
Twenty Best Practices in Nonprofit Publishing

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These best practices are based on observations I have made over the years as an executive working for non-profits and as a consultant to nonprofit organizations. These best practices represent an approach to publishing observed in nonprofit organizations running successful publishing programs.

GENERAL

- *Understand that writing and editing are not the same as publishing.* Writing and editing are an important part of publishing, but publishing connotes a broader market view including pursuing new opportunities, risk taking, customer orientation, strategic marketing, and new product development.
- *Ask if your publishing department is expected to provide editing services and design services for the entire organization.* If publishing is expected to provide editing and design services for internal customers, then you must budget for this cost and provide the requisite staff resources.
- *Hire some new staff from the commercial (for profit) publishing sector.* Experienced staff from the commercial publishing world will enrich your program because they can bring to the table different approaches to developing and marketing new products.
- *Distinguish your periodical publishing with book publishing.* These are two entirely separate businesses. Specific differences lie in: editorial decision-making, evaluating financial performance and sales, marketing and promotion, rights and contracts, and graphics and production.
- *Provide your publishing program the assets it needs to grow.* Investing in a growth market is smart business. Publishing is a business that can provide substantial sales and profits for your organization.
- *Consider co-publishing to increase market reach, reduce risk, and to expand into new markets.* Avoid the “not invented here” mentality as partnering with another publisher can be good business for both partners. Be sure you understand your goals and those goals are not in conflict with the proposed co-publishing arrangement.

LEADERSHIP

- *Remove roadblocks for staff so that they can succeed with their publishing responsibilities.* Do decision-makers add value to the process or create roadblocks to progress? Opt for a flat organization so that decision making can occur in the area where the impact will be most beneficial.
- *Reward and recognize new initiatives.* Publishing is an idea business, and without an influx of creative ideas, your publishing program will stagnate and shrink.
- *Abandon the commitment to the status quo.* Keep long tenured employees stimulated with new ideas by creating a forum where newer staff can exchange ideas with senior staff.
- *Assess staff performance based on expectations and avoid creating a culture of incompetence.* Deal with poor performers and disgruntled staff immediately with appropriate corrective actions. Don't expect people problems to get better without an intervention.

ORGANIZATION

- *Understand the service components (non-revenue) and sales/profit components in a nonprofit publishing program.* Recognize that some aspects of your publishing programs will serve internal customers at a cost without an offsetting revenue stream.

- *Compensate competitively with the commercial sector and offer incentive compensation based on performance.* There is no substitute for qualified, happy employees compensated fairly and at the prevailing market rate.
- *Purge the silo mentality.* Emphasize the sharing of information and strategic planning on an interdepartmental basis. Knock down interdepartmental walls that inhibit collaboration and information sharing.

VOLUNTEERS

- *Ask the best and brightest volunteers for their advice about member and customer new product needs.* In addition to serving as subject matter experts, volunteers can provide you with insights into what your customers need.
- *Involve volunteers in your publishing program.* Form editorial panels and use your top volunteers as subject matter experts for your periodicals and books.
- *Prevent micro-management by volunteers in the business operation of publishing.* Volunteers should set policy and direct mission tasks but not supervise staff in day-to-day publishing activities.

CUSTOMERS/RESEARCH

- *Monitor customer satisfaction on a continuing basis.* Establish processes and systems to serve customers and to measure customer satisfaction.
- *Adopt a customer focus.* Understand what your customers want and need, not what you want to give them.
- *Rely on market research, reader and advertising surveys.* Avoid a self-congratulatory posture as you evaluate your organization's publications. Use objective data to make solid decisions.
- *Recognize that associations and societies are in the information and education business.* This is true whether information is delivered in print (books, magazines, periodicals) or live (educational seminars and conferences) or electronically. Find out your customers' preferences for the delivery mode of publications and be prepared to respond to those preferences.