

Problem and Opportunity:

Private club newsletters are expensive to produce, time consuming to write and rarely if ever read. It's clear, even to those who labor away at creating these newsletters, that the Board, Management and Membership aren't getting much in exchange for the hours and dollars invested. More often than not, the expectations of the creators fall short of results.

Clubs feel compelled to have a monthly newsletter because that's what "good clubs" are supposed to do. Done correctly, newsletters can be a valuable tool for the manager and the board. They can engage, entertain and inform the members. They can "enfranchise" members and staff by giving them a voice within the community. Complaints can be heard, praise can be given, ideas can be exchanged.

Studies show, however, that members don't read newsletters very closely, if at all. Research suggests that 80% of newsletters written are never read by the members whose dues are used to have them printed. Why so?

Most newsletters aren't read because they're boring. Articles are written out of a sense of duty by people who'd rather be golfing. They feel obligated to write them and their reluctance shows. Ever say "oh no, ugh, ick, not another President's Column to dig my way through?" More photographs of the Golf Chairman giving trophies to the twenty two winners, runners up and also ran's of the last member-guest tournament. More clubhouse manager columns urging you to sign up for the next spring dinner dance that no one really wants to attend?

Most newsletters are written to be chirpy, light and fluffy, easy on the brain and easy to digest. It seems that most editors believe in the upbeat, the non controversial and the inconsequential. Photographs of the Easter egg hunt. Presidents commenting on the arrival of spring. Seems like the editors prefer a publication that's as far removed from the messiness of "the real world" as possible.

For those very reasons---which were intended by the writers to capture and to engage---most newsletters are never read by their target communities. People know about the messiness of life ---controversy, rumors, scandals, slander and an uplifting story or two which dramatize the delicious nastiness that underpins and cements communities of people together. A contrarian newsletter would acknowledge that people like spice in their food, spice in their lives, spice in their leisure reading. Words that aren't read are wasted paper. What members really want is a whiff of the world they know and love. *To inform you need to engage, and before you can engage you need to entertain.* The contrarian newsletter needs to provide "substantive entertainment" that captures the broadest possible spectrum of the member community.

Here's what you can do to make it a lot more fun to write and a lot more entertaining to read.

The Contrarian Newsletter:

If you're going to write, edit, endorse, guide or finance a club newsletter, then I recommend you cleanse your mind of any preconceptions you might have about "the good" and consider an alternative newsletter. Build your own prototype using elements from the following template, then drop it on your members. Give them no advance warning, don't apologize and don't explain. Become the "agent provocateur" and stimulate a little controversy. If you achieve that, consider their dialogue victory number one.

The following are a few of the principles you might use in generating your own contrarian newsletter. Accept that the first editions will be prototypes. Don't get your ego caught up in the product since it's

going to change, perhaps dramatically, over the course of the coming year. Remember that these ideas can be addressed individually or collectively. They're cheap. They're easier than what you're doing and they'll be a fun alternative to the drudgery that often accompanies the writing process.

Choose someone to write it who knows how to write, has the low-down on operations and policies, loves the club business and plans to hang around for a very long time: The obvious "editor-of-choice" is the General Manager. The G.M. is paid to perform, sits on all the committees, listens to the members ad nauseum and has a vested interest in having an informed and engaged membership. Make sure you hire a manager who can write and insist that they know how to research a story. As an alternative, enlist the help of a past president or committee chair who has the same talents, insights and enthusiasms. Get someone who currently is or has recently been "in the loop."

Get some practice by writing a weekly board update: The manager should be writing a Board Update for the Directors and senior management each week that describes and details doings at the club, the names of the people who do it and why they did whatever was done. Facts as well as commentary should be offered. This not only gives the editor---and I firmly believe that the manager should be the editor-in-chief and lead writer for the monthly newsletter---practice in writing, but it connects them with all the issues that arise within the club community. The manager should be the hunter-gatherer-digester of information and the weekly newsletter will let him or her develop those talents. Absent the manager, have that other newsletter editor receive the Board Update, thereby arming them with the issues they'll need to write an "insider newsletter."

Get rid of the photos: Photos are usually less entertaining than editors think they are. They tend to be exclusionary---if you're in the photo they're great and if you're not they dramatize that you're not. Anyone not in the photograph thinks it's narrow and boring. Besides which, they're expensive to reproduce. The cost-benefit equation suggests their elimination.

Print it in-house on cheapo paper: Getting your newsletter read has very little to do with the paper it's printed on. Given the quality of "off the shelf" word processing programs, the amateur can quickly become competent at formatting and printing the newsletter. Decent paper can be purchased at a reasonable price to run through your in-house photocopier. That, combined with a professional look from the word processor, and---presto---you have a high end document that can be printed quickly and cheaply. Note that this only works if you've agreed to ditch the photos.

Give them "Meat"---they understand far more than you think they do: Members are members because they've done what they do well. They've got the big bucks to buy and maintain their membership. These are bright, well educated people who can process information and ideas quickly. Give them detailed information on club operations, board concerns, issues confronting the club community in the coming months and years. The old "mushroom axiom"---keep them in the dark and feed them manure---has no place in the writing of the contrarian newsletter.

Put a controversial article on the front page: You need a "grabber" on the front page if you want people to read the newsletter. Make the front page story a big issue---**Dues to Be Raised Forty Percent in the Coming Month!!! Member Suspended for Sexual Harassment of Blue Haired Octogenarian!!! Major Renovation Planned During Member-Guest Golf Tourney!!!** That type of thing will grab member attention and break through the clutter of bills, magazines and announcements they receive in the mail every day.

Include a President's Suggestion Box: People want to feel “enfranchised,” that their voices will be heard and that action will be taken. Put a “President’s Suggestion Box” on the front desk and encourage people to drop in their ideas. Publish those ideas anonymously, eliminating only those which are completely stupid or insulting. Make sure that they’re answered in a reasoned and truthful way. This will become the most popular section in your contrarian newsletter because people love to see their ideas in print, they love to stir things up, they want the larger community to hear them and the larger community wants to be amused by the inane, the foolish and the provocative. More members will be “seen” this way than in photos and the ones who are published will proudly show others that they’ve been published even though the suggestion they’ve pointed to was published anonymously.

Print every printable letter sent to the editor or the board---anonymously: You want to encourage the free exchange of ideas, regardless of how controversial or uncomfortable those ideas might be on the surface. Boards and managers should actively solicit correspondence from the membership. Let the members know that the larger community wants to hear the good, the bad and the “should do’s.” Print them. But print them anonymously and then answer them clearly, directly and in a reasoned and thoughtful way. That way you avoid “smoldering controversies”---grumblings that brew and fester, that undermine authority and poison relationships. Debate the big issues openly.

Do individual articles about important stuff and avoid “President Columns” or “Manager Columns”: Presidents write meaty columns, but people struggle to read through them. If the issues are good ones, write an article about each, make the headlines clear and bold, let the members pick and choose those they want to read. Don’t have the big issues lost in a page-long column that appears to be the droning of “another member.” Besides, most presidents find writing a column each month a struggle at best, a burden at worst. If they like to write or if they’re particularly concerned about a given subject, have them write the articles and put their byline at the top. The President will be recognized as the author and their concern or enthusiasm for a particular subject will be clearly identified.

Eliminate advertising in the newsletter: Promotions need to be created for club events. Some promotions appeal to people while others do not. The newsletter, once read, is usually thrown out and the advertising for the summer camp is tossed into the garbage along with the President’s Column. Help people retain and manipulate advertising by adding inserts to the newsletter---one piece of paper for each of the events being generated. The family can quickly leaf through the fliers saving those they want to attend and tossing the rest. Making them cut and paste from the newsletter is more time consuming, frustrating and certainly less effective. Fliers can be sent out in the off months when the newsletter’s not being printed. People can still get the promotions as promotions and not as a newsletter. If you need to fill empty space in the newsletter, by all means include your most important promotions as “filler.” But never, ever, ever put advertising on the front page! It simply tells members that there’s nothing of substance in the remainder of the newsletter---why else would the cover page be filled with “filler?”

Hide some numbers and give away some prizes: People like “freebies,” and it’s often the case that affluence generates an even greater enthusiasm for freebies. Hide a member number in the text each month and give something special---a couple of seashore dinners with cocktails and a bottle of house wine---to the finder. You’ll be amazed by the number of people who’ll tell you their name’s never been published ***having looked for it every month for the last three years.*** That they’re looking is the whole point of the exercise!

Give away “rewards” to those who find typos: Typos are inevitable, even with three different readers checking for spelling and syntax before final publication. Give anyone who finds one of these a free drink.

Great for two way communications---they contact you about their find, you write them a note offering congratulations and a free drink for their editorial efforts. Amazing how much goodwill you'll create. And I assure you that you'll not need to plant the typos to get a response---the typos will simply appear no matter how much you try to avoid them!

Announce every birth, death, engagement and wedding. Leave out the divorces: In every culture three big events stand out---birth, marriage and death. Here in California, divorce is number four but a little controversial for the social page. Make a big deal about announcing each in a "Passages" or "People" type of column.

Develop long term editors who critique it for form and content: Develop some non-Board / non-Committee members who'll read the Contrarian Newsletter each month before mailing. List them as "Readers at Large" and give them a couple of free dinners for the effort. Keep them on staff for years. I guarantee that they'll evolve from typo checkers to readers to critics of form and content. They're invaluable to you because they're essentially "Joe Member" and can give you the "outside the power circle" perspective you need to make a really good newsletter.

Have your president read it before the Board gets to see it: The President represents the club to most of the members. That person need to buy into the style, the variety of articles and the slant within each of your Contrarian Newsletters since they'll be defending it to the community once published. Give them a chance to critique and to edit the issue before releasing it to the Board for review and comment. Listen to the President's feedback, be prepared to defend your editing decisions and alter your thinking if their logic warrants your doing so.

Make Sure that the board reads and comments on the newsletter before publication: The collective wisdom of the Board should be brought to bear on the Contrarian Newsletter before publication. Listen to their comments, add articles if need be, adjust others if tweaking is suggested. Let them know that the newsletter is their voice to the general membership and that the board's thinking needs to be reflected in what's published. The Contrarian Newsletter is a powerful public relations tool and is a critical part of the "influence package" available to the Board. Let their thoughts be heard.

Don't publish it monthly if there's too little to publish: Don't worry about publishing the newsletter monthly. Many times there's too little to say and too many pages to fill. Let it rest. Send out your monthly mailers---advertising definitely is needed each month---but avoid "newsletter blackmail" and the compulsion to send something, anything, regardless of need.

The Contrarian Newsletter---Start Now!!!:

The Contrarian Newsletter is based on a communications philosophy---the need to create an efficient market of ideas. Issues should be substantive and readable. Controversies should be fully disclosed. The thinking of the Board, its committees and the management team should be revealed. The Contrarian

Newsletter assumes that the readers are clever, concerned, thoughtful and interested in stories that dramatize significant issues. And “success” requires that the writers are deeply involved in the issues, enjoy writing, write with clarity and write in such a way that people read what they’ve written. Dollars aren’t wasted in “format”---paper, printing, photographs---and a simpler format allows the newsletter to be published quickly and cheaply.

Try the Contrarian Newsletter. Your members will thank you that you did!