

*How did one association magazine almost double its page count, increase its frequency, and boost its advertising revenue by more than 40 percent in a down economy? With lots of hard work and a process that others can mimic.*

**By Whitney Redding**

# the formula for publication growth

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Association publishers have plenty to commiserate about. Many are striving to cut corners in their magazines without sacrificing their value as member benefits. Some publications are appearing less frequently or have fewer departments or shorter articles. Publishers are reducing overhead by using more freelancers or cutting the freelance budget and relying more heavily on staff and members for “free” copy.

Against this backdrop, at least one association’s magazine is making impressive strides in the opposite direction. The once quarterly *International Educator*, the flagship publication of NAFSA: Association of International Educators, expanded to six issues a year. The average page count has nearly doubled, to 76 pages, allowing broader and deeper coverage of the key issues facing international educators today. A new managing editor has raised the bar on editorial quality with a cadre of reliable freelancers. The redesign resulted in a 106 percent increase in ad revenue the first year.

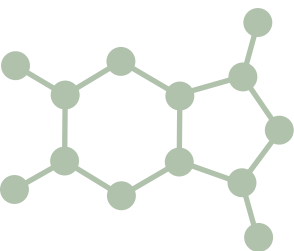
Although the redesign process began in 2004 before the downturn, the continued success of *International Educator* is

instructive for other trade organizations seeking to expand nondues revenues in difficult times. Advertising revenue for the magazine increased by 40 percent in 2008, a rate of success it already has surpassed this year.

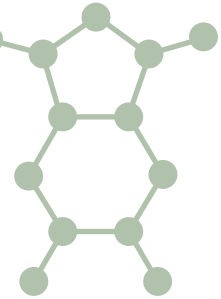
NAFSA’s success offers “a really good example of how using the assets and knowledge you have works,” says Scott Oser, president of Scott Oser Associates, Inc., who took over ad sales last year. “This is the first time I’ve had a client tell me to stop selling ads, as in: ‘We’ve got a really big issue. We don’t have any more editorial.’”

According to Chris Murphy, the editor-in-chief who initiated the redesign, there was nothing particularly inspired about how NAFSA converted *International Educator* from a loss-leader member benefit to a profit center. In theory, any organization could do it. “There is a kind of formula for it. It’s not rocket science,” he says.

Formulaic or not, any path that eventually can lead a publication from expensive to profitable is inspiring. “Look at it this way,” said Murphy. “You can’t make it start making money tomorrow, but you can make it start making money.”



“The economy will go down at some point and we don’t want to become a cost to our organization. We want to be a profit center.” —Chris Murphy



### Rethink the Benefits of a Magazine

Like many associations, NAFSA used to approach its magazine primarily as a highly visible member benefit. Its 40 pages were filled with peer-to-peer articles written by NAFSA members. But having to depend entirely on volunteer submissions was limiting from an editorial standpoint. Filling the news hole every quarter was a challenge. Ad sales were handled in house and on the fly by a single beleaguered employee who was also responsible for exhibit sales and other competing priorities. Meanwhile, NAFSA’s bimonthly black-and-white newsletter siphoned potential advertisers. Neither publication was generating enough revenue to cover direct costs; in fact, the magazine alone was losing many tens of thousands of dollars per year.

When Murphy came on board in 2003, he initiated a reader survey, conducted by Stratton Publishing and Marketing, Inc., on NAFSA’s publications. The results were revealing. “The newsletter was not very well read,” says Murphy. “People liked the magazine, but it didn’t have much support.”

Murphy then had to persuade the NAFSA leadership to pump even more money — what he calls “a very substantial increase” — into the money-losing magazine and eliminate the less costly newsletter, a sentimental favorite. “That was a sticking point,” he admits. Murphy argued not only that the magazine could make enough money to cover its costs, but that it also could start to generate revenue. “We completely rethought the magazine,” he says.

In the end, there wasn’t a lot of resistance. The data had spoken. NAFSA eliminated the newsletter, drew up a five-year plan to reintroduce the

magazine as a bimonthly, and set out to make *International Educator* essential reading for NAFSA members.

### Shore Up the Columns

One of Murphy’s first actions was to hire Managing Editor Elaine Loveland to improve editorial quality, and then he leveled with her about the importance of the noneditorial aspects of running the magazine. “One of the first things I said to her is that one of the reasons we’re changing the magazine is because the economy will go down at some point and we don’t want to become a cost to our organization. We want to be a profit center,” says Murphy.

Loveland started by cultivating an arsenal of professional writers. Feature articles now are capped at about 4,000 words — previous contributors had sometimes been more loquacious — and strengthened by examining multiple perspectives. Instead of writing for the magazine, NAFSA members remain involved through an advisory panel that recommends topics and gives regular feedback.

Loveland approaches each new feature as seriously as if she were preparing a college course assignment. “I do a lot of the research myself,” she says. “With any article, I actually give [the writer] an outline. I find many of the sources myself. I also pose many of the questions myself, so they can spend most of their time writing.”

Once the bar was raised on editorial quality, Loveland and Murphy turned their attention to practical improvements like creating a long-term editorial calendar. They devised several series of articles around a single theme, such as the internationalization of science, and published them in installments. Each issue of the magazine includes features

from two or three concurrent series.

Another strategy they adopted was to offer 20-page supplements that explore certain topics, such as health insurance, in greater detail. Other supplements called “regional spotlights” have zoomed in on covering a particular part of the globe.

### “Get” Advertisers

Naturally, all of these changes led to a substantial bump in advertising revenues. Particularly successful were the supplements. Revenue from ad sales more than doubled the first year, followed by a 60 percent increase in 2006. But the initial momentum eventually wore off. Ad sales increased only 14 percent in 2007. “Better editorial had to come first. Then we had to figure out how to step up ads,” says Murphy.

In many ways, improving ad sales was simply a matter of finding someone with the time to focus on building relationships, approaching advertisers, and deepening relationships with advertisers who have a vested interest in reaching NAFSA’s membership.

Enter Scott Oser Associates. Oser was hired in spring 2008 to actively sell ads, with the operative word being “actively.”

Oser said his job has been made easier despite the difficult economy because NAFSA laid the right groundwork. The tiny editorial staff of *International Educator* — Murphy and Loveland — has a solid understanding of how to present editorial so that advertisers “get” why they have to be in a given issue. Murphy “totally understood the fact that magazines can do things to attract advertisers,” says Oser.

NAFSA had a decent database of potential advertisers and knew a fair amount about its readers through surveys. “They actually do readership research, not just membership research. Readership and membership don’t always correlate,” says Oser.

Which is how, when the economy went downhill, Oser had the tools at hand to bounce ad sales back, with an expected increase in revenues of more

than 40 percent. Among the strategies that paid off were targeting new advertisers from conference exhibitors and offering ad discounts for exhibitors in the conference issue. "It went crazy. It took off and we sold over \$100,000 in that conference issue," he says.

The key was in following up with potential advertisers. "A lot of it is just common sense and effort," says Oser.

### Move From Taking to Selling

According to Debra Stratton, president of Stratton Publishing & Marketing, Inc., association publications often underestimate the roles they could be playing in their markets. "Too often, association publications tend to abdicate their market to commercial publications," she says. For example, a lot of association publishers tend to passively "take" advertising rather than effectively position their publication in the market and actively sell their competitive strengths.

Associations can and should leverage their credibility, including the fact that they usually represent the "cream of the crop" of their industries, says Stratton. After all, their editorial often is more in line with the priorities of business leaders than any commercial counterpart's, and association publications can offer an advertiser more opportunities for direct access to their target audiences. "They're not just selling a page in a magazine. They're selling a relationship," says Stratton.

In a challenging economy, when vendors become more selective about where to invest their advertising dollars, association publications need all the leverage they can get. "This is a great opportunity to hone the positioning of the publication, streamline production, and expand innovative offerings," says Stratton.

Murphy agrees. "We try to sell the value of the magazine. That was the key missing piece we didn't have before we had Scott. We were basically order taking," he says. "We had the argument there; we just had not been making it."

As a publication that has both the largest and most targeted circulation in its niche (nearly 10,000), *International*

*Educator* has little competition and could have continued order taking forever.

Soon after the revamp, NAFSA and Stratton conducted another reader survey. "There definitely was a very strong uptick in appreciation of how good the magazine was," says Murphy. The newly redesigned publication has won eight awards for general excellence, editorial quality, and design, including an APEX (Awards for Publications Excellence) Grand Award for a series of articles on international education in lands of conflict. The outward affirmation has helped to strengthen NAFSA's internal credibility as well as raise the visibility of the organization and of international education.

From a practical standpoint, the magazine continues to draw advertising and has become self-sustaining. "Advertisers are voting with their dollars. They clearly think the magazine is worth being in," says Murphy. Had NAFSA started the revamp during the depths of the current recession, instead of before it, he argues he would still have done it. "It would probably take more time and effort and more cajoling," he says. "That doesn't mean you can't do some of these things. Even in a bad economy." **an**

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### TIPS FOR IMPROVING PROFITABILITY ON A SHOESTRING BUDGET

A bad economy can be a good catalyst to improve your publication's essentials. Most cost-saving strategies, such as changing paper or delivery options, will only work temporarily. "The most important thing to do is to retain [your publication's] value," says Elaina Loveland, managing editor of *International Educator* at NAFSA: Association of International Educators. "We have to change how we're thinking about this, so it's not a crisis every time there's an economic crisis."

Experts interviewed for this article advise associations to

- Take the opportunity to examine the quality of your product. What is the real value and how is it presented? "Even if you can't afford research, you can form a reader panel to give feedback on each issue," says Debra Stratton, president of Stratton Publishing & Marketing, Inc.
- Streamline the association's array of publications. "Usually associations just add more and more and don't think about how they're competing with themselves," says Amy Lestition, CAE, executive director of Association Media & Publishing (formerly SNAP).
- If you must cut back on editorial, retain the full range of departments and features by shortening rather than eliminating them. "That's what members are valuing," says Lestition.
- Present editorial content that also appeals to advertisers to ensure the publication is fiscally sound. "If you're not bringing in income, your programs are in danger in bad times," says Chris Murphy, editor-in-chief of *International Educator*, adding that each of his publication's 20-page special supplements has been particularly successful.
- Take advantage of the recession to negotiate better terms with contractors. NAFSA was able to reduce printing costs by 18 percent by negotiating a longer-term contract.
- Use social media and online options to complement print publications. "[Going completely digital] could solve the cost problem at first, but it causes a quality problem," says Loveland.
- Know where your publication stands in the marketplace. "If you are number one or number two in the market, [selective advertisers] will cut back something else," says Scott Oser, of Scott Oser Associates, who handles ad sales for NAFSA.
- Never stop marketing. "To me, this is a time to look at where you can invest and lay groundwork so when the economy does come back, you're well positioned," says Stratton.
- Follow up with advertisers, rather than just peppering them with emails. Otherwise, says Oser, "your chances of keeping them are not so good because you don't have a relationship." Oser's advice for small orgs: "Find the 10 companies that need to, have to, get to your audience, and talk to them," he says. "Any association can do that."