

# NEWSLETTERS FOR MRO'S: CREATING, BUDGETING, WRITING TACTICS

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## Introduction

I am a York County Director for United Bikers of Maine (UBM). There are sixteen counties in the state. UBM has its own newsletter at the state level. I was an Area Representative for York County when we decided it would be beneficial to have our own county newsletter.

The quest began. I learned that we had to finance the total newsletter separately from the state organization. Each county is allowed an operating budget of \$350. I knew I had to get financial help if we were going to pull this off.

Since the beginning two and a half years ago, I have consistently mailed a monthly newsletter to 400 members with a monthly self-supporting budget of \$130. This newsletter was far more effective than our old traditional way of mailing monthly meeting reminders on postcards. Never mind the benefit of reminding members that their membership has expired and it's time to renew! A postcard couldn't accomplish both an expiration reminder and meeting date reminder.

We used to pay 19 cents a member, and now we pay 14 cents more per member. For that we can remind, update, advertise events, and solicit volunteers and ideas. We have gained members, the meeting attendance has tripled, and a united bond has formed. This newsletter on the county level was a good idea.

So, you think you might want a newsletter. There are different levels of newsletters: a state level and a county/district level. I am going to address the county/district level. Once you have acquired the talent and coordination on this level, you will be an asset to any state-level newsletter.

As I try to educate, I trace back the trial and error in the beginnings of my county newsletter. The following questions must be addressed: Why do you want a newsletter? What do you expect to gain from it? What kind of information

will you include? Who will draft, edit, publish and mail it? Where will the financial support come from? If you have answers to a majority of these questions, you are ready to learn about how to succeed with a newsletter.

## Part I: Graphic Design and Layout

The title probably seems a little scary, but don't fret. Constantly keep in mind, this project is simple, but time consuming. I think when you have tried to answer the questions asked above, the graphic design and layout is the first thing that comes to my mind to address the answers. The newsletter should contain information that current and potential members and advertisers need. The newsletter will also bear a printing cost per page. Keep the pages limited. You have a limited budget. The paper only needs to be easy on the eye, carry the essential information, have room for the advertising, and have a bit of a sense of humor. Remember, you are not trying to duplicate any magazine. Members need to be informed, not necessarily entertained.

The listing of officers and their phone numbers is essential and should be placed in a way that is easy for the viewer to see. I placed the names of the officers and director on the front page below the masthead. This enables easy access for the member at all times. It only takes a quick glance at the front cover.

Unfortunately, it seems to be too much trouble to dig page after page to find the contact number a member or advertiser needs. Always keep the members' needs in mind. They are the lifeline of your organization. Some examples of the calls my newsletter has prompted include: event information, membership information, raffle tickets, complaints on the organization (it's vital to accept these calls), new advertisers, etc. If the officers don't mind their numbers printed, print them.

Members need to be reminded of meetings and other important dates on a monthly basis. This can be accomplished in two ways. One, provide a small monthly calendar that can be cut out. Put on only the important dates for that month. Two, you can simply list the dates in bold letters under the title, "ANNOUNCEMENTS." I do both. I put the calendar on the front page and list the dates on the last page. People generally remember the first and the last thing they read. Listing dates are important. To increase the attendance at your meetings, keep reminding the members of the meeting dates. The newsletter serves this purpose and therefore you can eliminate any other monthly reminder system you have. It is really that simple.

Not all members can attend meetings, regardless of date and time. Why should they be cheated out of the information given at the meeting? This is information which should be contained in the newsletter. Keeping all the members informed of what is happening in their county/district and state, on a monthly basis, will attract future involvement. You will also attract new members to your meetings. Let the members know about the treasury, old business, and new business. Sounds like a meeting agenda, but with added information.

Legislative information should be kept in a column of its own. I put county meeting info in one column and state info in another. What is of interest to the members from the Board Meeting? You need to use your own judgement. My concerns would be on any public relations, event updates, contests, policy changes, legislation, safety and education program updates, officer changes, and any state requests of the members which could get the members more involved.

Now, you have a front page, three columns (county/district, state, and legislative) and an announcement section. What else can you include to help your organization? How about reminding members of their expiration dates? You can list the names of members who are expiring in the current month and the preceding month. This will give them two reminders. Now, I would print a renewal form for easy mailing. This has generated many renewals in the mail on the county

level. Each month that I have had room to print the form, I have received two to four memberships. That may seem like a small number, but on a yearly scale it's 24 to 48 members! I think it's easier to keep members current, than it is to obtain new ones. By the way, I do receive new member applications, too. Each new or renewed member you receive via the newsletter, is one more than you would get if you did nothing at all. That is important.

If you have any space left, print insights from other MRO's newsletters. Be sure you give credit. Ask for permission to copy if the source does not contain a general statement giving permission to reproduce its contents. I find many different articles that are interesting and eye opening. If it affects me this way, it may affect another. It may be as simple as reporting a motorcycle part defect or a poem on motorcyclist apathy. Again, use your judgement.

Sometimes I receive a thank-you letter from a charity. I like to print those. It's recognition for the county. If it wasn't for them, the event couldn't have been successful, and they deserve to know about it.

Other items for the newsletter include letters from members, and/or an editorial a member prompted and/or responded to. These can be interesting, and also help teach members how to effectively respond to a negative editorial.

Use your space wisely, because it is costly. If your letter can be two pages instead of three, and it saves you ten or twenty dollars to go with fewer pages, consider whether some of your information can wait until next month. Just use space available. Don't create space (another simple concept).

Lastly, your layout must include your advertisers. You don't want your newsletter to look like a phone book. Spread the ads out through the newsletter the best you can. I usually can place three or four ads inside the newsletter and dedicate the last page to ads.

## Part II: Advertisers and Funding

What is the monthly expense of the newsletter? Figure out how many pages it will be, and how many copies you will need. You may want

to print enough for each member plus twenty extra so you will have some available for meetings and shops.

I have found that a maximum of five pages is allowed at the 29 cent stamp rate. (I will discuss bulk rate in the next section.) Let's say your newsletter will be two to three pages. Contact printers and get price quotes. You will find, if the printer does his/her work in the shop, rather than sending the work out, the price will be lower. You will probably find that 8 1/2 " x 11" paper is the most economical, and that larger sizes are more costly. Inquire about the cost of folding and stapling your newsletter. You may find you would rather do this yourself to save money. One printer was going to charge me an extra \$17 to fold and staple, so I did it myself. My new printer does the newsletter for \$30 less and the price includes folding and stapling. It pays to shop around!

Once you figure out your printing expense, you can figure out how many advertisers you need and what to charge them. If you run short of advertisers, you will find yourself doing mini fund raisers (raffles, etc.). Be creative to finance your project.

Let's talk advertisers. I charge \$10 for a business card space. Through trial and error, this has proved the easiest method for both me and the advertiser. If they want a bigger ad, negotiate. Let's say you need ten advertisers. That would mean you need \$100 to print and mail the newsletter. I found that printing up a sample newsletter to show the advertiser was an effective way to get the advertiser to support it.

I use the phone book to get contacts. I select advertisers that would interest bikers and, of course, who would be interested in the newsletter. Examples are motorcycle shops, taverns, leather shops, jewelers, convenience stores, camping outlets, D.J.s and sports shops.

Before you call an advertiser, know how many copies you're mailing and what will be in the newsletter. The advertiser wants to know, "What's in it for me?" I tell the advertiser what I am planning, what it is costing, and what it is supporting. I find that I usually sell the space by saying, "Your ad will be reaching 400 bikers on a monthly basis for only ten bucks!"

I phone first, then go visit the advertiser in person if necessary, to show the newsletter and pick up a check. Most advertisers prefer the personal attention. They are the ones that keep renewing their ads and sponsoring other needs.

Get a receipt book. Advertisers need a receipt for their records. Once an advertiser pays, you must allow space in your newsletter. Don't over sell. It would be an added expense to print another page just to fit in an advertiser. This would defeat your budget. I mail an issue to every advertiser. They need to see their ad.

Never take more than three months worth of payments. You never know what can become of you and the newsletter further than that. The job is time consuming, so you will want to get another person to take over. Train them from the beginning if you can.

### Part III: Mailing

Now here is something that is very time consuming. If you have more than 250 issues to mail, you can and will want to mail bulk rate. You must have a minimum of 250 pieces of mail to qualify for bulk mailing. Postage will eat up your budget at 29 cents an issue.

It will cost you \$75 for a permit fee and then an additional \$75 annual fee. Your first startup cost will be \$150 and then only \$75 each year following. Go to your postmaster to find out how to do bulk mailings. The regulations can be confusing at first but you get used to the process, and it is worth the savings.

You will need to sort the newsletters by zip code according to the instructions your postmaster provides. Since you are doing some of the post office's work by pre-sorting your mail, you are allowed the discounted bulk mail rate. You need not be non-profit to get a reduced rate, but non-profit organizations may qualify for a lower rate or be covered by different rules.

For my county newsletter, my budget can be easily figured on a monthly basis.

Example: 300 pieces x \$.165 each x 12 months + \$75 annual fee = \$669 yearly. \$669 divided by 12 = \$55.75 monthly postage fee. Compare this with 300 x \$.29 = \$87! Bulk mailing is a savings of \$31.25 a month and \$375 a year.

Initially bulk rate will seem expensive and time consuming, but look at the figures. I can eliminate the need of three advertisers.

You can get a free bulk rate information packet from your post office, or they will tell you which main post office to contact.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: Postal regulations can indeed be complex at first, and they change occasionally. For instance, the bulk mail regulations I work with require only 200 pieces minimum. Check with your postmaster to find the best arrangements for your needs. TH*

## Part IV: Writing Tactics

This, by far, is the most interesting part of your letter. You can either gain the reader's interest or lose it. You can also make a point without antagonizing anyone. My main consideration when writing is to inform, not lecture. You can do this. Do it as if you were actually talking to someone. I don't think obscenities are appropriate in getting a message out. Absolutely no poison pen writing! The membership needs to be lifted up, not brought down because you are having a disagreement with your organization's policy. I think everyone can relate to that at one time or another. Let's discuss how you could relay to your readers that you're having a raffle:

**EXAMPLE 1:** "York County is having another raffle. The prize will be UBM products. Tickets will be available at next meeting or through the mail for \$1.00 each. Drawing will be held July 9th at the Poker Run."

**EXAMPLE 2:** "It's that time again! We need to raise our county funds. We will be having a raffle. The Winner will get a T-shirt, long-sleeve shirt, hat, sweatshirt, pin, can wrap, sticker set, one-year membership, and a tree & rocker set. Instant UBMer for only \$1.00! Value is \$82.00! The drawing will be held July 9th at the Poker Run. Get your tickets at the next meeting and/or call Mara to arrange to get one. We need you, so get more than one. Buy one for your mother, friend, significant other, your neighbor, and your dog!"

The difference between Example 1 and Example 2, is that No. 1 is definitely drab. No. 2 puts excitement in the raffle. You do want to sell tickets, don't you? No. 2 is also more descriptive. It's important information, with a touch of humor so

you don't sound so harsh. Again, write as though you are speaking to a person.

What I am going to tell you next is very important in technique. Did you ever have someone think their plan is better than one that was voted on at a meeting? Or have some members think that because something has always been done a certain way, a change is unthinkable? Instead of finding the negatives with a plan, speak the positives.

Let's say you have always held your meetings at Joe's Cafe. For many positive reasons, the meeting place got moved to another town at Greg's Grub. Accusations start to fly. You know the ones, that question the REAL reasons for the move. You and the officers are feeling the heat, but you know the move was a good one, so you address it in the newsletter. Instead of writing, "We did not move our meeting place because blah, blah & blah," I would write, "The meeting has been moved! The benefits are excellent. The location is more centrally located to all members, food is available, the bar is opened only to members, and there is more seating space. Finally, the welcome mat is extremely large at the entrance!"

Notice how the latter paragraph addressed the positives? That will get attention, not reaction. I feel the person(s) who had the problem, will recognize the way his/her attitude has been incorrect. Addressing the attitude in a positive way, will cause it to clear away more quickly.

You never know who will be reading your newsletter, so keep it clean and positive. I think nothing is more embarrassing to a motorcycle rights organization, than when average Citizen Joe can read animosity among the members. Keep that in mind. Again, a simple concept. Find the positives, not the negatives.

Ah, the lighter side — my favorite part. This is fun. Find a book, magazine, or pocket calendar of famous sayings (also known as food for thought). I call them "BLURBS." The writer needs the ability to address any given subject with tact. For example, you want expired members to renew, and you print the form. A perfect BLURB would be, "If you wait for perfect conditions, you'll never get anything done." This tells the reader, "Hey, you're procrastinating, get off you

butt and renew now!"

BLURBS are like subliminal messages. Advertisers do this all the time. They want your eyes to see one thing, while your subconscious receives a different message, the one he wants you to get. Your mother probably did this to you. Instead of accusing you of being a slob, she would just say, "Some slob left their coat on the floor." Of course, you would say, "I didn't do it." Then she would quote, "If the shoe fits, wear it." She knew you could decide for yourself what needed to be done. Have you caught on yet?

One more example. You have been suggesting that members respond to negative newspaper editorials. You have educated and reminded. Do it again and then a good BLURB would be, "It's better to try and fail, than not to try at all." Again, the reader will get the message, "Go on and do it. What do you have to lose? Stop making excuses and just try!" The BLURB was definitely more tactful.

You can print a BLURB just because it's funny. You will know which ones. If you use any person's saying, be sure to give credit as well. Just follow the BLURB with a dash and the name. Example BLURB: "Failure is the opportunity to begin again more intelligently." - Henry Ford.

I think I have covered the basics of writing tactics, without making a college semester out of it. By the way, take a writing course when the opportunity comes your way. The basic rules are: cover all areas of a subject as though you are speaking to someone; write positives instead of negatives when you can; put a little humor in it. Remember your factual information - stuff like meeting information and announcements. Writing tactfully should never be difficult. Just think thoroughly, before you put the pen in motion.

## **PART V: Conclusion**

It is my sincere hope that the above segments will enable any person to put together a newsletter on a low budget. Once the letter gets going, things get easier. I wish I had had this information when I got started. It would have been easier then.

You know, you might consider working with one or two people on this endeavor: one writer,

one advertising manager, and one to do the mailing. You can do it all yourself, but then again, you won't be around forever.

I started with an electronic typewriter and still produced a good looking letter. I just focused on the final appearance of the newsletter.

Honestly, when I do look back at Issue #1, I am so glad I use a word processor now! Things have certainly improved, but the first issue did get compliments. The point is, work on it, work on it, and keep your mind open to suggestions. Other ideas are helpful I am still learning and probably always will.

BLURB: "A true soldier never declares defeat before the battle." - Helen Keller.