



Your DEADLY Parish Bulletin... and how to fix it!

by Christopher Weber

I'll admit it: I don't read my parish bulletin. It just doesn't interest me. And I am sure that I am not alone. While I have been

very active in several different parishes over the years, I haven't bothered to read the bulletin in any of them.

Some might argue that I am just lazy, that I don't like to read. They may be right. However, I DO get up early every day to read the local newspaper. As a matter of fact, I subscribe to a local paper instead of a national one, because I enjoy reading about items about my community. So why would I bypass the bulletin, which contains news and information about my parish community?

I believe the answer is simple: My parish bulletin - and, for that matter, every bulletin I have seen in recent memory - is deadly - uninteresting. I offer here two things that make bulletins deadly, and some starters on how to fix them.

1. The Front Cover

Anyone who reads regularly knows that the front page of a publication is critical. It is your first - and sometimes only - opportunity to catch the reader. This is where *Time* and *Newsweek* feature the story of the week, where your newspaper splashes its most gripping headlines, where promotional flyers and catalogs give us their enticing title or tagline for the latest products.

What do we offer on the front cover of our bulletins? **The same thing every week:** staff and volunteer listings, mass times, and sacramental policies. This is marketing **suicide!!** How many *Time* subscriptions would get cancelled if they printed just their subscription and contact information on the cover each week?



Static information on a cover generates - well, STATIC. The fix here is simple: Move just about all of that somewhere else - ANYWHERE ELSE!! Keep a masthead that includes the name of the parish, or better yet, give your parish bulletin a unique masthead, with a great name. Think **newsletter**, not bulletin, and on the front cover run blurbs or notices that have the latest happenings of the parish. This is a place for spotlight events, special events or milestones that you want to promote. Hey, in today's day and age, you can even put photos there with some degree of quality. You can get a lot on there. Follow the example of newspapers, and use the "continued on page 5" technique. Don't waste this prime real estate for communication!

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In your bulletin ads, use first person language to help the reader see what they will personally get from being part of the activity.

2. Deadly Announcements

It is time to rethink the bulletin announcement. For starters, throw out the word announcement and replace it with "ad." We have become trapped in the misconception that simply **announcing** an event, with the what, when, and where, will magically get people to attend. We post paragraph after paragraph of announcements, and the pages full of words make the readers' eyes glaze over.

One of our local papers charges about \$65 to place a four line classified ad for a week. Display ads are even more expensive. If you had to pay those rates for the content of your newsletter, what would you change? How would you maximize the impact of what you place there?

Think about what it means to advertise for something. What do advertisers do? Instead of simply listing the features of something, they share all of the **benefits** that

the consumer can get by using the product. In your bulletin ads, use first person language to help the reader see what they will personally get from being part of the activity.

An example:

Instead of

"This year's Bible Study on Genesis begins on February 1. Sign-ups will take place after Mass on January 27 in the Parish Hall."

try:

"Are you caught off guard when someone asks you a question about the Bible? Have you ever wondered what the Church teaches about evolution and the Creation stories? Join us for this fascinating study...."

Use compelling words to draw the reader in. Break up the monotony of the countless words with interesting graphics. Invite everyone who submits an ad to you to ask themselves, "What benefit is this event or idea going to give to the reader? How can I best convey this benefit? If I weren't involved in this activity already, what would make **me** want to come?"

A Shift in Perspective?

I believe that we have taken parish newsletters for granted, that we have plodded along while ignoring their great potential as tools for ministry. I challenge everyone who has anything to do with your newsletter to stop, reflect and dis-

cuss: What do we want to accomplish with this medium? How is our parish newsletter an opportunity for evangelization? What can we do to make it less "deadly" and more effective? †

Chris Weber works for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, as Director of the Catholic Education Ministries Center of Central Maryland.

QUESTIONS FOR NEWSLETTER PLANNERS

- What would it take to make our front page less "deadly?"
- What types of events or accomplishments might we promote on the front page each week? How will we decide what to place there?
- How can we make our newsletter easier to read? Can we use white space and graphics to break up the words?
- How can we help our newsletter contributors to think "ad," not "announcement," and focus on benefits instead of features?