

## MAGAZINE CIRCULATION STRATEGIES

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Magazines seem to bear no small resemblance to rabbits these days. With more magazines than ever on the newsstands and advertised on radio, television and even in your own mailbox, in order to survive, a magazine must develop aggressive and up-to-date circulation strategies.

As state magazines, most of us are insulated from a daily concern with subscriber numbers since we don't rely on advertising revenue. Still, with ever increasing costs and a not inconsiderable desire to hold onto our jobs, we, too, must make circulation one of our prime concerns.

Our story at *Virginia Wildlife* is a simple one. While spending only a minimal amount of money, we have been able to withstand a rate increase without losing subscribers and have even managed to recoup losses sustained during the past few years of circulation inactivity.

At *Virginia Wildlife* we really hadn't actively sought to expand our subscriber base. We had a steady group who continually renewed every year and an even steadier group who routinely give *Virginia Wildlife* as Christmas gifts. We enjoyed a comfortable position until February 1979 when we began to notice that our circulation, which rarely fluctuated more than 200 or 300 monthly, began to decrease significantly.

Investigations revealed that during the past few months we had lost approximately 4,000 subscribers. We decided not to concern ourselves with "why" and thought instead that it would be more productive—not to mention easier—to attempt to attract new readers to our magazine rather than agonize over why we were losing some of the old ones.

Clearly, it was time for some aggressive action. Our problem was complicated by the fact that a price increase from \$3.00 to \$5.00 per year was due to take effect in July 1979. Amidst dire predictions of impending disaster, we began to look at just what we had done in the past to promote our magazine.

Our policy had been to send one renewal notice to each subscriber one month before expiration. This was his only chance to renew and if he declined, or simply didn't get around to it, he didn't hear from us again. The problem was worsened by the fact that the form itself was old-fashioned and didn't project the image of the magazine today as it had done when it was originally designed. Redesigning the form seemed to be an obvious step and we took it.

Another technique we employed was to send an empty magazine cover with a plate change indicating that we were sorry we couldn't send the entire magazine. Since his subscription had lapsed, this was all he would receive. The cover was clever, but the success rate was nothing to get excited about.

We also relied on our game warden force. One of the job requirements was that each year each warden must sell 100 subscriptions. Most wardens just barely met the requirement. Certainly, there were a few super salesmen who really enjoyed that part of the job, but this enthusiasm was not contagious. Frequently wardens went back yearly to the same people. So, our subscriber base was steady, but it wasn't expanding significantly from their efforts.

Basically, this was just about all that we at *Virginia Wildlife* did to make it easy or subscribe to our magazine. But with our circulation dwindling from month to month, it was time for some serious action.

Just what is the best way to get the word out and tell people that we have a four-color magazine on Virginia's outdoor sports and wildlife?

First, a little overdue thinking made us realize that thousands of copies of publications went out of our office every day without one word concerning *Virginia Wildlife* magazine in them. Here was a bonanza of free ad space!

Next we looked at television. Our office produces weekly a television show. Where could one find a more ideal place to promote the magazine?

And what about radio? How could we enlist stations in the promotion of *Virginia Wildlife*?

Limited as we were by state regulations, we couldn't buy ad space in other magazines, but could some sort of deal be arranged?

And, lastly, with the names and addresses of hunting and fishing license holders at our very fingertips, isn't that the kind of list that direct mail specialists would pay for through the nose? To what group could we better pitch our hunting and fishing magazine?

The first place to which we turned our attention was getting our message into the already existing publications that came out of our office. Game and fish regulations, our enormously successful Sportsman's Calendar and numerous maps and booklets were among the more promising possibilities.

The number of those who see our yearly game laws and fishing regulations is staggering. This year we printed 800,000 game laws. We put an ad with an attached form in one panel of the 28 panel publication. We omitted no essential information in order to include our message. We did the same thing with our fish laws.

In the first month after both were distributed, we received 380 new subscriptions. It has now leveled off to about 100 per month. About 92% of these are new subscribers. These laws will be in distribution until next June and should continue to work for us until that time. This simple ad placed in our laws has proved to be a real subscriber bonus. It was almost painfully easy—and free!

For the last two years we have produced the *Virginia Wildlife Sportsman's Calendar*. Our 1978-79 edition sold out of its 24,500 copies within four months—and all without one word concerning *Virginia Wildlife* magazine. This year, we increased our print order to 30,000 and included a simple form blown in during the binding process. Since July we have sold 28,200 and the inexpensive insert has brought us an average of 120 new subscriptions each month. All in all, this was another subscription gold mine.

Secondly, our *Virginia Wildlife* television program in the Richmond area offered another promotional opportunity. The show is produced by a local station at no cost to us. I appear on the program each month, telling viewers just what to expect in the next issue of the magazine. We use slides and art to reinforce our message and try to make the discussion as controversial and lively as is possible. We end by flashing the address for subscribing.

The response in actual subscriptions has been next to nothing with only 13 in a three month period. This may possibly have something to do with the fact that the program airs at 6:30 am on Saturday. The response has not been overwhelming, but then it costs us nothing but a morning of my time each month. Our philosophy here is that the more familiar the public with *Virginia Wildlife*, the easier it will be to get them to send in their check when we pitch them in a more accessible way.

That also is our philosophy concerning the radio spot we instituted.

I made a 3 minute sample tape giving some of the highlights from each month's magazine. Of the 144 stations in the state, 23 indicated that they would be interested in using the spot on a monthly basis. In 3 months I received only 3 subscriptions relating directly to the show. We use taping facilities of another state agency, about \$16 is spent in mailing costs and \$60 monthly in tape duplication fees. In cold hard numbers, the spot doesn't pay for itself. But in exposure for *Virginia Wildlife* magazine, we're certain that it does.

And what about other magazines? Our Editor, Harry Gillam, energetically began calling magazine editors within the state to arrange exchange deals. We'd run an ad for their publication in the "Outdoor Notebook" section of our magazine if they'd run an ad that we could supply camera-ready. A local publication called the *Outdoor Virginian* agreed, as did *Commonwealth Magazine* and the *Tennessee Sportsman*. The numbers aren't staggering, but they do prove that the minimal effort and cost was well worth it. We got four new subscribers from the *Outdoor Virginian* and three from the *Tennessee Sportsman* during the three month test period. *Commonwealth* gave us an unexpected bonus. Instead of just running the ad in the one issue we had agreed upon, the art director placed our ad in wherever he needed to fill some space. We got three months worth of free advertising and 23 new subscribers.

Additionally, the Virginia's Wildlife Federation ran our ad several times in their *Federation Record*, giving us 27 new subscribers during the test period.

Again, the only cost involved here was the copywriter and artist's time and a few supplies.

The last thing to which we turned our attention was a direct mail campaign. We had the best possible list available to us at no charge—that of the current hunting and fishing license holders.

I read as much as I could about writing and putting together a direct mail package, something that I really knew nothing about. I attended a seminar in New York held by Rene Gnam, one of the most respected names in the field. Using everything that I had learned at this session, our Art Director Robin Sharpe and I put together a direct mail package, including a letter, a copy of an interoffice memo and a specially coded envelope.

I used a list that one of our biologists had scientifically collected of hunters and hired a part-time person to lift names randomly from fishing license agent books. I used 500 hunting license holders and 500 fishing.

This campaign brought us 47 new subscribers, a response rate of 5.02%—a figure that is considered highly respectable in direct mail circles. While this is not quite as easy a way to gain new subscribers as some of the other methods I've described, it does work.

What was the bottom line in all of our new circulation strategies?

With our new rate taking effect last July, instead of being burned by losing subscribers, we managed to recoup all of the losses that we had suffered over the past year. Our circulation stands now at 59,000, as opposed to our late 1978 list of 54,500.

And we plan to keep aggressively pounding at it.

We'll continue with what we've been doing in the last few months such as exchange deals, radio and television spots and the like. Never again will any publication leave our office without the *Virginia Wildlife* message.

We're planning a more extensive mail campaign using our hunting and fishing license lists. The trading of our subscription list for those of other magazines in the state is on the boards. With any luck, we'll hit an entirely new group of people with our *Virginia Wildlife* pitch. We're going to begin to regularly include information in our weekly press release from articles in the magazine. Every request for information that hits our office will include a form for subscribing to *Virginia Wildlife* magazine.

A new idea that we plan to explore is that of having hunting and fishing license agents give out forms for the magazine with every license sold. We'll also design posters for them. We're planning to produce a television spot for *Virginia Wildlife*. We've even been offered free production help in putting it together. Additionally, we plan to do a radio spot promoting the magazine. And with all of these new subscribers, we plan to re-evaluate our renewal campaign. We're aware that it needs it.

One thing that we learned from our experiences was that ways to promote a magazine are only limited by the people behind the ideas.

At *Virginia Wildlife* we were complacent with our steady and loyal group of subscribers. We had our heads in the sand and it took a jolt to get them out of there. In the almost inevitable budget crises that seem to be taking hold of many fish and wildlife agencies, we have seen painful evidence in the past that Information and Education sections are the first to bite the dust. To protect both your magazine and your job, you need numbers. And you need to do just about any cost-effective thing you can now to get them.