

## **Starting A Newsletter**

**by Cindie Edmunds**

So, you want to start a newsletter? Publishing a newsletter can be exciting, tedious, stressful and rewarding. Sometimes you'll feel all these emotions at the same time. Asking (and answering) some basic questions BEFORE you begin will help things go more smoothly.

### **Who's Your Audience?**

Now, this probably sounds like a ridiculous question. Obviously, your audience is the members of "ABC Homeschooling Group". But think about it for a minute. Is your publication statewide, countywide or just your local area? Will your readers be mostly urban, suburban, rural or some combination? Are you writing to a special segment of the homeschooling population: your history club, field trip group, teen homeschoolers or learning disabled? Each of these groups will require a different focus, which brings us to our next question.

### **What's the Purpose of Your Newsletter?**

Is your newsletter the main outreach for your support group? Is it how you keep members informed of group and/or community activities? Do you want to inform other homeschoolers outside of your group, perhaps attract new members? Do you want to provide more than just a calendar of activities: helpful articles, a column or two, resources, etc.? Trying to be as specific as possible when answering these questions will help give your publication focus.

While you're thinking about what to include, spend some time looking at newsletters you admire and ask yourself why you like them. Go to the library and look at the newsletters in the periodical section. Browse the Internet or sign up for a couple of email newsletters. Adapt elements of their layout that you like to your publication.

### **How is It Published?**

Will you be printing and mailing a hard copy newsletter, sending it via email, a web page or a combination of these? Each option has pluses and challenges.

If you plan on publishing a hard copy, you'll need to consider your budget. While a hard copy publication has definite advantages, it's also the most expensive option.

Some groups allot a certain amount of their yearly budget for their newsletters, but others have a separate subscription rate. The money you have to work with each month will influence the size of your newsletter. It's much better to think small and grow over time. A well-planned four-page newsletter that's clean, crisp, informative and interesting is much more appealing than a twelve-page newsletter that has little focus.

A web-based newsletter has the potential to reach the entire world and can be a rewarding and creative undertaking. Your first consideration will be where to put it. If your group already has a web site, this is the obvious choice. If not, there are many places on the Internet you can get a free web site (most have ads that are displayed on your pages as this is how they're able to give you space for "free"). Most web hosts, whether paid or free, do provide simple tools that make it easy to get your site up and running, which is great if you have little or no web publishing experience. However, don't be tempted by all the "bells and whistles" just because they're available. Every graphic, page counter, background music, etc. increases the time it takes your pages to load into a potential reader's browser.

An email newsletter is, arguably, the easiest option. However, since there's less visually to keep your readers' attention, your content will be what keeps subscribers coming back. You also need to consider how you're going to send it out. If your subscriber base is small, you can just send it out through your personal internet service. If you have a lot of people to send your publication to, or you are limited in the amount of time you can spend online, it might be more efficient to use a service like Yahoo!

Groups, <http://www.groups.yahoo.com> or Topica, <http://www.topica.com>. These services are very easy to use and you only have to send one newsletter, which they then send out to everyone subscribed to the list. But, they will include an advertisement, usually at the bottom of your email.

### **How Much Time & Resources Do You Have Available?**

Are you doing this on your own or do you have help? If you're doing this by yourself, you need to consider how much time you that have available to produce your newsletter. There's a lot to be done for each issue: gathering information, writing & editing, formatting, mailing, proofreading, etc. How often do you need or want to put your newsletter out? If you're responsible for keeping members informed about upcoming activities, you'll probably need to publish on a biweekly or monthly basis.

### **Production: The Work Begins!**

Okay, you've given this a lot of thought. You've considered your audience, know what you need to include, and how you're going to publish it, now it's time to roll up your sleeves and get busy!

Regardless of the medium you choose (print, web or email), you're job will be much easier if you have a standard layout or format you can plug information into from issue to issue:

- You'll want to have a "masthead" that includes the name of your publication, volume & issue number and date.
- Choose an easy to read font and keep it at size 10 or above.
- Put regular features in the same place each month so your subscribers don't have to hunt for the information they want.

When your newsletter is done, proofread, proofread and proofread again. If you can, find one or two other people to proofread. Incidentally, this is a great project for older kids and teens. If you don't have anyone to proofread for you, try to set your publication aside for several hours or, preferably, a day or two before you recheck it. Even if you do an online or email publication, print out a copy to check. Seeing the words on paper gives you a different perspective to look at it from.

### **The Grand Finale!**

Whew! You made it...your first issue is almost done! If you're doing a print publication, you need to print, collate, fold, staple and mail your newsletter. But, if you've got kids and/or friends, bake some cookies, put on the teakettle and have a production party! Now you only need to mail, upload or email those newsletters. Pat yourself on the back, relax and have a few of those cookies!