

Source NW Magazine

Date: 2003-2009

Background:

For many years the Mersey Basin Campaign published a newsletter, Campaigner, which focused on MBC's own work. However, MBC was keen to raise its profile with a wider audience and saw the opportunity for a more ambitious publication that would work as part of a revamped communications strategy.

The new publication was renamed Source NW. It had more pages and a new format derived from a new corporate identity. The aim was to produce a freely available regional magazine of a standard comparable with that of national publications. It was decided from the outset that quality should not be compromised and that only the highest standard of writing, photography and production would be used in the magazine.

Source NW was therefore not a newsletter focused on the MBC's own work. Instead, it was a magazine that covered environmental issues of all kinds in the region, making it more interesting to a wider audience.

Source NW was not simply a way to promote the MBC's activities. Its value lay in the fact that, by being known as the producer of a quality publication, the MBC gained both exposure and credibility.

The project:

Source NW magazine was produced as a 28-page publication, published 3-4 times a year, totalling 20 issues over six years. It was sent out to around 8,000 people with an estimated readership of between 16 and 20,000 people. Issues were also published electronically on the MBC website. The magazine was free and there was no charge for subscription.

A good stable of freelance writers was compiled and writers were sourced in terms of best value. Most writers worked at a national level and while their rates did vary, the quality of writing made it excellent value for money. MBC realised that good quality freelance journalists are only marginally more expensive, but deliver reliably top quality articles.

MBC managed to secure good quality photography relatively cheaply. Images were often provided free of charge by companies, local authorities, tourist boards or individuals. Other photography came cheaply or free from online image stocks. When it was necessary to commission photographers, young but talented photographers were found who offered excellent value for money.

The same design company was commissioned to produce each issue to ensure quality and continuity within the branding and print, design and distribution costs were kept to a minimum in order to allow more money to be spent on content.

Source NW magazine was initially very MBC-centric but over the years the focus broadened and MBC derived value from its role in producing the magazine, rather than from being featured heavily in the content. This freed the magazine up to address more interesting stories and appeal to a wider audience.

How we did it:

- The communications manager kept informed of environmental issues nationally and in the region, and created an ongoing list of ideas for stories.
- The communications manager then drew up a list of proposed content for each issue.
- MBC management discussed the list and gave any feedback.
- The content was then finalised and approved by the MBC chief executive.
- The communications manager then commissioned any articles that he wouldn't be writing himself.
- The communications manager collated all content, images and adverts. This took between four and six weeks.
- The finished content was handed it over to the design agency, which designed the magazine.
- Proofs of each page were then sent to the communications manager for checking before sending to print.
- Completed issues were then printed and mailed out to subscribers.

Publicity:

Source NW magazine itself formed publicity for MBC. The MBC website hosted downloadable copies of each issue, helping to promote the magazine. Issues were also included in delegate packs for the Campaign's conferences and sub-regional forums.

Project value and funding sources:

Each issue cost between £15,000 and £18,000 to produce and was paid for by MBC. An estimated breakdown of costs is included below.

Commissioned photography: £500

Stock Pictures: £300

Commissioned articles: £2,500

Misc (transcription, travel etc): £100

Design and production management: £3,500

Print: £6,175

Mail out: £3,600

Envelopes: £300

Total: £16,975

Plus in kind contribution of the communication manager's time - £3,000.

For later issues it was necessary to secure new funding. External funding was secured for two issues in the form of sponsorship. This totalled £10,000 and £15,000 but was unlikely to have been possible for every issue. A further £3,000 was secured by including an insert from the Environment Agency – this was a good method for generating extra funds and could have been a sustainable source of funding for the magazine.

Who was involved?:

Communications Manager - acted as editor for the magazine, commissioned all freelance writing, sourced images and wrote around a third of the content for each issue.

Communications Advisory Group - advised the Communications Manager and helped direct the delivery of the magazine. Group included members from NWDA, Creative Concern, Sustain Magazine, Hemisphere Design & Marketing, Environment Agency, The Mersey Partnership, Information Commissioners Office and United Utilities.

Hemisphere Design & Marketing (design agency) - developed the design and managed production.

Freelance writers and photographers - produced content for the magazine.

New Media Manager - produced content for the magazine and ensured issues were available for download on the MBC website. Produced audio packages of interviews conducted for Source NW, which were promoted on the Campaign blog and website.

Lessons learned:

Aim high – just because you are a small organisation doesn't mean you can't produce something of the same standard as that of a much larger organisation.

Quality matters and needn't blow the budget – getting writers of a good standard doesn't need to cost the earth. If you are working on a tight budget, once you have got all the print and production costs down to a minimum, the only thing left to squeeze is the money spent on words and images. This is a double-edged sword though as the money saved is often at a cost to the quality of content produced.

It doesn't have to all be about you – a publication that focuses only on what your organisation does is a newsletter rather than a magazine. Both are valid but have very different audiences. Newsletters are appropriate for a smaller audience of an organisation's partners and supporters. If you are an organisation wanting to produce a magazine for a wider organisation, do not limit yourself to featuring content only focussed on your organisation. You will earn more credibility and a larger readership if you address the wider issues that impact on your organisation's area of work.

The hidden cost – the communications manager spent around 4-6 weeks producing each issue. This contribution was essential and must be considered when trying to deliver a similar project.