

A Labor of Love

By Bob Osgoodby

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Why would a publisher of an online Ezine or Newsletter give away free ads? The obvious answer is to build their subscription numbers. Notice I specifically did not say readership.

Many people will subscribe to an Ezine or Newsletter that allows them to submit free ads, in the hope that the other subscribers will see theirs. When the Ezine is published, many will simply scan it looking for their ad. Many times they won't even bother to check out the rest of it.

Publishers who accept free ads are building false subscriber numbers. Simply put, many people are subscribing to place their free ad, and not for the content of the publication. Unless their publication is a "labor of love", it will come back to haunt them when they decide to charge for the ads. They will experience significant defections when the "freebie" goes away.

A better way to build a subscription base is to build a readership base. People are getting the Ezine because of its content. They don't care about ads sprinkled about because the Ezine is informative and good reading.

We have found that the hardest job is to build the initial readership base. Using our newest publication as an example, we started off with an invitation to join in one of our other publications. Within two months, we had 400 subscribers. That number stayed pretty flat for another three months. But once it started to take off, it has averaged several hundred new subscribers a month. We are now over 5,200 which is not big numbers as Ezines go, but it is new and is a start.

Our goal was to build a solid readership, and not have any advertising until it reached 1,000. So what's the point here?

If we had allowed free ads from the onset, it would have taken us that long to build our subscriber base anyway, and a lot of people would have defected when the free ads dried up. In point of fact, it would have been a hard sell when we started to charge. People don't like to pay for something they used to get for nothing, so you won't even have a good advertiser base to show for your efforts.

If the content is there, readers will also be there. It is much easier to sell advertising in a publication that has a solid readership base, than one which was built on free ads. Many advertisers are pretty "savvy" and know which end is up in this regard.

It is a lot of work to schedule and publish the free ads. This time could be much better spent in developing a "first class" publication.

If you are thinking of starting an online publication forget the free ads. Concentrate on getting some good solid information that will build reader loyalty. Once this is accomplished, your subscriber base will grow. Then, you can start to market the ads in your publication. Surprisingly, when you have a decent subscriber base, people will approach you to place their ad.

So how do you get your subscriber base to grow if you are not giving away free ads? There are a number of ways. An ad swap with another Ezine is a good method. Try to find others that are a match with your publication and offer to swap ads with them.

Also, don't be afraid to spend a few bucks and place ads with other Ezines. Place free ads where you can, but don't use automated software which most experienced publishers simply block.

Once you get your subscriber base to a respectable size, you can then consider selling ad space. You should avoid competing ads in the same edition. This is confusing to the readers, and will guarantee that neither one will advertise with you in the future.

The number of online publications is increasing every day. If you are thinking of doing this, stick with your area of expertise, and remember that giving away free ads may hurt more than it will help.

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