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"Practical Problem-Solving Advice for Publishers"

Twenty Best Practices in Nonprofit Publishing

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These best practices are based on observations we have made over the years as executives working for nonprofits and as consultants to nonprofit organizations. Some version of each of these best practices has been implemented in virtually every nonprofit organization that can boast a successful publishing program.

General
- Understand that writing and editing are not the same as publishing. A publishing enterprise requires a broader market view--including a strong customer focus, an eagerness to seek out opportunities, a willingness to take risks, skill in strategic marketing, and a dedication to new-product development.
- Determine whether your group is expected to provide editing, design, and production services for the entire organization. If so, then you must budget for this, create a mechanism for charging these costs back to internal clients, and provide the requisite staff resources.
- Make a conscious effort to hire at least some new or replacement staff from the commercial (for-profit) publishing sector. Adding such experience to your staff mix will boost your group's customer focus and market awareness.
- Differentiate your periodical publishing efforts from your book program. They are entirely separate businesses—with sharp differences in editorial decision-making, financial-performance expectations, marketing and promotion needs, rights and contracts, even design and production considerations.
- Provide your publishing program with the assets it needs to grow. A growing publishing enterprise can generate substantial revenue for your organization.
- Consider co-publishing to reduce risk and expand into new markets. Partnering with another publisher can maximize opportunities for both partners at lower cost for each.

Leadership
- Create maximum independence for your publishing operation. Let financial success and overall contribution to your organization's mission be the only criteria on which the group is judged.
- Remove bureaucratic roadblocks for publishing staff. Do high-level decision-makers add value or create roadblocks? Case in point: You wouldn't expect publishing professionals to properly prepare 990 tax forms. In the same way, your CFO is unlikely to speed product innovation.

- <u>Reward and recognize initiative.</u> Publishing is an idea business, and without a steady supply of creative notions, your publishing program will languish and ultimately fail.
- <u>Deal with poor performers and disgruntled staff immediately</u>. Don't expect people problems to get better without an intervention.
- <u>Practice patience</u>. Even with digital products, development, marketing, and sales usually require months, even years—not days or weeks.

Organization
- <u>Distinguish between the service components (low- or non-revenue) and the higher sales/profit components in your program</u>. Overall, you need to make money. But not every journal or web offering can or should be monetized.
- <u>Do your best to compensate competitively with the commercial sector.</u> But don't hesitate to communicate that the nonprofit sector often makes up in benefits and security what it lacks in salary.
- <u>Recognize that some editorial people are introverts</u> Your role as a leader is to create frequent and comfortable opportunities for sharing and mutual learning. That said, work to create an "Everyone has a voice, not a vote" culture—so that original ideas are clearly welcome from any part or level of the organization—but publishing decisions are ultimately made within your group.

Volunteers
- <u>Ask the best and brightest volunteers for advice.</u> In addition to serving as subject-matter experts (reviewers, authors), volunteers provide priceless insight into customer needs. Use online surveys, focus groups at conferences, casual conversation at any association event. And don't talk only to elected leaders—rank-and-file members often provide the best-informed market intelligence.
- <u>Fully inform volunteers about your publishing program.</u> Make sure elected leaders receive copies of everything you publish, and create numerous opportunities to elicit their feedback. Manage expectations—and create support—by clearly sharing your financial ambitions and product timelines.
- <u>Head off micro-management by volunteers</u>. Elected leaders should set policy, not supervise staff—much less enjoy special access to publishing opportunities.

Customers/Research
- <u>Adopt a laser-like customer focus.</u> Seek to understand what they actually want and need, not what you imagine they "should" want.
- <u>Be driven by market research, including reader and advertiser surveys as well as focus groups</u>. (These can be quite informal, yet still informative.) Use data to make decisions, not "intuition."
- <u>Above all: Recognize that associations and societies are in the information business.</u> This is true whether information is delivered in print (books, magazines, periodicals), live (educational seminars and conferences), or electronically. Learn your customers' preferences among publishing formats and deliver content the way(s) they prefer.

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