

signature

HONEY, I SHRUNK THE STAFF

Can associations with reduced resources take advantage of post-pandemic opportunities?

PAGE 24





HONEY, I SHRUNK THE STAFF

WHERE'S YOUR HEAD AT THESE DAYS? CUT AND CONSOLIDATE — OR RESET AND REINVENT?

BY CARLA KALOGERIDIS



Many of us can relate to this article's headline. And if you are one of the lucky ones who can't, you probably (sadly) could remedy that by substituting another word for "staff." Honey, I shrunk the... magazine? the conference? the budget?

The last 12 months have seen a world turned upside down, prompting many associations to jump on the bandwagon of corporate America cutbacks. Many companies that remained profitable or even thrived in the pandemic laid off workers anyway because it was something that already needed doing, and a worldwide pandemic let them do it without much criticism. Some associations have found themselves in the same position: Inflated staffs were quietly deflated, events and travel budgets reined in, and not surprisingly, leadership has turned to the chief publishing officer and whispered (loudly): "Hey, now's the time to [fill in the blank] reduce frequency or cut pages or go all-digital —no one will blame us right now."

On the flip side, some association publishers are watching their advertising sales take flight in recent months — even in print where studies show Zoom-fatigued content consumers are seeking respite. With events cancelled all over the globe, many advertisers are taking money earmarked for conferences and exhibitions and putting it into advertising and sponsorships. It makes sense: They need to fill the new-lead pipeline somehow, and if they don't find good use for their marketing budget, they might never get it back.

So, what's happening in our neck of the woods? Here's what we're seeing: Some association publishers are cutting back; others are consolidating but growing. And if you know where to look (hint: the demise of third-party data — more on that later), you might even find that associations are poised for their biggest growth opportunity in a decade.



HONEY, I SHRUNK THE MAGAZINE

Susan Welter and the publishing team at the National Association of REALTORS® (NAR) is in the beginning stages of a transformation. “We are just starting this process, but we do anticipate some consolidation and a reallocation of a portion of our print production dollars to more mobile media formats such as podcasts, video, and webinars,” she says. “And we will be redeploying those savings to grow capabilities in these areas with the goal to communicate to our members where they are — on digital and mobile platforms.”

Welter, who as vice president, creative and content strategy, is just over two years into her role as leader of NAR’s publishing team, says the pandemic helped NAR identify member needs and where changes needed to be made. “We strive to take a member-first approach to all we do and continually challenge ourselves to drive value for our members,” she explains, “and that sometimes means having to make some tough decisions and lead change.”

NAR began its transformation by hiring a consultant (Stratton Media Strategies, LLC) to review its publishing operation. “The review included everything from content to finances,” says Welter. “It became clear that while our bi-monthly *REALTOR*®

magazine was at one time the primary member communication vehicle, needs and preferences evolved and the advertising dollars went with them, long before the pandemic.” And this year? “The trend continues as print dollars decline, while every new digital opportunity we launch is booked within weeks,” Welter says.

“When we did an advertising audit of our magazine, we found that our advertisers were running in an average of 3.8 issues each. We’ve only got five or six advertisers buying every issue. That told me right there that we needed to look at going quarterly,” she says. “The market will tell you what it can bear.”

NAR started implementing cost-saving measures like co-mailing — which made a significant impact on a magazine budget that mails 1.3 million copies per issue. At the time of this interview, Welter was preparing a recommendation to her CEO. “No final decisions have been made yet, but we could go quarterly and increase the overall quality of the four remaining print issues and still experience a significant savings that can be reinvested in staff and resources to support new capabilities and products that deliver member value.”

Welter recognizes that *REALTOR* has a unique challenge as an advertising vehicle. “Our page rate places us in the same arena as *Fortune* and *Fast Company*,” she says. “But selling ads to non-endemic, lifestyle brands has never been successful. A good portion of the suppliers and service providers that serve our industry don’t typically invest in print brand advertising. When we compare our magazine to others in the field, they are all trending down in page count and frequency.”

That doesn’t mean Welter isn’t a fan of magazines. “I’m a true believer in print, I started my

career in print and publishing,” she says. “While the information we provide in the magazine isn’t time sensitive, the magazine is popular for its tangible tricks, tips, and tools. Members consider it to be very valuable.”

Welter has been calling on her AM&P Network colleagues for advice, such as SHRM’s VP of editorial, Tony Lee. “SHRM has a great story to tell,” Welter says. “They made the switch to a digital-first approach without sacrificing their print.”

Like NAR, SHRM’s *HR Magazine* continually ranks as a top member benefit. But with rising costs in postage and printing, Lee told Welter he was having a hard time budgeting enough to cover all the expenses. SHRM decided to create a weekly e-newsletter with a magazine-length feature and then changed *HR Magazine* to quarterly as part of SHRM’s Go Green initiative. Lee says members were “incredibly supportive” when surveyed about the idea and that “gave them the greenlight from the member standpoint.” (*Editor’s note: To read more about SHRM’s digital-first transformation, see Signature Jan/Feb 21, pp. 18–19.*)

Welter is certain that however NAR moves forward in the hopefully waning months of the pandemic, it will be investing in a more robust digital publishing suite, including video and podcasting. “We have to make sure we are aligned with how members want to receive information,” she says. “Our team knows there are no sacred cows. We are looking at everything and are encouraged at every level to lean forward.”

Welter describes NAR’s audience of real estate agents as “mobile savvy,” but NAR continually surveys its members to stay on top of preferences. Stratton is also doing extensive surveying as part of the publication audit, as well as seeking input from NAR’s Member Communications Committee for which Welter serves as staff executive. And the communication is transparent; any changes NAR

makes will be coupled with a campaign explaining the changes to the members. “They need to know that we are not taking away content. We are only shifting how we provide it,” she says. “In fact, we look forward to delivering more targeted, timely, and original content.

“I’d rather be investing in technologies that can help us with targeting and personalization,” Welter continues. “We have an amazing data science team that is able to provide us with insightful and actionable data about our members. We eventually want to provide members the Amazon-esque experience but with content... ‘If you’re interested in that, you might like this.’”

Another place Welter plans to invest is in the professional development of the NAR publishing staff. “We have the opportunity to grow the skills of our already talented in-house staff as we make our offerings more versatile,” she says. “I see this transformation as a combination of new opportunities for staff to learn and grow, but I also expect we will need to do more outsourcing.”

HONEY, OUR STAFF NEEDS CHANGED

Ancdotally, I can confirm that many AM&P Network members have told me about staff reductions over the past year. Editor in Chief Meghan Stromberg was asked to look at her publishing operation at the American Planning Association (APA) from a different angle, and the process revealed that personnel needs had changed.



“WE MADE SURE MEMBERS KNEW THAT THE MAGAZINE CUTS WERE NOT A KNEE-JERK REACTION TO THE PANDEMIC — THEY COULD EVEN BE CONSIDERED OVERDUE, GIVEN THE PUBLISHING INDUSTRY’S SHIFTING LANDSCAPE.”



Meghan Stromberg, AMERICAN PLANNING ASSOCIATION

“I was asked in 2020 to cut 25 percent out of my budget,” says the 16-year veteran of the organization, who had hoped that staffing would not be affected. In the end, however, that wasn’t the case. With several months of experience with the magazine’s digital-first transition, coupled with the association’s focus on digital relevance and streamlined workflows, it became clear that a full-time copyeditor position was no longer needed. “It was terrifically sad to lose a valued contributor and colleague, but this decision made sense for the organization. It was also in line with global publishing trends, she says.

APA began with a comprehensive assessment of all publishing activities to identify which to focus on, which to economize, and which to sunset. APA’s scholarly journal fell into the first group, and its monthly member magazine, called *Planning*, fell into the second. Welter spent much of late summer/early fall of 2020 developing an economization plan that reduced the monthly magazine to quarterly, but also added value to the publication by transitioning to a digital-first strategy.

APA made a modest investment in its online presence for the magazine, creating a new digital dissemination plan, adjusting workflows and job duties, and rolling out messaging to the members about the change. The magazine went quarterly in January 2021. “We’re figuring it out as we go, which takes a loyal and committed staff willing to expand their comfort with the unknowns,” she says. “It helps that our publishing team has been empowered to make decisions with minimum interference.”

Like Welter, Stromberg and her team are taking their members — who are city planners and city government staff — along with them for the journey. “We explain every step we make,” she says. “We made sure members knew that the magazine cuts were not a knee-jerk reaction to the pandemic — they could even be considered overdue, given the publishing industry’s shifting landscape. We told them that the world has changed, and we need to change with it.”

APA conducted reader research to determine “how much the membership could tolerate losing,”

as Stromberg puts it. “The magazine enjoys really high desirability. We used the survey to find out which sections we could eliminate and what members could live with in terms of frequency.”

Stromberg also benchmarked against other association publishing teams. “Because we are highly subsidized by our association, there wasn’t as much pressure on our publishing department as some other organizations were experiencing,” she says. “But when I talked to different association publishing colleagues about what they were doing, I realized we were way behind the times. Our content was very good, but the way we presented it online was not.”

One product she completely sunsetted was the magazine’s digital flipbook because people simply weren’t using it. The print edition went from a monthly 56-page magazine to a quarterly 48-pager. Stromberg also changed the paper and trim size to save money. Her printer, Royle Printing, actually found a less expensive paper with a more luxurious feel.

It’s too early to tell how the magazine frequency reduction will impact ad sales. “I’m nervous about it...I won’t lie. But the advertising revenue we were bringing in wasn’t covering the cost of the magazine anyway,” Stromberg points out. “A new digital approach opens up new ad possibilities.”

Instead of publishing one new article to the website every month, the team now posts new web-only content every week. APA’s monthly e-newsletter — which Stromberg says has “great open rates and clicks and solid advertising” — promotes the digital and print magazine content.

Stromberg admits her staff isn’t trained to do what she is asking them to do through the digital-first approach. “We did significant research on how other association magazines were approaching it, and we found colleagues through AM&P who were willing to walk us through it,” she says. One fellow AM&P Network member took Stromberg through her entire digital-first workflow, step by step. “Now, the digital-first strategy has revitalized us,” she says.

For example, the publishing team is engaging more with podcasts and video. When possible, story interviews are recorded, and then those



are made into podcasts. APA's on-staff digital asset specialist taught the editorial team how to structure an interview to get better sound bites. They're even getting it done working from home without the microphones and mixers that they'd have access to in the office; Stromberg says the editor and the interviewee both record their own voices on their smartphones while the interview is conducted over Zoom. They use 15-minute recording segments to allow the conversation to unfold uninterrupted — any longer than that and the files are too big to send to the digital specialist, who does the editing.

“The editors who used to write are now doing the podcasts and video,” Stromberg says. “We’re learning how to promote ourselves, how to write copy to sell a story, how to do SEO. We’re learning how to produce a photo-driven story when everything we did used to be a narrative.”

“Once we got over the initial shock, we’ve gotten excited about the possibilities,” she says. We’re learning to get comfortable with uncertainty. We got a lot of things wrong, but you can change the plan as you go.”

APRIL 15 @ 1–2 PM EST

The Staffing Conundrum: Has Remote Working Changed Us Forever?”

Register for this FREE AM&P Network Lunch & Learn at siii.net/event/amp-network-remote-work-webinar.

HONEY, I SHRUNK THE SALES

There’s a flip side to everything — including what Jim Elliott, president of James G. Elliott Co., Inc., describes as “the many tactical reasons not to consolidate and cutback right now.”

Now before you go, ‘Of course he would say that...he’s in ad sales,’ Elliott has years of experience and has seen this kind of thing before.

“I always tell my publishers who contemplate reducing magazine frequencies or cutting pages in tough times to first ask: What is the job to be done?” says Elliott. “The job is to serve members. Some associations are making consolidation decisions without having all the right data and without getting an objective view of their assets and the competitive atmosphere. The economy gets bad, and they panic. Maybe you do have too many assets, and you do need to consolidate. But don’t make a move like that without very carefully analyzing the data and thinking it through.”

Elliott says before making any decisions, start with asking the members what they want. “In many cases, it’s absurd to get rid of the magazine because that is what they want,” he says. “Are there existing digital products that serve the audience just as well? If not, you’ll have to invest what could be significant money to create digital assets that are as effective and well-liked as print. And you have to spend money constantly to drive web traffic. Bottom line: You don’t make changes when you’re in trouble — you make them when it makes sense for your customers.”

"MY ADVICE TO ASSOCIATIONS FOR THIS YEAR IS THAT IF YOU DO NOTHING ELSE, GET YOUR FIRST-PARTY DATA HOUSE IN ORDER."

AnnMarie Wills, CEO OF LEVERAGE LAB



Elliott says that declining sales is often a sales problem as well as a product problem. "Salespeople are beat up right now. They don't know how to sell print or integrate it with digital. Often, a struggle in sales revenue means that you need to sell better *and* improve your assets." This might include:

- + Growing your audience.
- + Being more competitive with B2B publishers that serve your industry.
- + Optimizing your product line.
- + Improving the marketing of both your print and digital products.
- + Educating sales staff on how to sell digital.

A common misperception that associations have is that if an advertiser is spending a certain amount of money with the association's print magazine, when the number of issues is reduced, the advertiser will simply shift the saved budget over to the association's digital products.

"Most of the time, that's not the way it works," Elliott says. "The advertiser will say, 'OK, well if you're changing everything up, then I'm going to take a look at all my options and what else is out there.' That might mean moving some of the budget they used to spend on your magazine over to a competitor's magazine. Or, they may have been looking to make budget cuts of their own, and now you've given them an easy way to do it."

As noted by Stromberg and Welter, Elliott says there are also potential costs in staff training. "You can't just switch in the blink of an eye from something you know and do well to something you don't know or do well," he says. "Sometimes, you lose advertisers because the new digital product doesn't perform well. Why would you put great content into something that has only a 10 percent open rate? Even a bad magazine lands on their desk, and they have to do something with it."

And finally, he says, what message does it send when you cut print? How does that impact your brand? "It's challenging to position a consolidation or cutback as a positive step," Elliott says.

"The idea that people are one-dimensional in their media consumption is false," he adds. "People get tired of looking at a screen plus their 5–6 hours a day of Zoom calls. Are they really going to read your association magazine online?"

But what if the struggle is real — the association is bleeding money, and something has to give? Elliott says consider cutting back, but only temporarily. "You have to have a plan," he says. "Tell customers you're cutting back in 2021, and then add, 'And here's what our plan is for 2022.'"

Elliott's best advice? Look before you leap. "There are unintended consequences in all this," he says. "Look at what commercial publishers are doing. Research. Get outside advice. Get a real view of your association's publishing business from someone objective. You can't analyze something like this internally."

THE COOKIE IS CRUMBLING

Elliott says what really should be top of mind for association publishers is not cutbacks, but rather setting themselves up to take advantage of the demise of third-party data.

In case this is news to you, here's a snapshot of what's happening. For years, cookie tracking has been the way online advertisers find potential customers. Advertisers have a better chance of selling their product or service to a customer who has already shown an interest. Cookies provide lots of data, such as demographics and browsing behavior, that are very valuable to advertisers. However, due to global pressures to protect the data of individuals and increase cybersecurity, Google Chrome, Firefox, and Safari have announced plans to block third-party cookies that are not HTTPS secure and phase out cookies completely by January 2022. The EU is already passing stringent cookie-less legislation, and in the U.S., each state is devising its own privacy rules. What this means for targeting and retargeting is that digital advertisers are looking for other options.

AnnMarie Wills, CEO of Leverage Lab, says now is the time for associations to collect, unify, and



monetize every data stream. Wills, whose agency helps association publishers and other media organizations get the most value out of their first-party data, says all of this is good news for associations because advertisers are looking for publishers who have developed relationships with their customers.

“I call this the first-party data revolution,” says Wills. “It’s a perfect storm of marketing conditions for association publishers. As the third-party data button dries up, the relationship associations have with their members will become much more important to brand marketers. It’s very important for association content producers to innovate how they can provide leads back to advertisers. Retargeting ads based on anonymous cookies are going to disappear, but associations can leverage their first-party data to not only orchestrate personalized experiences for members, but also help advertisers target in a different way. It’s a new way forward.”

Wills says forward-thinking associations are capturing data around how individual members are acting and delivering that to advertisers as added value. “Many associations are leaning into that pretty hard,” she says.

The first step is to get your first-party data assets out of the buckets across the organization. Wills says it is probably all siloed, and the path forward is to build a first-party data asset that breaks down those silos. “The association’s data has value, and you will need to invest in technology that brings all that together for the advertiser. It’s hard to get a cross-platform picture without technology,” she explains. “A customer data platform acts as a veneer laying across all places where your customer data lives. It brings together in one place everything that you know about your member. Associations are in a unique position to offer singular, identifiable data on everyone they know.”

Then you have to take that knowledge and turn it into revenue. “Associations can offer marketing services or special programs, building higher-value audience segments that advertisers really want to reach. My advice to associations for this year is

that if you do nothing else, get your first-party data house in order.”

That includes getting your sales staff prepared. “Sales training is like therapy. It’s one of the most important things you’ll do,” she says. “People need to understand what digital advertising is and how it works.”

One final point about taking advantage of first-party data opportunities: Wills says there are opportunities for associations of any size. “It depends more on the profile of your members,” she says. “If you serve a unique niche, and your members aren’t reachable any other way, then you will likely have opportunities to monetize your first-party data.”

Of course, associations may need help putting value, pricing, packaging, and developing a marketing strategy for their first-party data, but it’s worth the effort. “Associations can build this amazing intelligence machine that marketers really want,” she says. “Your association needs to be able to say, ‘We know whatever you need to know about this hard-to-reach audience.’ That changes the way the association is seen by marketers. Associations have the gold — they just need to get the pickax out.”

It sounds simple enough, but the challenge is often getting around old thinking. “Associations sometimes think that they are only here to serve the members and that they need to protect their members from the marketplace,” Wills says. “But advertising is almost better than the news if done well. Get your head around the idea that your association can be a marketing innovator.”

I couldn’t resist asking Wills: And what do you think about the future of print?

“Print has incredible value,” she says. “Some of our publishing clients that didn’t have print are now creating it. Bundle print with digital to create first-party data. There are things you can do in print that you can’t do digitally. Fifteen years ago, we were talking about the end of print, but the fact is that one-third of your audience is always going to want something tangible. We’re very bullish about associations and member organizations right now.” **S**



Carla Kalogeridis is publisher and editorial director for Associations, Media & Publishing Network's Associations Council.

[in LinkedIn.com/in/carlakalogeridis](https://www.linkedin.com/in/carlakalogeridis)

[@carla_kalomed](https://twitter.com/carla_kalomed)

[@carlakal](https://www.carlakal.com)