



"Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers"

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Shaking Things Up: How One Association Reacted to Its Magazine Rebranding

Earlier this year, I did an interview with Liz Novak, Editor in Chief at the International Association of Plastic Distribution (IAPD) titled **Changing an Association Magazine Title: An Interview with Liz Novak of IAPD** (<https://goo.gl/JRyJct>). The following excerpt from that interview sets the stage for this article, in which we discuss the reaction of readers, members, and advertisers to the title change.

“Liz Novak, Editor-In-Chief of the International Association of Plastic Distribution (IAPD) recently changed the title of its membership magazine, *The IAPD Magazine*, a name it has had since its inception in August 1986. This **McHugh Expert Interview** will explore the process of changing the title of a membership magazine and how to secure buy-in from key constituencies, as well as possible pitfalls.”

We encourage you to read the entirety of the initial interview so you have a better idea of the genesis of the idea for the name change, the process Liz used to gain support for it and some of the practical considerations for this type of change. At the time that interview was published, the first issue of the rebranded magazine was just being sent to IAPD members and other readers. We agreed to let some time pass and talk again once Liz had a chance to gather feedback from readers, members, and advertisers to the title change, both pro and con.

JM *What title did you change IAPD membership magazine from and to?*

LN The magazine had simply been called *The IAPD Magazine*, which didn't resonate with anyone unless they were already familiar with IAPD. Our rebranded magazine name is *Performance Plastics* with the subtitle “A Publication of the International Association of Plastics Distribution.” Selecting the *Performance Plastics* name was fairly easy, as our leadership decided last year to adopt the term “performance plastics” to differentiate IAPD's engineering-grade, industrial plastics from single-use plastics such as bags and bottles.

The plastics industry itself is vast and definitely not homogenous, but most people hear the word “plastics” and think of bags and bottles. That's not the kind of plastics our members manufacture and distribute. Performance plastics can be stronger than steel, lighter and more durable than glass, stand up to harsh conditions better than wood; the list of their benefits goes on and on. So, we always knew that “performance plastics”

would be in the title. We played around with variations of that, such as *Performance Plastics Today* or *Performance Plastics World*, but ultimately decided that *Performance Plastics* speaks for itself.

JM *Why did you decide to change the title of The IAPD Magazine?*

LN Our leadership tasked the association with growing the market for performance plastics back in 2010. As part of this initiative, we started sending the magazine to end users of plastics, such as engineers, materials specifiers, designers, architects, basically anyone in a position to choose plastics over other materials for an application.

This meant that approximately two-thirds of the circulation of our magazine was going to people who weren't members of IAPD and probably didn't know anything about the association. It's easy to glance at a cover of a magazine and if it doesn't say, "you need to read me," chances are good that people won't even flip through it. I knew it needed an attention-grabbing name that would still honor the association but would also appeal to a broader audience.

JM *These types of major changes don't take place overnight. Can you list key dates and/or events that were associated with this rebranding? For example: When did you decide to change the title? When was the magazine published with the new title? When was IAPD's annual trade show? List other feedback opportunities as well.*

LN I first proposed the idea to my CEO in January 2015. It was right before the January meeting of our Executive Committee (EC), so she added it to the agenda. The EC approved the idea and I was tasked with presenting it to the Editorial Committee to work out the details. I first talked it over with the committee chair, who also liked the idea, and then we presented the idea to the full committee during a conference call in the February/March timeframe. The full committee was on board with it, so we brainstormed magazine title ideas. Once we had a title we all liked, I discussed the legalities of using it with IAPD's attorney. Then I had a freelance graphic designer start working on possible logos for the new magazine. The Editorial Committee meets in person at a spring leadership event we have each year, so we had a chance to discuss the logos in our meeting that May. We didn't think any of those logos were quite right, so once I hired a graphic designer; one of her first projects was to create some additional logo options for the committee to review. She came up with four excellent options and the committee reviewed via a conference call.

We were ready to launch the rebranded publication with our June/July issue, but that is the one issue of the year that goes to our members only, rather than our full audience. Since 2016 is also the 60th anniversary of the association, we decided to include a section in that issue that covered the history of the association and we retained the old name. I thought it would be odd to rebrand a magazine that had a significant amount of content dedicated to association history, plus it was only going to IAPD members.

The first issue with the new name and logo was our August/September issue, which went to members and nonmembers and included a section dedicated to promoting our

fall convention, which was October 4-7 in Phoenix, AZ. Since we wanted to make a splash with that issue, and since it was going to so many nonmembers, it was the right timing. Also, the theme of the convention was “Looking Back, Moving Forward,” and the magazine rebranding seemed like a great way to “move forward.”

JM *What was the reaction of readers and members, pro and con, to the title change?*

LN I’ve only heard positive things from our members about the new magazine name. I thought it would go over well, though, so I wasn’t too surprised. I was a little more nervous about the reaction to the way we reorganized the magazine content. Before the name change, the front part of the magazine was all association-related news, including the People & Places column, which is quite popular with our members, then we would run our educational articles, and then we would wrap up with product news and application/success stories. That meant that the non-IAPD reader would have to wade through 20 or more pages of content before they got to anything that might be meaningful to them. So, with the rebranding, we reversed that order and we now start with the product news and application/success stories, then run the educational articles and wrap up with the association news.

It’s funny, really, I only heard one negative comment and it wasn’t about the title change or the content reorganization. To help bring attention to the title change, we published the August/September issue with a tip-on card on the cover. It looked exactly like the magazine cover and had the old magazine logo on it, with an invitation to “peel back to see our new look.” We wanted to do this because we were concerned that if members just got the magazine with the new title and logo, they might not make the connection to *The IAPD Magazine*. The only negative comment I heard was that the tip-on card was a little too sticky and once you peeled it off, you couldn’t stack the magazines because they would stick to each other. We don’t have plans to do tip-on cards regularly, so I don’t anticipate that being an ongoing problem.

JM *What was the reaction of advertisers, pro and con, to the title change?*

LN So far we haven’t heard anything negative from the advertisers. We gave them a heads-up about the name change while the sales manager was selling into the August/September issue and we were able to attract a few advertisers with the concept that they were going to be in the charter issue of *Performance Plastics* magazine.

JM *You also spent time with IAPD officers after the title change. Did their reaction vary at all from the first two groups (readers/members and advertisers)?*

LN The IAPD Board of Directors and Executive Committee have been very supportive. I think they appreciate the additional way to enforce the “performance plastics” message and that it helps create a larger audience for IAPD.

JM *At this point in time, post feedback, what two or three things did you learn?*

LN I mentioned this in our first interview, but it’s worth repeating: Don’t be locked into tradition. Just because something has been done the same way for decades doesn’t mean that it is still the right thing to do. Granted, this isn’t something you want to do unless you are completely convinced that it’s necessary, because branding requires

significant investment and you don't want to rebrand lightly. If you believe in it, pitch the idea to your boss, get buy-in from your leadership, and enjoy seeing your members excited about the changes.

Also of Interest:

- A-5, *McHugh Publishing Management Audit: The Basics and Benefits*, 2015, 4 pages
- A-8, *Twenty Best Practices in Nonprofit Publishing*, 2015, 2 pages
- P-24, *Renaming an Association Magazine*, 2016, 2 pages

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About Liz Novak and John B. McHugh

Liz Novak

Liz Novak began her publishing career in the early 1990s at *PC Magazine*. After enjoying 17 years as a magazine editor for various technical magazines, and seeing the impact of the internet on the publishing industry, she returned to school and earned her MBA. After graduation, her freshly minted MBA landed her a job as magazine editor for the flagship publication of the International Association of Plastics Distribution (IAPD). Six months into the job, she added Marketing Director to her title and has relished the opportunities that combining the association's publishing and marketing departments have afforded her. Contact: www.linkedin.com/in/lnovak.

John B. McHugh

John B. "Jack" McHugh is a 40-year veteran of the publishing business. Jack has worked as an executive for Houghton Mifflin, Wadsworth, and Saint Mary's Press. Jack is also an experienced association publishing executive. For seven years, he was Publisher and Director of Programs at the American Society for Quality and for a two-year period, he served as the Interim Publisher at the Project Management Institute. He is a member of the ASAE Advisory Board for Publishing, Communications, and Media Issues and Practices.

Jack's specialties include association/nonprofit publishing, book publishing, executive recruiting, journal publishing, rights and permissions, new ventures, organizational design, and social media strategy and policy.

McHugh and Liz Novak, of IAPD, are co-authoring a series of papers on **Networking Techniques**. Jack Mc Hugh is also the manager of two LinkedIn™ groups, **Association** and **Nonprofit Publishing** and **The Self-Employment Forum**.

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