

HindSight

By Graham Bell

Looking back on my tenure as editor of The Observer, I realize it is time to pass on lessons learned, or at least lessons perceived. Sometimes what we think we learn is merely an illusion. You be the judge.

This little dissertation will convey my perception of what the pitfalls of editorship are, and what I could have done differently while I was trying to perform that task. Of course, there were some pleasures derived from this experience and I'll discuss these, but remember it is human nature to harp on the negatives so expect an abundance of comments of that ilk.

It is great when The Observer comes together smoothly; the material is provided without too much nagging; required editorial changes are minor; the contents neatly fit our standard 8 page format; major cuts are not needed to make the contents fit; additional last minute articles are not required to fill the pages. It does occasionally happen that way.

It is frustrating when even nagging fails to produce enough relevant material for an eight page newsletter. An editor feels guilty when he has to insert trivial or seemingly useless articles just to fill out the page budget. Even worse is trimming or eliminating a good article contributed by a member. After all, that is what The Observer is supposed to be, a member newsletter containing material provided by members.

OK, let us now harp on some of the negatives:

- **COST:** NEKAAL has to operate on a tight budget, there is barely enough annual income to cover our insurance needs, let alone other things. So as editor I usually just donated the cost of publication. When we were all getting black and white copies, and none of it was online, the Kinko's bill was usually about \$30.00 a month. Add another \$8.00 to \$10.00 to cover mailing and you have used the better part of a pair of twenty dollar bills each month. After switching to an online version, we got the benefit of a colorful publication. Printing costs were up slightly, even though we printed only about half as many copies (have you priced color toner cartridges or ink jet cartridges lately?). Fortunately, since half the issues were online, mailing costs dropped so that the bottom line was a little less than before. **I didn't find cost to be a significant problem**, as I was happy to donate that amount each month. I didn't hear Janelle complaining much when she was donating the postage. Unfortunately, some in our organization might not be able to contribute an additional \$300 to \$400 a year. This is one reason why the new approach being implemented by Bill and Russell is a good step forward.
- **GRANDKIDS:** How, you ask, can something as wonderful as grandchildren be a negative? They are not, but they produce a negative. Traveling to see them on schedules established by wife and daughter disrupt publication schedules substantially. When I take on a responsibility with real, or implied, deadlines, I feel guilty if I miss those deadlines. But if I missed a travel schedule I would also feel guilty, and the spouse has more opportunity to complain than do you.
- **REJECTION:** On a few (very few) occasions, I had to completely reject a submitted article. Occasionally an article was just so inaccurate as to prohibit publication. Nearly always, I was able to work with the author to correct those inaccuracies, but on a couple of occasions that wasn't sufficient. On another occasion or two, the tenor of the article was such as to be, in the editor's opinion, inappropriate for The Observer. Be aware that if you submitted an article which didn't appear in the Observer, it was probably an oversight on my part. If I rejected an article of yours, you heard from me explaining why I rejected it. That was the part I really disliked.
- **NAGGING :** Here, in my opinion, is the worst part of editing and publishing a newsletter. The members have expectations; *Content* – an 8-page newsletter containing some relevant information, *deadline* - available at the general meeting, *Frequency* – once a month. Without a lot on nagging on my part, the material was not available for publication.

HindSight

In a business environment, **all** of us would have been fired. But a volunteer editor has no administrative control over volunteer authors or their schedules.

- **AND:** Last (and least) putting my typos and other mistakes out there for all to see. Hey, I'm human (barely perhaps).

There are, of course, some pleasurable positives:

- **SATISFACTION:** Was it Mr. T who said something like "I love it when a plan comes together?" There was always satisfaction (or is the word relief) when the final version got uploaded to the web site and the printed version was ready for distribution.
- **PRIDE:** It may not have been justified, but I frequently was proud of the quality of the newsletter. Content, as contributed by members and others was not only appropriate but was usually quite interesting and informative. The format of The Observer had, in my opinion, a pleasing appearance.
- **EDUCATIONAL:** with every issue I found at least one article from which I learned something. To fill out the newsletter, I often did some research so that I could write an article. That was always educational (otherwise I discarded the article and started over).
- **AND:** Last (and **NOT** least) getting to know you better. With each article submitted, I got to know the author a little better. Walt, that doesn't necessarily apply to you. The financial reports told us only of NEKAAL, not the Coles.

So, in hindsight, what should, or could, I have done differently? Often I thought of doing something which I didn't quite have the courage to carry out. What if I had never requested input for The Observer (nag), but instead had mailed a postcard on the due date stating that there was nothing to publish? I did, on one or two occasions, publish a much abbreviated newsletter because of insufficient material, and I did miss one or two issues because of that or because of a schedule conflict on my part. When all the articles which arrive do so within the last week before publication, schedules are very critical.

There were some pretty standard articles in The Observer, '*From the Prez*', '*FASTTRACKS*', etc. What if, instead of the *From the Prez* article I had merely included this sentence: '**Again, Graham failed to provide this article before the deadline**'? I am sure that would have upset a few people had it been their name and not mine. That approach wouldn't have accomplished much for several reasons. It alienates people. It doesn't address the non-standard articles, the most important ones, those voluntarily contributed by the general membership. You always hear from a select few in The Observer, you should be hearing from the rest of the members as well. With just the monthly reports on finances, minutes, facilities, FASTTRACKS, the president, etc. The Observer would soon be merely a status report. Member contribution is needed to keep it truly a **Newsletter**.

What about the future? I think the new approach to publishing The Observer will streamline the process and be a very positive step forward, but only if **you** participate. Forget about deadlines. Send in contributed articles as frequently as you can. Let the editor build a repository of articles to be published. Submit recurring articles as soon as possible, ahead of the deadline. Let the editor use the last few days before publication to handle breaking news and other last minute details.

It will probably take a couple of months to work out all the bugs in the new Observer publication process. Then, with your help, The Observer should be better than ever.