



Society Strategies

Federation of Genealogical Societies

P.O. Box 200940 Austin TX 78720-0940

Series Set VIII Number 1

September 2001

Set VIII Strategies for Editors

Finding News How to Fill Newsletters and Journals

by Sandra Hargreaves Luebking

Supplemental Page

This strategy paper, written some years ago, is an FGS *Classic* that contains ideas and strategies still relevant today in society management.

This paper offers advice for newsletter editors, whether print or electronic publications, on putting together publication committees, recruiting proofreaders, and finding content.

The FGS office no longer reprints the SSS papers, and has phased out paper copies of the SSS papers altogether.

There is no charge for any of the SSS papers and no limit to the number of copies you may download.

You may obtain SSS papers via download from www.fgs.org



Society Strategies

Federation of Genealogical Societies

P.O. Box 200940 Austin TX 78720-0940

Series Set VIII Number 1

September 2001

The FGS *Society Strategies Series* © consists of papers which offer suggestions and instructions for innovative and effective management for genealogical and historical societies. The Federation holds a copyright to this material.

Set VIII Strategies for Editors Finding News How to Fill Newsletters and Journals

by Sandra Hargreaves Luebking

A CHALLENGE

Finding good material to publish is often a challenge for editors of newsletters and journals. The ideal content will be interesting, informative, useful, or original—preferably all of the above. Finding enough of this kind of news to fill issue after issue requires an editor to be resourceful, skillful and imaginative. The editor who is successful must:

- write articles and news items as needed
- identify and motivate contributors
- produce an interesting, helpful, and error-free publication

The talents needed to succeed as an editor are: organization; a compulsion about (not attention to, but a compulsion about) detail and accuracy; a working knowledge of the field of genealogy; the desire and ability to verify information (i.e.,

misspelling someone's surname is taboo in genealogy circles!); and the ability to close—that is, to get a finished product out on time.

Content goals are simple:

- be accurate
- educate
- entertain

Above all, accuracy should be the trademark of any periodical. A goal of educating or enlightening a reader helps you to identify the type of material to include. To “entertain” simply means to present and format the material in a manner that appeals to readers.

FINDING CONTENT

Obtaining enough good content to publish is easy with a staff of dependable and skilled reporters. But few genealogy editors enjoy the use of a staff. Instead, the Busy-B Method of

finding news may help you, as it has helped me generate news to fill 60-plus issues of FORUM.

THE BUSY-B METHOD

- BAND
- BEG
- BEAT THE BUSHES
- BRAINSTORM
- BARTER
- BORROW

BAND

You may not supervise a staff but you can still lead a band. A volunteer band, that is. Gather together reporters, columnists, content acquisitions people, proofreaders, or content advisors. And don't forget the production person who does the actual layout (under the editor's guidance, of course) and a mail team.

Among the band members will be friends and colleagues who a) owe you favors; b) understand the job is too big for one person; or c) would rather find writers than be one.

Some band members might accept specific tasks. Mary Ellen is creative and might enjoy doing the quarterly calendar. Joe, who has a good sense of timeliness and appropriateness, could agree to read area newsletters and journals for interesting tidbits. Sue and Bob may be persuaded to submit a certain number of book reviews for each issue. And Ralph and Mable, who often travel on genealogical quests, may agree to write a regular column on what works and does not work on research trips.

Perks: Rarely can your band members be adequately compensated (just as editors are seldom compensated). But every society can offer perks. Perks are small but significant rewards, such as being able to keep the books

reviewed or the journals scanned. Sometimes the only perk is recognition: the person's name in a prominent position in the journal or an award for long-time service.

Occasionally an FGS board member will recommend a writer or suggest the reprint of a particularly good article they read. In this case, the perk to the board member is a thank you note from the editor and a mention following the article that this was brought to the attention of FORUM by (name). It's not much, but it is something.

BEG

Begging is never beneath an editor's dignity. Beg readers to submit ideas or clipped material, or a manuscript. Gary Mokotoff, FORUM's production editor, once inserted a notice which read, "Write for FORUM." It gave "four easy options that could get your idea in print." Note the word "could." Promising to publish anything unseen is an unwise commitment!

Frankly, the response didn't overwhelm us. But those who did reply were sincere and capable. Their contributions provided topic ideas, articles, and news items we would have gotten no other way.

Sometimes you can beg in person. I often approach speakers whose topics at area conferences would please a wide audience of readers as well as attendees. Most good speakers write out their material in some format, so part of the job is done.

Adapting prepared text is not a difficult task for an experienced editor. The caution here is that no speaker wants his or her material adapted without permission—so don't do that. And some, because their words are their income, prefer not being published in full. But they

might agree to a condensed version. Understand and accept their limitations and go with what they are willing to give.

Begging means to ask for an article, to follow up with a letter, e-mail, or phone call, and then to politely pester the writer until you receive the article. And all good begs include a request for an illustration.

BEAT THE BUSHES

Beat the library, archives, and public records office bushes, that is. Scour your region for unusual records or news that is of interest to readers. Then, expand the content or create an article with a “twist,” a slightly different angle than what a reader might expect.

An example is the annual feature in FORUM, usually titled something like, “Educational Opportunities Abound.” It gives details on the major national institutes that seek to attract participants. Rather than publish individual notices as each institute submits them, we combined all the opportunities into an annual article.

This is a reader-based decision, meaning it benefits the reader by allowing evaluation of multiple opportunities in a single sitting. The institutes benefit because they are assured a wide audience rather than having their event buried in a huge calendar.

The directors of each institute are contacted well in advance of deadline, given the previous year’s version to edit, and what they submit is printed. It has proven to be a nice addition to each spring issue of FORUM.

An enhancement was added to the 1999 article: a photograph of students at one of the institutes.

For fairness, each director was given an opportunity to submit an illustration “for consideration.”

Beating the Bushes can work on a smaller scale as well. I once found a three-line item in a non-genealogical journal that said the National Park Service was responding to renewed public interest in the Cumberland Gap. I contacted the Cumberland Gap National Historic Park and talked to an enthusiastic park ranger who provided me with enough material to fill two fact-packed pages. It was one of our most popular articles.

The best way, in my opinion, to Beat the Bushes is to locate a “tidbit,” search for additional information or a new angle, draft an article, and then:

- submit it to an authority with a deadline
- double space between lines for easy revising
- explain limit “500 words”
- say, “this will be published as is unless changes are received by_____.”
- if it is a comparison article, as is the Educational Opportunities, include the full article so they can see all entries and can design their entry to “fit” the context.
- include SASE or a request for an e-mail response
- key: make contacts early enough to accommodate their schedules.

BRAINSTORM

Keep an idea clipping file. It is very helpful when someone tells you they would write if only they knew what to write about. You promptly hand them a topic list that you carry at all times!

FGS has a wonderful plan that is a variation of brainstorming. When a potential director is asked to run for office, they learn the require-

ments include the provision that once, during their three year tenure, they are to submit a FORUM article.

Note: the operative word here is submit, not write. Directors may compose an article, but many elect to delegate the writing to a third party. Some of FORUM's best articles were referrals by FGS directors.

BARTER

To barter means to "exchange in trade," or to share skills. Editors have been known to write articles for sister publications in exchange for an article for their own magazine. Your area of expertise or research may not exactly fit the scope of your own periodical. But it fits some periodical. And that editor may be able to provide a story in return, or know of someone else who can.

View neighboring editors not as competitors, but colleagues. And barter your way into a good article.

BORROW

I hesitate to even mention "borrow" but reprinting material from other publications has become a way of life for many editors. And there's really nothing wrong with borrowing as long as reprints do not fill 50% or more of the periodical and as long as you are using the material with caution.

Don't just copy. Check the facts with a phone call or an e-mail; verify that addresses and URLs are still current; and be sure references are accurate. This can all be done by a band person.

And always, always: give credit to the publication from which you borrowed and cite the original source, if different.

BUFF

To buff means to polish—or shine—what has just been written. Sometimes it just needs a little energy added. Energized writing does not need to be cute or chatty. It does not mean annoying your readers with frequent underlining, boldfacing, or lots of exclamation marks.

Instead, energize by terse, even telegraphic writing, using the 15:5:5 theory:

- 15: no sentence more than 15 words
- 5: no paragraph more than 5 sentences
- 5: no article more than 5 paragraphs

Buffing also means that, after writing, editing, energizing, and formatting, comes proof reading. It is critical. You cannot guarantee accuracy nor enlightenment, if an issue is filled with mistakes. Yes, you might entertain readers, but few of us want to see our hard work be turned to comedy because of grammatical or typographical errors that should have been eliminated.

For details on proofreading and the use of a style sheet, see "Editing and Proofreading Society Publications," by Kay Haviland Freilich, CG, Paper 1:22 in the *Society Strategy Series* (FGS: Austin, Texas, 2000).

One or more of these six "B's" for finding content should help you to meet the challenge of filling your periodical.