

The Secrets to Running a Circulation Department Without a Circulation Manager

By Lisa Whittington-Hill, Publisher *This Magazine*

Don't have a Circulation Manager? Don't worry! You can still run a successful circulation department. The secret is to be organized, plan things in advance and develop systems that work for you and your magazine.

Develop a schedule.

When do you need to run your issue labels? When do you need to mail your renewals? When will your fall marketing campaign launch? Keeping one main schedule/calendar with all your important circulation-related tasks and their dates and deadlines will make your life much easier. Mapping things out on a calendar (or other planning tool that works for you) will help you better budget your time, prioritize tasks and ensure things don't fall through the cracks. You may want to do individual workback plans for specific campaigns or circulation projects, but make sure you have one main document that maps out everything you need to do from weekly tasks to annual updates.

Print things in bulk.

At the beginning of the calendar year take an inventory of all the circulation materials you have on hand. Figure out what circulation materials you will need throughout the year and get those printed right away. Not only is it cheaper to print a whole year's worth of renewal forms at once, but it's less stressful if you don't have to scramble at the last minute because you suddenly realized you don't have any of the forms you need to run your renewals.

Four tips to get you started:

Find a good circulation database.

There are plenty of options available when it comes to managing your subscriber database. Figure out what subscriber information you need to track and find the solution that best suits your needs (and budget). Your software doesn't have to be fancy or costly. Also, don't choose a solution that will require hours of training or expensive updates. Ask other magazines with a small circulation team (or no team) what they are using and what the pros and cons are.

Don't go it alone!

Partner with other magazines to share resources and workloads. This could be anything from working together on a joint marketing campaign to sharing a booth at a conference. For example, at *This Magazine*, we have had success with organizing two-for-one subscription campaigns with other magazines. These campaigns can be promoted online and on social media to keep costs low (no printing of materials!) and both magazines share the workload. Not only will partnering with other magazines make your life easier, but you'll get access to new audiences and readers for your magazine.

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Competing with larger magazines with more resources.

Like the direct mail campaign a bigger magazine did? Instead of setting yourself up for failure and stress by trying to imitate it, adapt it for the limited resources you have. There are no shortage of cheap and cheerful campaigns you can do that are manageable with the resources your magazine has. Look at what other smaller magazines are doing and keep a file with ideas and examples. Also, think about whether you are taking advantage of all the existing opportunities you have to promote your magazine. You might not have the resources to do a big direct mail campaign, but you might have a few hours you can devote to a social media campaign to promote your new issue.

Getting lost in the details.

Sure, circulation management is detail-oriented work, but that doesn't mean you should ignore the big picture. Make sure you set aside time in your schedule (put it in the main calendar) to look at your subscriber numbers, renewal rates, campaign results, etc. Set up some simple tracking tools (spreadsheets are your friend!) that you can use to keep track of circulation numbers, campaign budgets, etc. They don't need to be fancy, they just need to work for you. Setting up templates in advance makes it easier to just plug in numbers as you go.

Four things to avoid:

Focusing only on new subscribers.

Remember that retaining existing subscribers is easier (and cheaper) than constantly acquiring new ones. If you have a small circulation department, make sure you are building time in your schedule for renewal efforts. You don't need to have an 18-effort renewal series, but you need to have something in place to keep those subscribers.

Ignoring customer service.

If you have a small circulation department, you are likely also handling all your magazine's customer service. It's easy to get overwhelmed, so develop a system for responding to messages. Set aside blocks of time during the week for responding to subscriber emails or messages. Think about options that are easier for you and your subscribers, for example online renewal and address changes options. Put a list of retailers on your website so people know where they can buy your magazine. Indicate on your website how long new subscribers should wait to receive their first issue. These steps will help cut down on the number of customer service inquiries you receive.