

# IS IT TIME FOR A REDESIGN?

## SIX SITUATIONS THAT SIGNAL THE NEED FOR A NEW LOOK

BY LYNN RILEY

It's the stark reality of the information age: your established publication is competing with new ones every single day. You can have the best content in the world, but if members don't flip open the magazine, it won't matter. Of the stack of publications that hits your members' mailboxes, will yours catch their eye, or get lost in the shuffle?

In publications design you often hear this tidbit of wisdom: a magazine should get a facelift every 5 to 7 years. It's not just a ploy for design firms to make more money. Rather, any publication will look a little droopy and dated if it's been that long since it had a new look.

### COMMON TRIGGERS

Besides the "five to seven years" guideline, there are other good reasons for a publication redesign.

Here are six of them:

**Reason #1: A change in mission.** Has your magazine's mission shifted? Perhaps you're reaching out to a different target audience, or trying to bring in more advertising dollars. As a publication's focus changes, the design may need to change to support it.

For example, an association involved in the energy sector recently hired a new director of communications. The new director's vision for the association's magazine includes more coverage of legislative policy and more outreach to policy makers. Because these changes are significant, they'll warrant a different graphic design style from the old one.

**Reason #2: A change in reader demographics.** Reader demographics shift over time. Membership drives often recruit younger members, for example. As an industry changes, new demographic segments may join an association. Some publications serve not only members, but also reach out to policy makers and legislators. In fact, in reaching out to new members of any kind, the publisher should always consider the new group's interests when evaluating content and design.

All of these demographic shifts bring with them reader preferences. Older white

males in manufacturing or agriculture have different reading habits than twenty-somethings who are passionate advocates for a non-profit cause.

With more and more readers going online to get their information, and your publication needs to be competitive in light of this trend. Information should be organized for shorter attention spans and design should mimic the dynamic quality of the online environment. The publication should be as easy to navigate as a website.

**Reason #3: Feedback from other departments.** In some cases, the publication department is the most removed from association membership. That's why feedback from other departments is so crucial.

The membership department, political outreach staff, PR personnel, and meeting planners talk to members all the time. They know the membership and are excellent resources when you assess the current effectiveness of the publication. The feedback other staff provide can greatly influence the publication's design.

**Reason #4: Feedback from readership surveys.** Periodic reader surveys help you keep your finger on the pulse of your readers. Most publications survey their readers far too infrequently. Many never conduct a survey. Ideally, though, you should conduct a reader survey every three years.

An effective survey helps guide editorial changes, which in turn will impact the design. The most helpful questions address what parts of the publication members read the most, what they find most helpful, what their favorite features or sections are, and what changes they would like to see.

Questions that ask directly about design, however, aren't very helpful. For one thing, preferences are subjective. But even more so, what makes for a reader-friendly publication isn't obvious to non-designers. If you ask questions about the look, readability, and reader likes and dislikes (and why), the designer can take it from there and figure out how to improve the look.

**Reason #5: A drop in ad revenues.** Adver-

tisers look for publications with broad industry appeal and strong readership. Sagging ad sales may indicate that advertisers lack confidence in your publication. A fresh, up-to-date design sends the message that you're on the ball when it comes to capturing and keeping reader interest. (And here's a tip: give advertisers a preview of the new design in your media kit to generate excitement and stimulate ad sales.)

Today's technology has made printing more affordable. It's a great opportunity to bid out your publication to printers and take a look at the competitive pricing on 4/color these days. Advertisers find 4-color more appealing, and it gives them a wider range of options.

**Reason #6: Digital publishing trends.** Many publishers are now offering a digital version of their print publication. A digital publication delivers time-sensitive information to members more quickly, and it's often the format of choice for the Web generation.

If you are thinking about going digital, consider how well the existing print design will translate into digital format. A redesign can deliver a publication that works well in print and electronic format.

### INVESTMENT RETURNS

The thought of a redesign can be overwhelming. Many association publishers fulfill multiple roles, and getting the publication out regularly is just one of their many responsibilities. Redesign is really an investment, though, that will ultimately make a publisher's job easier.

A redesign can mean more ad revenues, more satisfied membership, new members, and can even increased influence on policy makers. Do you really want to wait another five to seven years for that? ████████████████████



*Lynn Riley is principal graphic designer for Lynn Riley Design, Inc. in Chester, Maryland. You can reach her by phone at (410) 725-1001 or via email at [lynn@lynnrileydesign.com](mailto:lynn@lynnrileydesign.com).*