



BEST PRACTICES FOR WRITING CONTESTS

Why Run a Writing Contest?

The primary benefit of running a writing contest is to increase a magazine's paid circulation. By charging a fee for entry that includes a subscription to the magazine, every entry will also be a new subscription to the magazine. Done annually and executed correctly, a writing contest can result in hundreds of new subscribers each year and be a significant source of revenue for your magazine.

Now here comes the bad news. Potential costs (for prizes, staff time for organizing, design and printing) can be significant. This means that even if a contest is successful in terms of the number of entries/new subscribers it attracts, a net revenue boost is not guaranteed. As well, renewal rates for contest entrants turned subscribers are generally very low. (Often less than 10% renew.) To maintain circulation levels post-contest, the magazine must make the contest an annual event, rather than a one-off. Gradually, over a period of years, a magazine can recognize gains from a writing contest as the number of entrants who convert to renewals and regular subscribers incrementally rises.

There are other secondary goals to running a writing contest. It can also: raise overall awareness of the publication; generate engaging content for the magazine; fulfill the magazine's core mission; and continue to engage a magazine's core readership by involving them in shaping the magazine's content.

Defining Your Contest

Writing contests come in all shapes and sizes. The key to defining your contest is deciding what audience of potential entrants (who are also potential readers/subscribers) you are trying to reach. The format and rules of your contest should reflect your goal of reaching out to a target market that is a cohort of potential growth for your publication. Who are you trying to target?

If you're a literary magazine that primarily publishes fiction and poetry you're probably going to target emerging and aspiring writers who either are not yet aware of your publication or haven't seen the value of subscribing. This means you might, for instance, restrict the contest to writers with no or few previous publication credits and pitch the contest as an opportunity for the emerging writer to achieve publication—that first step in their career. If you're a magazine dedicated to outdoor adventure and exploration, you might run a postcard writing contest with submissions of short postcard narratives of 400 words or less. This could appeal to those who are not necessarily interested in developing a career as a writer, but more interested in being part of a community of outdoor enthusiasts. With the right strategy, the contest can extend the magazine's brand to those who previously had not seen or known about your magazine's community. Once you determine who you are targeting, then you can decide what kind of content you will solicit from entrants, as well as what kind of prize and judging process you should implement.

Prizes

The prize you offer is the primary marketing tool for your contest. Many contests offer a cash prize as the primary attraction. These can range from a few hundred dollars to as much as a \$1000 or more for the winner. While a large cash price can certainly incentivize entrants, there are other ways to attract people. Try to select a prize that appeals to the cohort you're targeting. For instance, the Broken Pencil Indie Writers Deathmatch Short Story contest targets new independent writers primarily working in edgy and experimental writing. It offers as a main prize "the indie writer's makeover." The "makeover" gives the winner a chance to meet with and have their work evaluated by an agent, a small press, and a recognized 'edgy' writer. A magazine devoted to show dogs might offer as a prize a consultation with a renowned judge or breeder. These prizes can sometimes be even more effective than cash.

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Judging

A good tactic is to approach well known figures in the field (a writing magazine might recruit a prize-winning writer; an outdoors magazine might recruit a well-known adventurer or an Olympic kayaker, etc.). They may be willing to judge your contest for no or little pay to show their goodwill to the community. Offer to vet the submissions and only forward those entrants that meet a certain standard, in order to minimize their time commitment. If you can secure a recognizable 'name' to judge your contest, that will attract entrants by enhancing the prestige factor of the prize.

Community and Social Media

Consider involving the readers of your magazine by giving them the opportunity to vote for or comment on contest finalists via an online poll or other means. This can extend the reach of your contest by creating further user generated content that might draw people to your publication and bring in new readers. There could also be a social media component to the voting process.

Marketing

The success of your contest is determined by your ability to reach your intended target market of potential entrants. You'll need to create a marketing plan with executable timelines. Put in place ad/banner trades with other publications six to 12 months before your contest begins to ensure that the ads run while your contest is accepting entrants. Six months before your contest opens, develop your art and design work, ensuring that it reflects the type of person or community you are targeting. You should also build a dedicated area on your website, create a Facebook event page for your contest, identify and promote a Twitter hashtag, and regularly promote your contest through your e-newsletter. Depending on your budget, you may wish to print fliers, postcards, posters etc. Finally, throughout the process be sure to engage your target community. If you are reaching out to emerging writers, there are many listservs, LinkedIn groups, blogs, etc. that you can use to drum up interest in your contest. The same principal applies to almost any magazine: find likeminded groups and reach out to those communities. Promotion is the key to a successful contest. Maximize those entries and the benefits that follow.

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