

PRSA ENTRY

Research

Since I joined Old Dominion in January 2016 as editor of Monarch magazine, we have commissioned two readership surveys, both conducted by CraniumTap, a marketing research firm in Norfolk. Both e-surveys asked hundreds of alumni a series of questions about particular articles and themes, as well as general impressions of the alumni magazine.

The first, which was completed after the spring 2016 issue, yielded several valuable insights, upon which we have acted. Perhaps the biggest takeaway was the readers' hunger for more information about Old Dominion. Nearly one-third of respondents said they read each issue cover to cover; an additional 47 percent said they closely read at least half of every issue. And 44 percent said they would like the publication frequency to jump from two to four times a year.

Interestingly, the mode of delivery preferred by all age groups of alumni was print. However, we have neither the budget nor the staff to publish more print magazines each year. But I wanted to respond to the desire of alumni for more information. So in 2017, we launched a unique interactive e-magazine, Monarch Extra, which is posted twice a year. I will discuss it in the Creativity section.

One of the most-popular types of articles, according to the first survey, was "history articles." That led me to reinstitute the "Then & Now" feature, written by a previous editor. Our winter 2017 issue featured a Then & Now column tracing the University's long relationship with the elementary school across the street. And our next issue, in the winter of 2018, will include a Then & Now feature on the university's first athletic director, Bud Metheny.

Planning

I engage in a lot of thinking and agonizing before each issue to ensure we are addressing our readers and their interests.

Our primary audience segment is alumni. The magazine is mailed to more than 110,000 of them. It also is distributed across campus and usually sent to the parents of freshmen.

That means we must showcase alumni achievements and interesting life stories. But the magazine would be monochromatic if that's all it did. I also strive to publish compelling articles about faculty and athletes and other students in every issue, because alumni, I've found, want to know what's happening at their alma mater now.

Diversity and inclusion are top themes at Old Dominion. That also holds true for my mission with the magazine, and those words have many more meanings than most people might think. As mentioned, I try to vary the types of subjects for stories. I also try to ensure a good mix in terms of race and gender. Diversity, to me, also requires a representation of different ages, different academic colleges, even different life experiences (some involving career, some involving outside-work pastimes).

I have no exact formula for deciding what proportion of articles falls into each category, though I try to ensure that each academic college is represented in every issue and I have sometimes replaced a potential faculty story with an alumna profile to achieve what I think is a healthier balance. I have received continued positive feedback from alumni, including in our survey results, saying they appreciate the range of articles in every issue.

Creativity

I and our design director, Karen Smallets, continually look for new ways to freshen Monarch magazine. For example, I have tried to provide alternatives to the traditional long-form article including more Q&As, stories told in segments, greater use of factoids and data graphics, and, in our spring 2018 issue, a

collection of quotes in the news from faculty, alumni and students. We have also enlivened our covers. In 2017, both covers were illustrations – portraying our bioelectrics program and a series of profiles of alumni in the arts. The latter cover was designed by two members of our art faculty using historic wood type from the department’s letterpress collection.

Perhaps our most innovative strategy was to create Monarch Extra, a twice-a-year e-magazine, in February 2017. We see Monarch Extra as a way to provide more information to alumni and other readers in a unique interactive format, which allows us to incorporate videos and animation. For instance, a story about two alumni who piloted Navy flyovers before home football games featured an image of a Navy jet flying across the page. We also have included videos of a rare snowstorm on campus and the women’s rowing team. We believe the e-publication has been a successful way to engage and inform readers using the latest design technology. Monarch Extra received an online innovation award earlier this year in the CASE District III competition.

Implementation

As mentioned, I’m deliberate in achieving my strategy for the magazine. First, I review my long list of story ideas and solicit others from contacts in alumni affairs, research, academic affairs and athletics, among other offices. I prioritize which might be most timely and decide on a list that meets my various goals for diversity and interest.

We have an annual budget of roughly \$32,000 to use for free-lance writers and photographers. I try to vary the lineup of free-lancers in every issue, returning to some who have provided good work while adding new ones whom I haven’t worked with before to gain fresh perspectives. I also seek to match stories with writers’ specialties and interests.

One challenge in the past two years was to slightly reduce our free-lance costs while maintaining a strong product. I did that by increasing the number of articles I write, though I still employ a good mix of free-lance writers, photographers and illustrators.

Another challenge, common to university magazine editors, is to juggle magazine duties with non-magazine duties, which for me include writing and editing speeches, columns and news releases. One way to do this, I’ve found, is to jump directly into the work for the next issue even before the previous issue is published. I’ve also asked for – and received – help with non-magazine duties during peak deadline times.

Evaluation

As mentioned, we have commissioned two readership surveys. Both have produced promising results. In 2016, our satisfaction level was 74.1 on a scale of 1 to 100; this year, it was 81.8. Adam Cook, the director of CraniumTap, said the numbers and growth would be a source of envy for many other publications.

In terms of readership and enjoyment, one of the top-rated articles was a story on students with autism and faculty members doing research on autism. That even ranked higher than some articles I thought would be popular, such as a profile of two alums who are Major League Baseball coaches. For me, the takeaway is not to underestimate the range of our readers’ interests and to continue to widen the scope of our articles.

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