

The Pros and Cons of Advertising

by *Helen Hegener*

Should your homeschooling newsletter or magazine accept paid or unpaid advertising? Or should your publication rely only on other sources of revenue, such as subscriptions, membership fees, donations, or merchandise tie-ins? Is advertising a helpful resource for your readers, a valuable source of revenue for your work, a compromise to pay the printing bill, or a nuisance most people would rather not bother with?

The majority of mainstream commercial publications accept paid advertising, generally to help cover production costs and to provide their readers access to related resources and information. Non-commercial publications, such as those published for organizations, often do not include advertising, preferring to maintain a neutrality in the commercial marketplace and to keep production costs to a minimum.

When a publisher or a production team makes the decision to carry advertising they are making a conscious effort to link their economic well-being to a specific market, rather than, say, only to their subscribers. A publication that accepts ads brings consumers and vendors together, and this creates a vested interest in maintaining the happiness of both parties. If the consumers remain happy they'll continue to subscribe, and if the vendors remain pleased they'll continue to advertise. Thus the publisher strives to support a good climate for commerce within the market, which often strengthens and supports the entire community, organization, or other target audience.

Generally speaking, publications which carry ads offer more in-depth coverage of the topic, due to ad revenues giving the editorial department more resources to spend on content. Consider the magazine, which enjoys a large advertiser base: the editor enjoys a corresponding freedom to assign articles and hire columnists. The editor of the non-ad-based publication, on the other hand, is often limited by financial constraints, which can be traced in a circular fashion: no ad revenues, which mean articles, reviews, and other content is usually donated. This often limits readership, which makes the publication less interesting to those who might volunteer their time and effort to write articles and reviews.

Advertising can lower subscription costs, but again, it can become a circular argument. Mad magazine publisher William F. Gaines explained this in 1972, arguing that if he accepted advertising in his already-successful magazine he'd have to change the magazine's appearance, and he wasn't sure that would gain him any ground: "We'd have to improve our package. Most advertisers want to appear in a magazine that's loaded with color and has super-slick paper. So you find yourself being pushed into producing a more expensive package. You get bigger and fancier and attract more advertisers. Then you find you're losing some of your advertisers. Your readers still expect the fancy package, so you keep putting it out, but now you don't have your advertising income, which is why you got fancier in the first place--and now you're sunk."

Many readers appreciate advertising because it lets the vendor speak directly to the consumer about the product, without the editorial filtering evident in most reviews and resource articles. Paid commercial advertising can be viewed as a gesture of faith in the reader's ability to weigh the arguments provided and to make an informed decision. Many readers purchase magazines specifically for the advertising they contain, and travel, hobby, computer and fashion magazines are only a few categories where advertising routinely makes up a large percentage of the overall content.

Before you accept advertising in your newsletter or magazine you should think about what you want from advertisers, and in what ways their presence might strengthen your publication. It's also wise to consider what advertisers might want or expect from you, and how those might weaken or compromise your ability to publish the kind of newsletter or magazine you want to. You should plan ahead as much as possible, and develop policies on issues such as deadlines, frequency discounts, and how advertising copy should be submitted. Decide in advance how you'll handle those inevitable questions like whether or not you'll trade

advertising space for favorable reviews or editorial coverage.

If you're just starting out it might be a challenge to gain advertisers, even in a niche market like homeschooling. Many publications offer free ad space for their first issue or two, giving business owners a risk-free opportunity to try their services and test the readership. This approach can win friends and - if successful - influence future business, but it can also be an expensive production outlay.

Well-targeted advertising pitches can result in advertisers willing to try out your reading audience, but to keep them you'll need to develop a strong circulation base, especially if they're what's known in the industry as the deep-pocketed national advertisers. In his excellent guidebook "Launch Your Own Magazine," magazine expert Samir Husni, Ph.D. writes, "Unfortunately, there are no statistics on how many premiere issues contain freebies, but I would guess it's a big percentage. You have to say to the national advertisers, 'Look how well we fit together.' Maybe they'll fall for it and pay for the next one. Or, perhaps their competitor will pay for one in order to keep up with the Joneses. Bear in mind, some companies won't be interested in a freebie. Would the National Rifle Association want an ad, free or otherwise, in Utne Reader? Not likely."

The bottom line in advertising often comes down to just that: the bottom line. If you - or your organization - can afford to produce and distribute a publication without advertising, give it a try and see how your readers like it. You can almost always take on advertising at any point down the road. You'll be spared many of the headaches and hassles associated with adding commercial considerations to your project.

If, on the other hand, you need to sell ads in order to pay the production and/or mailing costs, learn as much as possible about industry standards, protocols, and how to keep advertisers happy. A strong advertising base can be your best assurance of a long and successful publication run.

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