My Last Issue (or, “Could You Be A Newsletter Editor?”)

by Tom Frerichs

This is the forty-first issue of the Sunrise Herald I’ve edited, and it will be the last. Although Stu Jones reported elsewhere that my retirement was scheduled for November, I think it will work out better if I leave now. There normally wouldn’t be a June or July issue due to the Convention and the Fourth of July conflict with our meeting, so this will allow the new editor two free months to get his bearings.

My reason for leaving is very simple: I’m tired. Over the past year my day job has become very challenging. I just don’t have time or energy after I come home from work to devote to anything other than a bit of reading and getting some sleep.

Although the results may not show it, the newsletter takes me somewhere between ten and twenty-four hours of work each month. I realized how much time this was taking when Jim Laird, our Superintendent, asked about our latest modeling project at the last meeting. I hadn’t done any modeling in over a year.

Job Description

As Stu also reported, Jim asked the various officers and other workers to provide a job description, a short summary of what they think they should be doing. Although technically I’m out of a job, I thought I’d offer my version for the editor’s job, both as a bit of help for the next guy and to explain what my goals were. Then you can judge how well I’ve managed to meet them. Here’s my description:

_The Editor shall collect and create content to be presented in an interesting, informative, and attractive manner for publication in an electronic monthly newsletter named the Sunrise Herald with the goal of promoting the activities and people of the Division. The Editor shall report to the representative of the Publisher: the Division Superintendent. The Editor may e-mail the newsletter and may maintain a list of e-mail addresses of newsletter recipients._

Explaining some of those terms

Those words “interesting, informative, and attractive” take a little explanation. For example, interesting and informative seem to be the same thing, but they aren’t. The IRS Tax Code may be very informative, but unless you’re a tax lawyer or being audited, there’s no way it could be considered interesting.

Attractive and interesting are two very different goals. I’ve seen publications that are works of art. The graphic embellishments, the photography, and the typography are beautiful. There’s only one problem: when you get to the actual content that’s being communicated it’s boring.

On the other hand, having text lines that are too long for easy reading, changing fonts for each story, and all the other sins of poor design make the most interesting content unaccessible. Attractive doesn’t necessarily mean pretty; it can also mean readable.

Promotion is the goal

You’ll notice I said nothing about the Region, or the NMRA, or even model railroading in that verbiage. Of course, the division should be promoting all three, but that’s not the primary purpose of the newsletter. Instead, the newsletter should encourage participation in the division. After all, no one else is going to do that.

You may have noticed that there weren’t a lot of “how-to” articles in the Herald. That was by design, and the few that appeared - and I’m guilty of writing at least a couple of very long ones - were in the back pages. The front page never had a “how-to” article.

There are two reasons for that decision. First, I can’t compete with the resources of commercial publications that do a fine job offering that kind of story. Second, there’s nothing in that type of article that makes a member want to take part in the activities of the division.
When I provided a summary of a clinic, I may have described many of the techniques demonstrated, but it was always with the intention of making the reader think “Darn! I should have come to see that myself.” Further, I tried to make the presenter as important as the presentation.

**Publisher? Editor?**

There is an important distinction to be made between the publisher and the editor.

The newsletter is a publication that purports to represent the division, not only to the members but to the public at large. Therefore, the “owner” of the newsletter - the publisher - is the division. Of course, the division can’t speak except through its elected officials, so the publisher, in effect, is the Division Superintendent. The Superintendent not only has the right, but the duty to prevent the publication of anything that might damage the division’s reputation or be opposed to the division’s purposes.

On the other hand, it is the editor’s job to decide what should be included. It’s his creativity, taste, and judgment that is being employed. Putting it another way, the publisher may taketh away, but only the editor can addeth, because if the publisher starts to decide what should be in the newsletter, then the publisher becomes the editor and the editor becomes nothing more than a layout artist.

If the Superintendent feels strongly that something should be in the newsletter and the editor disagrees, then the answer is simple. Get a new editor.

**Final thoughts**

I could not have survived as long as I have without the able assistance of Dick Hunter, proofreader in chief. He kept me honest.

I also want to thank the membership of Sunrise Division for putting up with me for so long. I hope all of you truly experience Model Railroader’s tag: *Model Railroading Is Fun!*