



"Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers"

Don't Miss Out: Re-tool Your Publishing Program, To Extend Your Mission and Build Profits

By

John B. McHugh and David Beacom

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Why We Wrote This Paper

The membership manager of an association client just shared this all-too-common story:

At a recent ASAE meeting, I was amazed to hear how profitable some association publications divisions are. So I went to our executive director to argue for taking a serious look at growing our publishing program. Right now, we have only one major source of revenue, and that's membership dues—all our eggs are in that single basket. Instead, our publications unit needs to be beefed up to support more of the overall budget and bring in new revenue. As things stand currently, we have no new products; we're essentially stuck. That has to change. And a healthy pubs program would really help serve our mission because—even in digital form—association publications literally make our value proposition tangible to both current members and potential prospects.

A common tale, indeed. Many executive directors are well-versed in membership, conferences, and other education or training programs. Just as many don't have the knowledge or experience to understand how a strong publishing enterprise can promote and extend those activities while generating new audiences and added income. Judiciously investing financial and human capital in a publications program can pay multiple dividends—more vibrant and relevant publications that educate current members and attract new ones, plus significant, ongoing income to fund other organizational initiatives.

Building a robust publishing program is always a work in progress, never actually "done." However, you definitely need to start out with a basic framework of understanding and

planning, which requires a well-defined publications mission, supported by a written and widely understood mission statement.

Nine Questions to Ask to Determine the Mission of Your Publications Program

In most nonprofits, publishing serves as the communications link to members, customers (including advertisers), suppliers, and the world at large through its magazines and newsletters. Scholarly findings and industry statistics are disseminated through its journals and reports. The publishing division may also provide editing, graphics, and production services to departments across the organization. In the most fully-evolved publications units, a growing book-publishing program extends the organization's brand, gives leading authorities in the field a respected channel for disseminating their ideas (and binds those leaders more closely to the association), and brings in revenue by selling to members *and* nonmembers alike that can outpace traditional association income sources such as dues and conferences.

In defining the mission of your publishing division, you and your colleagues need to come to agreement on basic questions like these:

1. In what ways should the publishing division represent the organization to the world at large? Publications content, even when digital-only, tends to be tangible and memorable, so it often becomes a nonprofit's "calling-card" and "leave-behind." Simply put: Does your leadership team understand that publications have a pivotal role in establishing and extending your group's brand?
2. Given this public prominence, all publications content needs to tie back to and serve some important aspect of your mission. Which raises the question: What resources and inside help, for example, from subject-matter experts, from communications staff, does the publishing division need to *ensure* that it accurately and objectively covers your field for members, customers, even potential funders or political supporters?
3. Do you view your publications program *as a business* needing investment of capital and human resources? That is, is the publishing division a revenue-driven unit responsible for increasing sales and profits?
4. How much are you willing to invest—in both time and money—to grow sales and profits? What are your likely pain-points or decision-thresholds (temporal or financial) if you invest more capital in publications?
5. Will profits be reinvested in publishing, redirected to fund other association programs or technology needs, or meted out to serve some mix of all of the above? If so, what should that mix be?
6. Alternatively, is the publishing division primarily a service unit, providing journals, newsletters, and other content that informs and engages an audience made up almost entirely of members? If so, how should the related costs be represented? (It is an established association practice to assign journal and other member-benefit costs to pubs, while membership dues go to a separate department. It is all well and good that you follow this standard practice. But do so only with the proviso that your

leadership understands that this method of accounting doesn't really tell the true story of how much your journals, etc., "cost."

7. Does the publishing division provide in-house editorial/graphics/production support to other units? If so, you can ensure accurate accounting of costs by establishing agreed-upon procedures for "billing back" these services to client departments such as conferences, marketing, and membership.
8. No matter how large or small your publishing effort, have you thought through the human and financial resources likely needed?
9. At the most basic level does your publishing team—whatever its size—have the knowledge and experience it needs to succeed?

How to Write the Mission Statement

If you've wrestled with all the questions above—even if some of your answers at this point remain tentative or only partly-formed—you have one more essential task to complete: *Don't let all that hard work just vanish. Write it down, in the form of a mission statement*, one that spells out your goals and, ideally, the rough timetable for achieving them (or for regrouping as needed). In short, a consolidated summary of your group's answers to the questions above.

Once the association adopts a written mission statement for publications, you have put in place a vital element for potential success. Broad organizational expectations will be clear. Equally important, publishing staff will fully understand what their jobs are.

A precisely-defined, well-written, and widely-communicated mission statement is essential for prioritizing objectives, managing expectations, and measuring results across the organization.

The alternative is ambiguity and confusion, helping to create a chaotic work environment, a confused publishing staff, and growing ranks of unhappy internal and external customers.

Treating Your Publishing Program as the Valuable Financial Asset It Should Be

Your publishing program can make impressive moves up the growth curve if you choose to view it as an asset and not merely as a cost. This may require changing an organizational view of publications as a low-cost/no-frills operation staffed by "free" volunteer labor to a business deserving investment of financial and human capital to grow. Just be sure to recognize that successful publishing is labor-intensive and requires skilled professionals to produce products that simultaneously meet changing customer needs and boost sales.

With all the new technologies for electronic content development and delivery currently available, however, the price of entry today can be far lower than in the past. Newsletters no longer need to be printed and mailed. Specialized content can be "narrow-cast" to reach only audience members likely to be interested. Ebooks, while not yet outpacing the ease and accessibility of their print cousins, can reduce unit costs for you and increase flexibility for many readers.

This is an exciting time to be in publishing. Now is the time to position your publications program to serve both your mission and your bottom line. As we said at the outset: Don't Miss Out.

Bonus Checklist: Six Suggestions on How to Build Political Support for Your Publications Program

Culture varies widely across nonprofit organizations. But here's a brief yet time-tested list of how-tos that we've seen work in widely different settings:

1. Ask members—not just volunteer leaders for suggestions about most-needed content. We all love to be asked to share our ideas. And your members—especially at the grassroots level—are likely to suggest content with high interest to the bulk of your audience.
2. Share your learning and expertise. Make sure colleagues and elected leaders know the findings of any surveys or focus groups you conduct, even—rather, *especially*—if the findings suggest a change in direction. Likewise, share any industry statistics or trends you have access to. Many associations are too inward-looking and gain significantly when exposed to occasional updates from “the real world.”
3. Make sure that elected leadership sees the fruits of your labors and of their investment. “Sample” them with everything you produce, making clear that important parts of their job include (a) letting you know where a given product might be improved and (b) evangelizing on behalf of your content through their own professional networks.
4. Cultivate your authors as the organization's “rock stars” and encourage them to think of themselves as a distinct creative and contributing community.
5. Always tell the truth. If one part of your business shows signs of taking a nosedive, share the bad news as early and widely as possible and be open to novel or unexpected solutions suggested by members or colleagues.
6. Share the spotlight, no matter how small or large your staff. Leadership needs to know who does what and credit for any successes achieved need to be shared as broadly as possible.

Feel free to contact McHugh you if want to learn more about how a publishing management audit can help you build on strengths and correct weaknesses in your publishing program so that you fully capitalize on new growth opportunities. Send an e-mail at jack@johnbmchugh.com

Related Papers of Interest

- *A-8, Twenty Best Practices in Nonprofit Publishing—Revised with co-author David Beacom, 2018, 2 pages*
- *A-9, Don't Miss Out: Re-tool Your Publishing Program, To Extend Your Mission and Build Profits — Revised with co-author David Beacom, 2018, 5 pages*
- *A-11, Maximizing Volunteer Input in Association Publishing—Revised with co-author David Beacom, © 2018, 3 pages*
- *A-14 Political Success in Associations: Making the Volunteer- Staff Relationship Work, 2017, 6 pages*

- A-31, *An Interview with David Beacom On Association Publishing*, 2018, 5 pages

Available at http://johnbmchugh.com/free_pub_guides.htm

Contact Information

John B. “Jack” McHugh

Phone:

414-351-3056

Email: jack@johnbmchugh.com

Website: <http://www.johnbmchugh.com/>

LinkedIn™: <https://bit.ly/2JL0r06>

Association and Nonprofit Publishing LinkedIn™: <https://bit.ly/2SAgdfL>

David Beacom

Phone: 202-549-7434

Email: dfb@davidbeacom.com

Website: <https://davidbeacom.com/about/>

LinkedIn: <https://bit.ly/2LxRcC0>