

# PRINT MATTERS

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## It's time to get personal

What happens when readers become writers?

Your first reaction may be to groan, because amateur writers require much more editing than professional writers. And that is certainly true. However, we think that readers have something invaluable to offer as writers, so the trade is worth it. Let us explain.

Many publications today are written by professionals who write in third person in a traditional news format, and we agree that is the best approach. That said, though, we also think there's plenty of room to incorporate first person articles in a variety of ways. Here are a few reasons why this is a good idea.

- It will build a closer bond with your readers. When people open up and share stories from their personal lives, it touches others deeply. Readers will feel more connected to your publication and will feel a sense of camaraderie and community with other subscribers.
- It will inspire additional stories. There is something about sharing that begets more sharing. Even if a reader hasn't had the specific experience relayed by the author, the personal nature of the piece may inspire readers to open up about something in their own lives.
- It provides a change of pace. Your subscribers are likely avid readers, and most of what they read is written in the third person. First person stories provide a different perspective, and are often easier to read. "Our readers have told us that they grasp the content better when there's a firsthand story that illustrates the concept," said Barbara Billitzer, publisher and editor-in-chief of *Right of Way Magazine*. "If it is written too much like a textbook, they get bored and lose interest."

It's hard enough to maintain readers' attention in today's fast-paced and often chaotic world, so we certainly don't want to lose their attention once we have it. So now let's look at some different ways you can incorporate first person contributions to your publication.

**1. Point/Counterpoint articles.** Publishers tend to shy away from these because of the controversy that they can create. We urge you to be brave. If handled correctly and fairly, these articles will generate a ton of conversation in your industry, which naturally generates more publicity and recognition for your magazine.

**2. A "Mistakes Made" column.** It absolutely takes courage for a person to come forward and admit a mistake, much less dissect one. But we have so much to learn from each other, and a column like this would really resonate. "Our readers tell us they learn the most when someone shares what they did wrong," Billitzer said. "Much like in real life, we learn from our mistakes. Readers are the same!"

**3. Columns on overcoming adversity.** This is in a similar vein to the previous suggestion, although adversity is not something we volunteer for; it tends to find us on its own. These stories may or

may not be directly related to your particular industry, but in any case would hit home with readers. Articles such as these tend to be very inspirational, and if you can have them written by well-known folks in your industry, all the better.

**4. Personal vignettes.** The topics that could be covered in a column such as this are endless, but what they have in common is that they teach or inspire others in some way. Many of the stories covered in *RVW* fit this mold. The magazine's entire purpose is to bring together women who RV. "Many of our readers say they would not have had the courage to RV themselves if they hadn't read about someone else doing it," said Editor Dee Johnson.

One story in *RVW* was particularly poignant. A reader described how she handled a blowout on the freeway by slowing down gradually instead of giving in to the instinct of slamming on the brakes, which might have jackknifed her vehicle. This tip is immensely helpful to fellow drivers who could experience the same potentially dangerous mishap.



**5. Open letters.** These can run the gamut as well. Maybe a reader could write about an industry mentor who really made a difference in his life. If your industry is under attack, a reader could pen a piece that provides a solid defense. It's just a good catch-all column that serves as a great invitation for readers to provide input that honestly might not have occurred to you (or your staff) otherwise.

The notion of inviting readers to write is definitely a courageous choice, but one we encourage you to make. Adding fresh, first person voices to the mix is a great way to keep your readers interested and involved with your publication.

*Editor's note:* We must give credit where credit is due. The genesis for this story was an article written by Mark A. Newman, editor of *Endocrine News*. He penned the piece for a weekly e-newsletter produced by Association Media & Publishing, which is an association for association communications professionals and publishing teams. He was recapping a session from AM&P's 2016 Annual Meeting titled "Making it Personal with First Person Essays."

# Publisher's Corner

## Think outside the box



Publisher Tracey Guhl believes you can find creativity anywhere.

“Even if you don't have trouble coming up with ideas for your publication, there is always room for something new and creative,” says Guhl, who is publisher of APCC magazine.

Here are a few of her suggestions.

### 1. Always have your eyes open.

Look at billboards when you're driving. Observe point-of-sale displays in stores. Open your junk mail. All of these marketing tools have the potential for sparking something creative in you.

### 2. Spend time with other magazines, particularly those outside of your industry.

Bookstores offer an ample selection. You can get a plethora of ideas on layout, design and editorial, even though the subject matter is vastly different from yours. “Just trust me on this one,” Guhl said.

### 3. Change your venue.

Most of us work best in quiet environments, but an hour at a local coffee shop — or even outdoors — can do a world of good. “It breaks your normal routine and exposes you to new energy from the people around you,” Guhl says. “Something this simple really can make a difference in getting your neurons to fire in new ways.”

### 4. Pick up the phone.

“I am often reluctant to do this because I feel I'm always on deadline,” Guhl said. “However, the very best way to get good ideas is by talking to people in your industry.”

### 5. Join a trade association.

“I literally cannot say enough good things about Association Media and Publishing,” Guhl says. “It is an association for association publications. I often get three to four new ideas from every issue of their weekly e-newsletter.” For more information, visit [associationmediaandpublishing.org](http://associationmediaandpublishing.org).

*Editor's note:* Our readers love to hear stories from their fellow publishers. Please do not feel your tale has to be a story for the ages; simple publishing or life lessons will do. To contribute, please email Tracey Timpanaro at [tat25@comcast.net](mailto:tat25@comcast.net).



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