Exploring the Path to Publisher
n paper, Mike Regennitter was an unlikely candidate for publisher — let alone executive director. “I have a degree in communications arts, and I started in nonprofit publishing as an entry-level graphic designer,” says Regennitter, executive director of the Mercedes-Benz Club of America in Colorado Springs, Colorado. He moved to a couple of different organizations over the years, advancing to art director and production manager. “Within a few years of starting my career, I knew I wanted to have more of a leadership role, he says. “And I was happy to find that in the design department.”

Then, in 1999, Regennitter became art director for CBA — The Association for Christian Retail. During his 10 years in this position, he started to see the opportunities on the publishing side of the business. “Sales were lagging, and I asked myself, ‘How can I support a growth in sales?’” he recalls. “I was tasked with creating a great publication, but as the art director, my ideas on how to strengthen the magazine were largely ignored. So I started working with the sales team on my own.”

As Regennitter helped the sales team with their marketing and development of media kits, email blasts, and other kinds of promotions, he took on some of the
Takeaways for Creative Types Transitioning to Leadership

DON’T FORGET YOUR ROOTS. Stay involved in the publications, but don’t try to take them over or retain ownership.

BRING BIG IDEAS TO THE TABLE. Give your publishing team ideas and then step back and let them run with it.

UNDERSTAND YOUR ROLE. In the association’s marketing and communications, your role is now to set the tone for the messaging — not to micromanage the words or dominate the design.

BUILD THE SKILL SET. Master the art of controlling costs and growing revenue — or bring on people who can.

BE BOLD. Just because you’re the one responsible now, don’t get too cautious and revert back to the status quo.
I learned that if I’m making money for the organization, more people listen to me. It pains me to say it, but money talks.
— Erin Pressley, NACS

challenges associated with the financial side of publishing for the first time. “I looked for how we could add value for the advertisers and how we could roll in some added value in print and digital,” he says.

During his 14 years with CBA, Regennitter’s career morphed into a leadership role. The organization may not have had a choice. “I was submitting proposals continually,” he says. “How do we better manage expenses? How do we deliver more? We were cutting our way to prosperity, but you can only do that so long before quality starts to suffer.” Regennitter was promoted to director of membership, and three years after that, to director of business development, and then COO as well as publisher of the magazine.

“Ideas were not getting acted on because the leadership did not understand the business of publishing,” he says. “You have to be willing to take risks. I was prepared to fail and explain later. Failing forward is the culture you need. We don’t have enough bold people in the association publishing.”

The long-held culture of a strict separation between the content side and the business side of publishing has discouraged many seasoned communications professionals from trying to cross the great divide. And while Regennitter’s path was an organic transition, it’s becoming more and more common for association creative types to make the leap to publisher and beyond.

“It was never part of my plan to move into a role that involved advertising, let alone overseeing it,” says Amy Freed Stalzer, senior director of content for the National Business Aviation Association. “I have a background in liberal arts, a degree in English, and I spent the better part of 20 years as an editor. The business side just didn’t call to me.”

Over the years as the association grew, the editorial department grew, advertising grew, and soon it was clear — someone would have to bridge the gap. “Who better than the head of editorial to give information to advertising so they can sell the content?” Stalzer says. “We needed someone to develop and coordinate complementary messaging across multiple tracks. There really was no one else.”

Erin Pressley, vice president of publishing for NACS, the association representing convenience retailers, bridged the gap under similar circumstances. Pressley says she made the move from editorial to publisher by being in the right place at the right time and by having the right attitude. “The association was undergoing a reorganization. My boss asked me, ‘Do you know anything about ad sales?’ I said, ‘I know enough,’” Pressley recalls. “Really, a lot of it I had to learn on the job. A lot depends on having the right kind of attitude — can-do, positive, eager to learn.”

“It comes up that way a lot in associations,” agrees Stalzer. “In most associations, we’re used to wearing a lot of hats. As the organization grows, someone has to pick up the slack. Editors make their own decision about how much they want to bridge that line. A lot aren’t comfortable. They don’t want that type of responsibility and that’s fine. But if revenue building is a priority,
Those who need to make the business case to leadership can start with data analytics, which can inform both your editorial efforts and your advertising program.

— Amy Reed Stalzer, NBAA

PREPARING FOR PUBLISHER

While Regenniter, Stalzer, and Pressley did not originally set their sights on the business side of publishing, they have some solid advice for people who do.

Regenniter admits that in his younger years, he was not focused on career. “I was always entrepreneurial, but I didn’t find my true passion until I got into association leadership,” he says. “You get there through humbleness and pure determination. I found things that no one wanted to do, and I picked up the ball and said, ‘I’ll do it.’”

And Pressley points out that the opportunities will vary depending on the organization’s size. “On a small staff, being publisher might mean going on sales calls to support the sales team. Or, it might mean that you are the sales team,” Pressley says. “The title means so many different things based on the size and needs of an association.”

So if you want to make the leap, how do you prepare?

“I totally didn’t know enough when I started, but I was willing to learn,” Pressley says. “I knew I could figure it out, in no small part because I was heavily involved in AM&P. No matter what I ran into, I knew someone I could call to ask questions and get guidance. Having that network of people and those kinds of resources at my disposal was huge.”

Stalzer is also a proponent of ongoing professional development and networking. “Conferences are a great opportunity to learn. They are a way to hear from your peers, learn about publishing trends, and see what is going on outside your office,” she says. “AM&P is a must for me — and no one is paying me to say that. There are plenty of other great conferences as well. It’s important not to just hear about association publishers. What is happening with commercial publishers? You might not have the resources to do exactly what they do, but maybe you can get yourself thinking about new ways to solve issues.”

To prep for her new role as publisher, Pressley took a week-long executive education course at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Business called Finance for Non-Financial People. “It was a very stressful week, but it was incredibly helpful,” she says.

When it comes to continued education, Pressley says the size of the step you take will vary with time and means. It can be as simple as Googling “What is UBIT?” or looking at resources from groups like the Association of National Advertisers.

Pressley also sees branded content as the space where the worlds of editorial and business meet. “Being both editor and publisher allows me to better understand what it takes to make branded content work,” she says. “Content is sacred, but it also becomes a tool that, if used properly, can be a win-win-win for the reader, the advertiser, and the association. It can be good content that you can also make money with.”

Regenniter, who’s been on the business side of publishing for 20 years now, grew more intentional about his career path as he found himself spending more time with the finances. He got an IOM from the Institute for Organization Management and a CAE from ASAE, studying governance and leadership through various executive seminars.

But he never took his finger off the pulse of publishing. He’s not involved in the daily creative work, but even now, as executive director, Regennitter meets with the editorial and design team after each magazine issue for a post-mortem. “That’s where I get more involved using my experience to help staff be more effective and creative.”

His advice to would-be publishers is to think about your inherent strengths and how to apply them to the business of association publishing. “What are you really good at — financials, cost management, sales? In the end, you will have to embrace them all, but it is easier to grow your strengths than your weaknesses.”

You get there through humbleness and pure determination. I found things that no one wanted to do, and I picked up the ball and said, I’ll do it.

— Mike Regenniter, NBCA
He also advises to start having the career conversation with your superiors. “Most of those in leadership will be receptive to people who want to grow themselves professionally,” he says. “They will help you because the organization will benefit from your ambition. Don’t be afraid to have that conversation, but be ready that they might tell you something that you don’t want to hear. At least you will know then where you need to grow to get to the next level.”

MONEY STILL TALKS

With the popularity of sponsored content and content marketing, association communication professionals are increasingly called upon to contribute creative services to what traditionally fell outside their department. What hasn’t changed? Those with the revenue-generating ideas are the ones finding their way to the chief publishing officer desk or even the C-suite.

“Some editors try to move on to become a publisher because they see it as a natural progression of their careers. There is a perception of more prestige, bigger salaries, and more job security,” Pressley says. “Whether or not that’s true is another matter. What is true is that you have to be able to see a bigger picture of the business when you’re a publisher.”

Pressley recommends that even if you’re working on the creative side and do not have ambitions to make the leap, learning about the publishing side of the business is beneficial. “A light bulb went off — if I’m making money for the organization, more people listen to me,” she says. “It pains me to say it, but money talks. Being able to make a compelling argument for the value of our content from a financial perspective is far stronger than coming at it solely from the editorial side. I can talk more confidently with my board and colleagues who don’t understand editorial as well as I do. It’s helped me speak their language.”

Even though Stalzer believes the divide between editorial and sales is important, the individuals in these departments must collaborate. “There are editorial staff who stay pure — like church and state,” she says. But someone needs to be able to bridge the gap — otherwise, they are two separate teams seeking separate goals that in the long run neither will meet.”

Because senior executives and board members may not have editorial backgrounds, Stalzer says this can lead to a de-valuing of the publishing enterprise in the overall scope of the association. “I’ve been lucky in that our leadership understands the importance of publishing compelling content to engage members and potentially drive revenue,” she says. “Those who need to make the business case to leadership can start with data analytics, which can inform both your editorial efforts and your advertising program.”

This is perhaps the greatest strength of a designer- or editor-turned-publisher: They understand content and numbers. “It’s not just how the publication comes together, but how are the circulation numbers, is the signature cost efficient, are we on target for advertising sales,” Pressley says. “You need to be able to pull everything together to get a good look at the big picture.” And like anything else, you need to recognize when you need help.

Pressley says the best thing she ever did was hire an experienced sales director. “By hiring the right people — having the right people on the bus as they say — it can take a lot of pressure off of me needing to know all the nitty-gritty, day-to-day details,” she says. “I can keep my eye on the big picture because I know I have talented people in editorial and talented people in sales.”

Regennitter regularly draws upon his creative skills and experience in leading his association. “Being able to communicate a message quickly and effectively is a real asset to have as a leader,” he says. “I also use my creative side in strategic planning. Ideation is a very creative process.”

Another reason he cherishes his heritage on the creative side of publishing is the pure practicality of it all. “When our team is stretched, I jump in,” he says. “I can do the email blast. I can do the layout. I can write the story. And on those days, instead of feeling stressed, it actually feeds my creative monster.”

Thomas Marcetti is associate editor and Carla Kalogeridis is publisher and editorial director of Association Media & Publishing.

Guest Designers: LTD Creative

Since this job didn’t come with a client, we only had to impress the dogs. LTD Creative owners Tim Finnen and Louanne Welgoss brainstormed ideas about taking a professional leap and opening your mind to new ways of thinking. Louanne sketched a layout while Tim created the digital illustrations, manipulating stock to achieve an eclectic ripped from magazines look, all pulled together under a restrained color palette.

Armed with the illustrations, Louanne and team members Lauren and Evan collaborated on the layout and typography, finding creative ways to de-digitize headlines and callouts to suit the hand-done look. And of course, they couldn’t just plop down normal headshots; they gave them a bit more personality. “These folks all made that leap, but at the same time, they aren’t plunging to their death, so the parachute gives it a form of safety,” says a conscientious Tim about his thought process.

The result? “Pawfect!” according to LTD’s two pawfessional assistants, Maggie and her protégée, Moose.

LTD Creative is a strategic web and graphic design firm for associations. Our knowledge base includes expertise with education, medical, science, financial, and housing associations. LTD Creative helps achieve your objectives with targeted materials for print and digital publications, conferences, websites, and marketing material.

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