

CHAPTER NEWSLETTER

The chapter newsletter, when used effectively, is the most powerful tool available to the chapter commander for welding together a group of disparate individuals into a unified and highly motivated MOS&B Chapter.

A chapter newsletter is basically a special interest publication. Studies run by major advertising agencies have shown that special interest magazines can have a more powerful effect in shaping people's viewpoints and lifestyles over a period of time than any other communication medium.

General

There are several main rules for producing an effective newsletter. It must deal with topics of great interest to the readers. It should be written in an unpretentious, folksy style (as close to conversational English as possible), so that it comes across as a one-way conversation between the writer/editor and the reader. It must be published frequently enough so that reading it becomes a strong habit, and the reader will soon consider the newsletter an old and trusted friend.

Content

To be effective, the newsletter must talk primarily about your chapter, its recent achievements, any problems, future plans, and the members. These will be the topics of greatest interest to your members and readers. The newsletter can make its greatest contribution toward unifying and motivating the chapter by concentrating almost exclusively upon those topics.

If a chapter is active, has standing committees, and its membership is greater than 25, it becomes impossible for each member to keep track of what all of the other members are doing, or to gain an accurate overview and image of the chapter and its varied activities. The members can keep up with the chapter's activities only if the newsletter covers them all.

It is a curious psychological fact that the members will view the activities performed by the chapter as being truly important and worthwhile accomplishments only after those activities have been reported on the printed page or in the newsletter. Also, if the newsletter judiciously keeps this chapter membership informed on the problems and roadblocks faced, except those posed by personality conflicts, members will often come up with the practical solutions that may have eluded the officers. The newsletter thus enables the chapter to make full use of the collective ability of the members.

By describing the future plans of the chapter, the newsletter reinforces the enthusiasm for those plans that the Commander generated during the last meeting. The newsletter can help the

commander persuade the membership to embrace a project or policy that may have received a cool reception when first announced.

Additionally, by recognizing and applauding the efforts of the individual members on solo and common projects, the newsletter makes the members feel appreciated, motivating them to do more in the future. The more members are mentioned in each issue of the newsletter, the better. Good related topics include a short biography of new members, perfect attendance lists, chapter awards to outstanding members, recognition of any promotions or awards received by members from their employers, churches, and other civic groups, birthdays, wedding anniversaries, and births.

Topics best avoided are more than passing mention of speeches that were delivered at the meetings unless they directly affect the chapter's planned activities. Also, highly detailed descriptions of ceremonies and any sermonizing to the members should be avoided as well. If one stays with the policies, activities, and members of your chapter as the topics for the newsletter, it will be more successful.

Style

Not every writer can be another Shakespeare, but almost everyone who writes can hold the attention of his readers if he follows a few simple rules. The ideal writing style is contemporary conversational English. Get as close to today's spoken English as you can and keep your sentences short and simple. The language must never get in the way of the thought.

To describe a myriad of chapter activities, devote a short paragraph to each topic. Use a boldfaced subhead to lead it off, and make the subtitle colorful, funny or witty in order to pull the reader into the paragraph. You might consider putting in an occasional lengthy editorial just to change the flow.

Don't be dictatorial and never attempt to be too dignified in your writing as it will likely come across as pompous, ponderous, boring and then not be read. For the same reason, avoid using the passive voice ("it was done."). Say, "Joe did it," or "I did it." Be loose, casual and friendly to achieve rapport with the reader.

If you want to educate or persuade via the written word, you must first entertain. Use the light touch except when dealing with serious topics. Humor is an absolute necessity. People seem to appreciate a style that contains mildly irreverent (whenever appropriate) wry humor. Of course, in matters of chapter policy, the newsletter must agree completely with the commander's line of approach. Use language, an occasional slightly off-the-wall word, the unexpected, because readers love writing that is fresh, new and exciting.

Always refer to the chapter officers and highly popular members by first name. Occasionally refer to them with a colorful aside or an underplayed compliment or a deft observation about their character. That, too, unifies and motivates a chapter.

The most important aspect of style is that the newsletter must always be credible and completely believable. It must never oversell or over praise or over condemn for any reason. It must be honest, and it must reflect the mature judgment of the writer. Otherwise, it is not worth the paper on which it is printed.

Format

It does not matter how the newsletter is formatted. If the editor owns a computer with a desktop publishing program on the hard disk, and he puts out a professional looking newsletter; great! But a newsletter consisting of three typewritten sheets stapled together can be just as effective. The only thing that really counts is what the words inside say, and how they go about saying it. Still, there are formatting rules. The big advertising agencies have done a lot of research into readability of the printed page. Here is what they have to say about the format: "If the words are hard to read, people won't read them even if the subject matter is important to them". Therefore, always use an easy-to-read serif typeface. One of the best is proportionally spaced Times Roman. If you are using a typewriter, you are stuck with whatever typeface with which it is equipped. You should, however, keep the type clean so the letters will print out sharply. If you have a choice, use a fairly bold typeface so the letters will print black and be easy to see. Use a 10-point or larger type. If you have too much material, print more pages or cut out some of the material, but do not shrink the typeface. Never overprint on tinted or colored paper and avoid using colored ink. If you do, the readability falls diminishes as does the number of readers.

Frequency of Publication

Ad agency and magazine publisher research show that the magazine (or your newsletter) can play an important role in shaping people's viewpoints and activities only if it is published at least once a quarter. Then, if it is put together correctly, it will gradually become a powerful influence upon the readership. They will begin to look forward to receiving it each quarter and will read it avidly. After a while, it will be an old and trusted friend. And that is exactly what you want.

Printing

Most chapters photocopy their newsletters. Many use the services of specialty photocopy shops. Most of these have several of the old slow traditional machines, and one high speed machine that will copy the entire newsletter, collate it, and maybe even staple it much faster than you can do it yourself. Unfortunately, many of those super machines turn out poor quality copies. Seek out and use a photocopy machine that will always give you copies that are as good as, or better than, your originals.

Distribution

Do not hand out your newsletters at the meetings. If you do, you will be wasting most of the benefits available from the newsletter. The members will scan the newsletter quickly while talking with their friends before or after the meeting and promptly forget most of what it contained.

Instead, mail out the newsletter so the members will get it the week before the monthly meeting or the first meeting of the month. Each member will then have more time to study the newsletter at home. They will also have the opportunity to begin thinking about the issues that will come up at the next meeting.

The Writer/Editor of the Newsletter

If the commander, the lieutenant commander, or the adjutant has a flair for writing and the time to do it, those officers are best suited to generate the chapter newsletter. Hopefully, they know exactly what is going on in the chapter. It generally takes about a day to gather up the information, write the articles, print, assemble, and mail the newsletter.

If the officers lack the time or the talent, then the chapter should take whatever trouble is required to recruit as a member, a professional writer who is sympathetic to the cause. The best bet would be an experienced reporter at the local newspaper. But he must be a person who sees eye to eye with the commander on chapter policy. Failing that, the chapter should select the best and most mature writer from among its members and persuade him to take the job.

If the editor turns out not to be an officer, the commander should establish a set of procedures whereby the officers and the committee chairmen will have available for the editor all the information he will need on the appointed day and in a usable form.

The commander should take the time to meet with the editor in advance and diplomatically discuss with him what issues are of particular importance. The commander should also make himself available to review the newsletter as soon as it has been written, which will likely be at the very last minute when it is ready to go to print. The commander should limit himself to only correcting major errors or embarrassments. Most importantly, the newsletter should never go out without first having received the commander's approval.

If the editor cannot get the information when he needs it, or the commander dictates the newsletter to him and then wants to be the real editor, this is a situation that takes all the fun out of the job for the editor and will not work well. Soon the editor will either be going through the motions or turning over the job to someone else. Value your newsletter editor; he is one of the most useful people in your chapter.

The Cost

For a chapter with an ample treasury, the choice is between a plain and a fancy newsletter. But for a new or small struggling chapter, the choice is between a plain newsletter and none at all. Plain is fine because it is what the words say that really counts as long as the words are easy to read. You can put together a newsletter using a typewriter, scissors, and rubber cement. The chapter may also try to get someone who is about to buy a new computer, to donate his old one to the chapter. An old, obsolete computer has little or no trade-in value, but if it still works, it is fine for putting out a simple chapter newsletter.

You can plan on a three page, single-spaced, newsletter stapled at the left corner. If the chapter has letterhead, cut out the MOS&B logo and the name "Military Order of the Stars and Bars" from a sheet of your letterhead and glue them down at the top of the first page of your newsletter. If the chapter does not have letterhead, cut the MOS&B logo and name out of old correspondence you have received from the division. Instead of gluing those items down at the top of your newsletter, tape them down. Next month you can work an exacto knife blade up under the tape, lift off the logo, and place it on your next newsletter.

Underneath the logo, type the name of your chapter. Below that, type the name of the newsletter (CHAPTER NEWS will get the job done); VOL. 1 (to show this is the first year you're putting out a newsletter); ISSUE 1; and the month and the year. Besides that, type "EDITED BY" and your name and phone number, and you are in business, ready to start typing the newsletter. Make most of your news items about one paragraph long.

So far you may have spent approximately \$.25 for paper and ribbon if you are using a carbon ribbon. If your chapter has 25 members and you are publishing a three-page newsletter, you will need to photocopy 75 sheets. At \$.08 a copy, that will be \$6.00 an issue for photocopying.

Larger chapters can cut back the cost of copying if they have a dedicated member who owns a photocopy machine that prints clear copies, and who is willing to absorb the cost of the toner and the wear and tear on the machine. You can buy a box of 5000 sheets of ordinary copy paper for about \$28.00 from one of chain discount office supply stores. Other costs are for postage stamps and envelopes. Buy a box of 500 plain long envelopes from a discount office supply store. It will cost you less than \$3, which is \$.006 per envelope. You should probably invest \$6 of your own money in a rubber stamp with your name and return address, and \$2 for a stamp pad as that will cut in half the time it takes to address the envelopes by hand.

Another tip is to design the back page of the newsletter so that when folded in half and stapled or taped closed, there is a blank space on the top half of the page. The space would then contain the required return address and the space for addressee and the postage.

As this is written, first class postage stamps cost \$.45 each, so postage for your mailing will cost you \$11.25. Add that to the \$6.00 to copy, \$.25 for envelopes, and the total cost is \$18.00 per issue, or \$.72 per member. If you can get the free use of a copier, the cost comes down to \$11.50 per issue, or \$.58 a member. Even if you are paying for the use of a copy machine, a year's worth

of newsletters comes to \$216.00 for the chapter, or less than \$8.64 per member, a low cost investment that any chapter can make for the future. You can also send electronic copies by email to those who will opt to receive it that way. Within a year or a year and a half, a newsletter will transform the chapter.

If you cannot get that much money in donations during chapter meeting, you should hold one annual fund raiser, perhaps a Chili Supper or something else in order to pay for the newsletter.