

# Shoestring Publishing: Managing a Small **hotsheets** Publication By Patty Osborne

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Managing a small publication often means that responsibility for almost everything falls on the shoulders of one or two people. Therefore, it's essential that you analyze the strengths and skills of your small management team so that you can decide who should do what and which jobs are best left to others with the appropriate expertise — either paid workers or volunteers. Jobs such as ad sales, renewal campaigns, grant writing, budgeting and financial reporting, fundraising, page layout, editing and general promotion all need to be done, but it's not always cost-effective to do them yourself. Regardless of what you will do yourselves and what you will job out, set up simple, efficient systems to manage submissions, renewals, ad sales and billing, contributor permission and payments.

## Volunteers

Get a good gang of volunteers. If you don't have room for them, move to a bigger space. If you don't have a free computer, buy one. The money you spend will be worth the extra work and energy that volunteers supply. You can offer valuable experience to volunteers and they will bring welcome manpower to you, and if you manage to find enough money to hire a new employee, your pool of volunteers will be the best candidates. Keep volunteers interested by varying their tasks: start them out on envelope-stuffing and data entry, but once you get to know them and what their interests and strengths are, try to find a project that they can take on with less supervision. If you set up straightforward systems for things like data entry, web content uploading and other routine tasks, volunteers will be able to perform them with a minimum of supervision. Get volunteers to write down their sign-in and sign-out times so that you can keep track of how many volunteer hours you have collected and use this information when applying for grants.

## Website

An important part of modern publishing is the website, but before you commit to a website designer make sure that the architecture of the site will allow you to update it yourselves. Make sure that visitors to the site can subscribe, renew and buy gift subscriptions easily using either Paypal or a credit card. Keep the site lively by changing content often, possibly by including blogs (volunteers sometimes make good bloggers). Use the website to build a loyal community of readers that you can use to generate income through web advertising. Your site can have a different mandate from the printed magazine and should be run as a separate, but closely related, entity. Work out a mandate for the site, like selling subscriptions, publishing every single piece online, providing extras you can't include in the mag (like audio) or just giving readers a taste of your magazine.

## Financial Management

Even if you're comfortable doing routine bookkeeping, it's a good idea to hire an accountant to do the year-end accounting so that you always have accurate financial statements available for grant applications. You should also set up a budget for the year and stick to it. This will alleviate financial anxiety and keep you from overdrawing the bank account (at least most of the time). As soon as you can qualify, apply for a line of credit from your bank in order to deal with temporary cash flow problems. Research which grants you might be eligible for (municipal, provincial, federal) and spend the time to write up good, clean applications.

## Circulation

You'll need a reliable, easy-to-use database to keep track of subscriptions, so ask other small publications to recommend a database program. Then, take the time to learn how to use whichever program you choose. Once you have mastered the program, consider turning over simple data entry to a part-time employee or a volunteer. Send out renewal reminders regularly: your most valuable subscribers are the ones you already have signed up. These days many people will respond to an email reminder that links directly to a Paypal page. Send out four or five reminders, some by email and some by snail mail, and as a last resort try phoning. Even after you've given up on a subscriber, it's a good idea to send out periodic emails telling them that you want them back — you never know what will prompt them to sign up again. Plan and execute a regular gift campaign for October to December and make sure that each year you send out reminders to people who bought gifts last year so that they will renew those gifts again this year.

## Ad Sales

Consider hiring someone on a commission basis to sell ads for your publication. Sometimes ad sales people will sell ads for more than one publication at a time, so ask similar publications who they are using and you may be able to get on board with the same person. If you have an active website, sell web ads too, or bundle a web ad and a print ad. A good way to keep track of ads from booking through magazine layout is to enter them into a database and produce a report that lists all add details, including prices. The layout person and proofreaders can use this report to make sure no ads are missed during page composition, and the billing people can use it for invoicing details.

## Promotion

Contact similar publications for ad exchanges: they'll run an ad for your publication and in exchange you'll run an ad for their publication. Everyone wins and no money has to change hands. Give copies of your publication away at events, but always include a special subscription offer. Hold contests and events where the entry fee includes a subscription, or team up with, say, a theatre company that offers a subscription to your publication as a bonus on a season ticket. Every few weeks, send out an email newsletter that highlights current content, events of interest, contests, or news related to your publication. Email newsletters are an excellent way to keep readers connected to your publication between issues.