

## **The Surviving Small Press: Taking Over a Newsletter**

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A situation that comes up often in messages from the web site is that someone has been assigned or volunteered to take over an existing newsletter, or they have acquired one, and they don't have any idea where to start.

The nice thing is, to use a cooking analogy, you don't have to start from scratch. It's like cooking from a recipe. You (should) already know what the newsletter looks like – how many pages it has, how many illustrations, if any, and approximately how many articles you're going to have to write and what to write about. With an existing newsletter, the format is in place. You just have to fill it.

The first thing to do is gather all the existing files, electronic and otherwise, you can find. Get all the back issues. And above all, make sure you have all the mailing lists of subscribers, media, sources, and suppliers. Then, make sure you have all the software you'll need to use those files. If you have access to the previous editor's notebooks and records, so much the better. Gather everything you can.

An old issue of the newsletter can be used as a template for your first issue. Simply delete the text and any illustrations, and replace them with your own. You'll find that in most software programs, formatted text like columns are done using text boxes that can be linked so the text flows from box to box. Once you get a feel for this it's pretty easy to manipulate them, but when you are deleting the old text just be sure not to delete the boxes with it.

If the old editor is still around, they may be willing to help you by describing their routine for getting an issue out, making introductions to sources, suggesting suppliers, and basically showing you the ropes. Find out their quirks, theories, ambitions, and reasons for doing the newsletter as they did.

The key to taking over a newsletter is to hit the ground running. You're going to want to make the transition from the old editor to you as seamless as possible. You may have new ideas about format and content, but to start out keep doing the newsletter the way it is.

Let your own personality take over gradually. But first, you need to find out what your readers already like about the newsletter. It is a huge mistake to assume you know what's best for your readers and then change everything. The only thing that can result from that is resentment and defection.

You need to study the old regime's newsletter. If readers have sent in letters, treat them like gold. Find out what the readers had to say and work from there. Also, take note of what the readers didn't write in about. Those are the weak points.

Don't be afraid to ask the readers what they think. Take a poll. Ask them what they like and need, and what features of the newsletter they have found useful. Make them a part of the transition. Let them know you are open to their suggestions.

When you are established with your newsletter, the only time you'll hear from readers for the most part is when you have done something to upset them. This is your one chance to really find out what they enjoy and find most useful about the newsletter.

If you are doing a company or organization newsletter, try to figure out which features the powers that be are most fond of. They will have their pet features and causes, and those cannot be eliminated without you being eliminated with them. Try to come up with some new ideas that will make the newsletter more productive to your management and more valuable to your readers.

Taking over a newsletter involves a serious consideration of politics. While the newsletter may be in your hands, it carries with it certain responsibilities and commitments that cannot be ignored. In a very real sense, the newsletter has a life of its own.

Research. Read all the newsletter back issues you can get your hands on, then go further. You are going to need to be an expert on your subject, whatever it may be. Use the library, the internet, and anybody who knows anything. You'd better know about what you're supposed to be talking about before you write and publish it.

I've seen newsletters taken over in the past. Usually it's for the wrong reason. The company purchasing it sees the newsletter as a money maker. Then the publication gets slicked up to look like whatever is the current trend or dilutes the content with whatever is trendy for generic newsletters. The personality of the newsletter is lost, but that often is the heart of it.

It isn't always possible, but try to get the old editor to stay on, if only in a small way, through the transition. Or get them to offer some sort of transitional message, explaining the change. Even if you are doing an organization newsletter where you have a captive audience, your life will be much less stressful if you can explain to the readers that the change didn't come about because the previous editor was fired or perceived by management to be incompetent.

People do not like to hear that someone they feel they know was relieved of a duty or lost their job. They'll stubbornly stand up for the person even if they didn't like them. So don't lay blame – it'll just boomerang back on you.

Instead, emphasize, in the newsletter and press releases, that the previous editor did a lot to build the newsletter and now they've taken it as far as they could and they are going on to better things. They've passed on the baton to you and you are going to try to make them proud. That may or not be the case, but at least you aren't seen as some upstart who stole their job.

This may seem like a little thing if you are taking over the newsletter for the Catholic church bulletin in a small Texas town, and 95% of the parishioners may never notice, but I guarantee you the other 4% will be after your head if you don't handle the transition with sensitivity and grace. The last 1% will hate you no matter what until someone takes over your position; then they will remember you fondly and hate the next person.

Many newsletters these days have a web site associated with them, and that is usually the editor's responsibility as well. The web site can be a very valuable tool for you. You can post back issues instead of having to maintain copies for people who ask for them, and it can be used to promote the letter. Don't be afraid of the web. You can always bring in an intern to maintain the site. Beginning webmasters are often willing to work on a site for free just to get the experience. Doing it yourself is not all that hard, but it can be time consuming if you are already burdened with getting the printed newsletter on its feet.

Most of all, when you are taking over a newsletter take a deep breath, let it out, and just do it. You can make any changes you want, but don't hurry them. Find your own pace. You'd got plenty of time to get comfortable with the job. Just make your deadlines – you can always do better in the next issue.

### **Newsletter Resources**

There are plenty of web sites dedicated to newsletter publishing. Unfortunately most of them want to do your newsletter for you, but here are some helpful sites to check out, and a couple of outstanding print resources.

- The Newsletter and Electronic Publishers Association is at <http://www.newsletters.org>.

- <http://www.newsletter-tips.com> is a site with lots of useful tips and trivia on newsletters.
- <http://publishing.about.com/cs/newsletters> is a part of About.com. They have archived dozens of articles and have links to everything you could ever want to know about newsletter publishing.
- Publishing Newsletters by Howard Penn Hudson is the best book on newsletters I have ever found. I'll be reviewing the latest edition in the next issue. The web site is <http://www.newsletter-clearinghse.com>.
- Newsletter on Newsletters is a wonderful newsletter and I'll review it next time, too.