

If You Build It, They Will Come... ***How To Grow Your Newsletter***

by Mary Ann Kelley

As the editor of a fairly new homeschool newsletter, I have had many opportunities to discover what works when trying to increase your online subscription base. Whether your audience is local or worldwide, there are certain principles that can help you grow your newsletter. The key idea is to target the right audience. Your newsletter can be featured in a publication with hundreds of thousands of subscribers, but unless they are your target audience, you will not see the results that you desire. When *TheHomeSchoolMom.Com* was only about four months old, it was featured in a family-oriented online publication with over 200,000 subscribers. Expecting a substantial amount of traffic from the mention, I was largely disappointed. Only a handful of new subscribers listed that particular publication as the referring newsletter. A couple of weeks later, a small homeschool publication of about 4,000 subscribers mentioned the website, and many new subscribers signed up for the newsletter. The lesson I quickly learned about online marketing is that although getting featured in large publications is affirming and gives your publication credibility, it does not necessarily bring traffic to your site or subscribers to your newsletter.

Successful online marketing determines who you are trying to reach, and focuses effort there. By all means, if the opportunity comes up to get your name in a larger publication, do it, but do not focus your promotional efforts outside of your target audience. Are you publishing a newsletter for a local homeschool support group? A mention in a nationwide homeschooling publication will not bring new subscribers to your newsletter, but a mention in the local newspaper at back to school time might. Write out a mission statement for your newsletter, then use it to determine who is your target market. Do you have an education newsletter that would benefit public and private school teachers as well as homeschoolers? Does your publication feature items of interest to veteran homeschoolers or those new to homeschooling? Do you want to reach homeschooling activists or the newly committed but overwhelmed homeschooling family? Knowing your target market is the single most important aspect of promoting your newsletter.

The next most important aspect of newsletter promotion is the attitude of the publisher.

TheHomeSchoolMom Newsletter has grown from 89 subscribers six months ago to 1200 subscribers currently, in part because I have treated each issue as if I had hundreds of thousands of subscribers. If you do business based on what you want to become instead of what you are, your image will be more professional and you will naturally draw subscribers. Check every link and e-mail address featured in your newsletter to be sure it is working properly immediately before sending it. Use your spell check consistently but do not let it take the place of proofreading your publication. Even the best spell checks or grammar editors can miss small errors, especially words like effect/affect. This is more important in the education market than even the mainstream press. Nothing is more damaging to homeschooling in general and your publication in particular than grammatical errors and misspelled words. Never have the attitude that it is okay to let the quality of your publication slide because you "only have a few subscribers". That is a sure way to lead a newsletter down the road of doom.

Be helpful to everyone that contacts you. As an online editor, I have been surprised at the lack of technological savvy of the average Internet user. You will gain loyal subscribers if you are kind and helpful to everyone who writes for help, and you answer every e-mail in a timely manner. People are impressed with personal attention and will pass along the word about how friendly you are. Make sure that it is easy to subscribe and unsubscribe to your newsletter, including easy to understand instructions in every issue.

To grow your newsletter, you have to get your message in front of the homeschoolers you want to attract. Think like your target market. Make it easy to find your newsletter. If possible, publish public archives of your newsletter and list them with the search engines so that people searching for keywords relevant to

your newsletter can find you. Yahoo! Groups offers the ability to publish archives for newsletters that are not published through them. One easy way to submit to the search engines is through www.AddMe.com. There are online lists of homeschooling newsletters. Search for them through the major search engines and add your publication in the appropriate category. If you publish a local support group newsletter, make sure that it is listed with all of the state homeschooling organizations. Almost all of them have websites with links to local support group resources.

Publicize your newsletter by placing a short, concise link to the sign-up webpage or e-mail address in the signature line of your e-mail program. Name at least one benefit of subscribing with the link to hook the reader's interest. A significant number of my subscribers come from e-mail groups that I frequently post on. E-mail signatures are an effective means of promotion.

Analyze your market. Who is promoting similar homeschool publications? They might be willing to promote yours as well. Write and tell them that you have added a link to their site on your website or in your newsletter, and ask if they would be willing to reciprocate. Whenever you feature a site in your newsletter, let them know. Many people are happy to put up a link back to you. If you have a website, be sure to examine the site statistics if they are available. Find out from where most of your traffic originates and push for more of that kind of promotion. Site statistics can give you a good idea of what works and what does not work in marketing. Focus on what works and do not spin your wheels fighting with the promotional venues that are not producing results.

Swapping ads with other homeschool newsletters is another good way to find subscribers. Other homeschool publications have sent me a substantial number of subscribers. Never look at other publications as competition. You can help each other, with both publications gaining more subscribers. If you publish a local newsletter, maintain contact with the other local groups, swapping out mentions. Perhaps people in the inclusive homeschool group would like to know that there is a religious group that they can join as well. People in the religious group may have friends that are interested in homeschooling for academic reasons and would like to pass on information about a local secular group. Building bonds with the other homeschool groups in your area benefits everyone by helping people find the kind of group in which they would feel the most comfortable.

As you begin taking steps to increase your subscriber base, you will naturally start thinking of more ideas along these same lines. Don't be afraid to step out and implement your ideas. There are many different opportunities for you to promote your group or publication, and by being professional, helpful, and enthusiastic about your publication while taking advantage of these opportunities, you can quickly build a strong subscriber base. Homeschooling is growing exponentially, and you have something of value to contribute to the homeschooling community. Get out there and let everyone know about what your publication has to offer!

Mary Ann Kelley homeschools her children in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and publishes a weekly newsletter in conjunction with her website [TheHomeSchoolMom](http://TheHomeSchoolMom.com).