.

*Most trade and professional associations have similar goals:*

- **Lobbying and legislative agendas**
- **Membership development and retention**
- **Community PR**
- **Connecting fellow members to create a cohesive community**
- **Driving revenue when they can**
- **Maintaining an environmentally friendly or “green” policy.**

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When you peel away the big picture you are left to figure out how to best accomplish all of these things. Because associations are truly the leading voices of the industries they serve, the power the association magazine holds in comparison to a regular for-profit publication is not to be taken lightly. But in order to effectively compete for the industry's attention, your magazine had better stand on par with the best of the best. So, what do you get in return for providing members with a strategically planned, well-designed and content-rich magazine?

The answer is you get a lot. In particular, you reinforce your position as the go-to source for industry news, as the place to turn for networking information and for maintaining a presence in the business community, and as an association's flagship communication – the magazine can help secure your standing as the leading expert in your field, which can help retain existing members as well as drive new ones.

But what about that “green” thing? Several factors go into the printing process, and those who “man the presses” are more keenly aware than anyone of the power they have to impact the environment. From choosing the right paper and ink to deciding to reuse and recycle press rags and plates, “print” does not have to be dirty word. Of course, this is also where digital comes back into focus. Some associations truly passionate about this cause may decide to ask members if they prefer to only receive digital. There may be a hidden cost – as explained in step 2 – but you have to make the decision that is right for your organization.

### 3. Time, money and resources... can you afford it?

As I said in the beginning, magazines are a lot of work. Juggling a project of this nature tends to be a struggle for small staffs – and while larger staffs, or staffs with a dedicated communications group, may be better equipped to handle the details, even then it can become a question of priorities.

Maybe you want to think about outsourcing? But, remember, the goal here is to create a flagship communication piece that reflects and builds your brand. So simply handing it over to an outside supplier that may or may not understand your brand or the industry that you serve could thwart your impending success. This probably means that you or your staff will want to remain reasonably involved, at least on the editorial side of things.

When it comes to printing and mailing costs, this is where most budgets feel the squeeze. There is a reason digital magazines are highly desirable, and although we are strong believers in print and digital working hand-in-hand, it's OK to get a little creative. If going with a special “digital only” edition of the magazine means you can then afford to produce three print/digital combo issues a year... then it's an idea worth consideration.

After weighing the overall plus and minus of in-house vs. outsource, you may still find the out-of-pocket costs are higher than originally anticipated. To help relieve some financial burden, you decide to sell advertising. Because you took the time to ask members in step 1 how they feel about advertising-supported publications, you can make an informed decision suited to your membership. But now you need someone to focus on this. Of course this too can be handled by a third party, but some associations like to maintain the one-on-one contact with potential advertisers. Whichever you decide, this decision can dramatically affect whether your magazine is a cost or profit center.

#### 4. Will your supplier/associate members support it?

Although driving revenue with your magazine doesn't have to be a goal, most welcome the opportunity to generate non-dues revenue whenever possible. Even if you have already determined your regular members welcome an advertiser-supported publication, there are a few more questions that must be answered to decide if it will work.

- **Will you deliver the right audience for your advertisers? Decision-makers and influencers are who advertisers love to reach. If your magazine is likely to be read by mostly lower-level staff, you might have a problem meeting advertising goals you have set.**
- **What will the frequency be? Monthly magazines are the norm in the consumer world and perhaps in some larger national or international associations, but they are far less common in association media overall. Quarterlies, semi-annuals or even annuals tend to be a more manageable undertaking.**
- **What is the promotion plan? Will you cross-promote the magazine in other online communications and on the Web site? What about including a free copy in membership recruitment mailings? Will you be sure to print enough copies to hand out at trade shows?**
- **Can you make it easy by bundling the cost of advertising in your magazine with other communications you produce online or in-person? The better deal an advertiser can get, the more success you are likely to have in securing their dollars now and in the future.**

#### 5. Which format – print vs. digital?

After you find out what your members want to know, then it's time for the \$64,000 question: Should you go the traditional route with print, or are your members progressive enough to embrace all digital? Although many want there to be a definitive "right" or "wrong" answer to this question, it's not quite that simple. The reality is that the two mediums work together. When we conduct reader surveys for clients with both a print and a digital edition of their magazine, one of our goals is to understand whether they find value in both versions.

Yes, traditional print is visually appealing, portable, easy to access and favored by those who prefer the touch and feel of a high-quality magazine. As an added bonus, the advertising appeal is great. Once you have a reader's attention, there is less of a chance of losing it to "flipping," "surfing," etc. And of course, last but not least, the traditional magazine is a familiar, proven entity people are comfortable with.

On the other hand, since most of us spend work lives on computers, it only seems logical that we would want to receive industry news in this way as well. Digital is quick, convenient, environmentally friendly and certainly cost-effective. Not only is there savings from postage and printing, but your reach can be greater when you go digital – assuming you have the e-mail addresses or other distribution methods to support that. And let's not forget the "cool" factor. Although e-magazines have been around a few years, it is still a technology that continues to evolve, creating a perception that "early adoption" is still possible.

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We find the most successful associations rely on both mediums to reinforce content and cross-promote. If you look at the most successful consumer media brands, they don't rely on one medium to do it all. I like to use Oprah and her multimedia empire as an example. Of course she has the broadcast brands, but she also has Oprah.com, the O Insider e-newsletter, an Oprah Twitter feed and of course *O Magazine*. Tune in to any one of these media and you'll find content has been repurposed and re-positioned to fit each unique audience, because the queen of consumer media knows integration and cross-promotion are keys to success.

*O Magazine* is available in print and on the Web, and though the Web version is not an exact replica of the print (i.e., an e-magazine or digital edition) the magazine micro site serves the same purpose – to provide the reader with a good portion of content that reinforces what is available in print, while cross-promoting the print version and driving traffic between the two.

### 6. How will you measure its effectiveness?

There are several options for measuring effectiveness. Starting with a small group like your customer advisory council makes good sense. Moving on to a readership survey is probably the next best step. Although focus groups could be utilized – and in some instances probably should be – these can get rather pricy.

With the readership survey, make sure you keep it fairly short – 12 to 15 questions have always served us well. While I wouldn't discourage anyone from sending out a survey via direct mail – as long as you also include a proper incentive – I prefer online surveys because, frankly, they are so quick and easy. You just want to make sure you get enough responses to reflect a good sample of the population.

If you don't have resources and/or inclination to design and build your online survey in-house, a user-friendly and cost effective alternative is a site like Survey Monkey ([www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)). Once the questions are complete, using e-mail to deliver to members is the most obvious method. However, if you are already using social media to communicate with your members, then Facebook, Twitter or LinkedIn can also be used to share the online link with members.

Probably one of the best ways to know if your magazine is a hit? Your advertising budget. If advertisers are buying space each issue and your expectations are being met or exceeded... this is probably a good indication you are doing something right.

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