

Chapter

Boost Your Web Presence with a Zine

In 1971, an unassuming computer engineer named Ray Tomlinson sent the world's first e-mail message—to himself. Tomlinson and the others who tinkered with this invention sensed that e-mail could have practical uses, but they had no idea it would lead to a revolution in how people communicate.

Now, more than 30 billion e-mail messages are sent on the Internet every day, and e-mail has become a dominant force in our lives. According to a survey by META Group, 80 percent of the businesspeople polled said that e-mail is a more effective form of business communication than the telephone.¹ And 75 percent of executives surveyed expect e-mail to be their primary source of business information by 2005.²

E-mailboxes are direct conduits to buyers of goods and services, and marketers have been so aggressive that government agencies have stepped in to protect consumers. One offspring of e-mail—the electronic newsletter, or *zine*—has exploded as a dynamic marketing vehicle.

WHAT IS A ZINE?

A zine (pronounced “zeen”) is an electronic newsletter; an e-mail-based publication that is sent on a specified schedule to subscribers who have agreed in advance to receive it.

■ TO ZINE OR NOT TO ZINE

Because zines are everywhere these days, consultants may think it's mandatory to have one. Not true. Zines are not for everybody. Producing a zine takes talent and resources that may be better spent on other marketing activities, such as updating your Web site, delivering speeches, or conducting surveys.

Carefully weigh the possible benefits of a zine against its challenges. If you decide against it, you can still speak directly to clients on your Web site with blogs, articles, reports, and case studies. Or, you might prefer to publish a hard-copy newsletter instead of an electronic one.

■ THE UPSIDE OF ZINES

A zine is a low-cost, high-impact marketing tool that can be a building block in an integrated guerrilla marketing campaign. At a fraction of the cost of other tools, such as direct mail, a zine can heighten your visibility in the marketplace, build your reputation as an expert, and open dialogues with prospective clients. A zine has enormous potential for generating leads for your practice.

The continuous nature of zines is ideal for consultants because so much of their business depends on building long-term, ongoing relationships. The continuity of zines gives guerrillas a systematic way to remain in contact with clients by providing them with vital, timely information, analysis, and feedback. A zine keeps you on clients' radar without the intrusiveness of telephone calls or the need for in-person visits.

Clients are eager for knowledge that can help them solve pressing problems, find out what is going on in their industry, and learn what the competition is up to. But the pace of business is fast, and most clients don't have the opportunity or the perspective for the independent analysis that an expert can provide. Zines can benefit clients by summarizing relevant information and delivering it to them quickly.

Consulting projects tend to have long sales cycles. A zine can help you make a strong impression during that process, and can provide ready topics for discussion with clients from initial meetings about a project, through the proposal and negotiation phase, and beyond.

Zines help you turn prospects into clients and clients into advocates. They allow you to maintain ongoing dialogue with readers that you would not otherwise have. You have complete editorial control,

so you can customize your zine quickly in response to the feedback you receive.

The search for zine content will stimulate you to think more creatively about how the issues of the day influence your clients' success. That search will give you a focus and point of reference as you sift through the overwhelming amount of information that affects the business world today. The insights you develop in the process not only will make your zine valuable to clients, but will be equally useful in all your other marketing activities, from speeches to proposal writing.

You can publish a zine with little cost and minimal resources. All you need to start is a computer, an e-mail program, and subscribers. At first, it will take time to build your zine, but as you progress, it will become easier. You always have the option of outsourcing some parts of the zine or the entire publication (more on this later).

■ ARE YOU UP TO THE ZINE CHALLENGE?

Even a one- or two-page zine takes considerable effort to produce. And you will need patience to make a zine effectively generate leads for your practice. With a zine, you're entering the publishing business, which is markedly different from, and will take time away from, your consulting business.

To publish a zine, you must commit resources to design and periodically update it. You need access to great content or the ability to develop it—you must have enough content to fill each issue. It takes writing and editing skills plus a bit of artistry to gather and analyze information, write articles, and lay out a zine.

It takes discipline to publish every issue of a zine on time and to respond quickly to questions and feedback from readers. You must also be willing to promote your zine and be patient while your circulation grows. The continuous publishing cycle of a zine means that you or someone in your firm will always be working on the next issue. That can make you feel as if you've got a perpetual, low-grade fever.

The most daunting challenge of zines is competing for clients' attention with the flood of e-mail they already receive. You will have to fight, not only to win a place in their e-mailboxes, but also to get your subscribers to open and read your zine.

Most businesspeople today are sophisticated users of e-mail and the Internet. Of the 60 million U.S. workers who have Internet access, 98 percent of them have e-mail. They are selective about what they read and are quick to hit the delete button—even if they subscribe to an e-mail publication. In fact, according to research by Quris, Inc., over 40 percent of permission-based e-mail is deleted before being read.³

GUERRILLA CHALLENGE: PUBLISHING A ZINE

A zine can't help your practice if it ends up in the cybertrash unopened. To avoid that possibility, ask yourself these three questions:

1. Do I have something valuable to say about my area of expertise that is not already being said in other zines?
2. Can I create a compelling zine on a regular basis that clients will open, read, and respond to?
3. Does my practice have the resources to publish a zine?

If you answered yes to the preceding questions, you are ready for the zine challenge.

■ STEP UP TO THE PLATE

To hit a home run, your zine must generate leads for your practice. For guerrillas, that's the definition of a successful zine; leads are the justification for your zine's existence.

GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: WHAT MAKES A ZINE SUCCESSFUL?

The first step is for clients and prospects to open and read your zine. But to hit that home run, your zine must provide the following benefits:

- ▶ Create trust between you and your readers
 - ▶ Deliver value
 - ▶ Stimulate dialogue with readers
 - ▶ Exude professionalism
 - ▶ Hit your target markets
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■ CREATE TRUST

You must build trusting relationships with your subscribers just as you do with your clients. Subscribers have to trust your integrity as a publisher. They must be convinced that you are honest in reporting

GUERRILLA ALERT: NO SPAMMING ALLOWED

Guerrillas know that they gain nothing from sending unwanted e-mail, including zines. Learn about and follow both the spirit and the letter of the laws that govern e-mail. In your zine and on your Web site, state clearly how to subscribe and unsubscribe to the zine, and make it easy to do. Be sure to use a “double opt-in” system so subscribers have to (1) sign up for your zine and (2) confirm that they want to receive it. Also, you must include the editor’s name and *physical* address in a logical place in the publication.

and interpreting the facts. They must have complete confidence that your content is accurate and up to date. Readers must feel comfortable relaying information in your zine to others and using it for business decisions.

Trust is vital to e-mail users, especially with the proliferation of spam. Having subscribers’ e-mail addresses creates a confidential relationship. Subscribers must feel assured that you will respect and protect their privacy and not disclose their e-mail addresses or personal information without their express consent. A written privacy policy is essential. Be sure to include a link to that policy in your zine.

For subscribers to trust you, they must respect you as an authority in your area of consulting, as a writer, and as a publisher. They must believe in the quality of your zine as a trustworthy source of information. To keep subscribers’ trust, maintain that quality with every issue, and always deliver your zine to their e-mailboxes at the scheduled time. You want loyal readers, and loyalty follows trust.

■ DELIVER VALUE

To reap benefits, your zine must provide real value to subscribers. Without value, your zine is nothing more than junk mail. Many zines are indistinguishable from sales brochures; they exist solely to promote the publishers’ products and services. Your zine won’t keep subscribers if you only publish promotional material that masquerades as news. Instead of sell, sell, sell, guerrillas inform, inform, inform.

For many readers, the most valuable feature of your zine will be your analysis of how recent developments could affect their industries and businesses. Inform them about new laws that might affect

GUERRILLA TACTIC: MINIMIZE SELF-PROMOTION

A definite line separates a useful, informative zine from a promotional piece. While savvy readers expect and tolerate a certain amount of promotion, limit self-promotion in your zine to 10 percent or less of each issue. Otherwise, readers will think of your zine as a blatant sales pitch and delete it. Don't spend half of the zine promoting your current seminar or your latest book. Let the value of your content promote your practice and products.

The intent of a zine is to pull clients toward your practice, not push your latest service on them. Concentrate on intelligently discussing the topics of greatest interest to your readers. Provide links to your Web site in selected spots in the zine so readers can find out more about you and what you have to offer.

them, judicial or regulatory decisions, mergers, acquisitions, financial trends, breakthroughs in technology, or upcoming events. But don't just report decisions and statistics; examine the implications of events and trends for your readers.

Zine subscribers also value interviews, columns by featured guests, articles on new strategies or business processes, individual and company profiles, or success stories. Here are some more suggestions for content:

- ▶ Present a problem and suggest a solution.
- ▶ Tell a story about a consulting project.
- ▶ Offer tips, alerts, or market intelligence.
- ▶ Conduct a poll and report the results in a subsequent issue.
- ▶ Point out resources, including books, research studies, and Web sites.
- ▶ Editorialize and analyze.
- ▶ Ask subscribers to contribute articles (within your editorial guidelines).

Your zine can include any of the preceding elements, or you can come up with other ideas. But develop a high-value formula for content that works for you and stick with it. And be sure to archive past issues of your zines on your Web site, indexed by subject categories.

■ STIMULATE DIALOGUE WITH READERS

The point of your zine is to engage your audience in conversation and build relationships. Many zines are boring and don't provoke much reaction. You should ask for feedback from readers in every issue. You might want to include a question at the end of featured articles like, "Was this item useful to you?" and provide an e-mail feedback link for response.

It's essential to get feedback on every aspect of your zine, including content, quality, format, and frequency of publication. You should regularly ask subscribers for their opinions on these elements. But asking for feedback is not enough.

Guerrillas stimulate responses from readers with a combination of personality, style, and point of view. Readers are more likely to respond to your zine if they feel that they know who you are. So give your zine a human voice; write your zine in a personal tone as if you are speaking to friends. Think of yourself as a radio or television show host whose listeners tune in because they like the host's engaging personality.

Make your articles and features lively; get to the point quickly and avoid stilted language and corporate-speak. Assume that your readers are intelligent and never talk down to them or take them lightly. When appropriate, inject humor into your zine—but never force it. Do:

- Include plenty of white space in your zine to make it easier to read. Tightly packed prose, however brilliant, is intimidating and less likely to be read by busy professionals.
- Bullet important points so they jump off the page.
- Create sidebars and emphasize key words.
- For longer articles, put brief summaries in your zine with links to the full texts, which can be stored on your Web site. Readers who want to read the full versions can do so.
- Avoid superboring features like statements from your CEO or president.

Your zine should be visually engaging, with some graphics and color to liven up the look of the publication. Easy does it, though—your readers are all using different hardware and software to access e-mail. Extensive use of graphics, colors, or special formatting can make a zine so slow or difficult to load that readers may delete your zine before it sees the light of day.

GUERRILLA TACTIC: MAKE WAVES

The most effective way to stimulate dialogue with zine subscribers is through your point of view. Take a stand and state your opinions as strongly as you can without compromising your honesty. Defy conventional wisdom. Be provocative, controversial, and evocative. Take on current issues in your industry and let readers know exactly how you feel. You might alienate some subscribers, but others will line up to shake your cyberhand. Expressing what you believe will spark excitement, generate questions and comments, and give your readers something to think about.

You'll know you're on the right track if your zine produces feedback from readers. When readers want to discuss issues you've raised, consider it a compliment and respond as soon as possible. Prompt, thoughtful responses build goodwill, loyal readers, and eventually clients. Use feedback to discover what your readers want and give it to them.

■ EXUDE PROFESSIONALISM

Zines must be professional in appearance. Design matters—in fact, it's critical. Readers want publications that are well laid out, easy to read, and don't look cheesy or homemade. They expect zines to be delivered on schedule and to load quickly and easily.

Guerrillas want wide circulation for their zines. An unprofessional looking issue or one with even a minor inaccuracy can damage your credibility and your reputation.

Readers also appreciate ease of access. Provide a prominent link to a printer-friendly, text version of your zine on your Web site so subscribers can download and print it at their convenience. They will then be able to read your zine anywhere and at any time, and pass it on to others.

The professional image of your zine depends on consistency of editorial standards. Consider including a statement of editorial policies at the end of your zine. Be consistent in the following areas.

► Content

Whatever content formula you choose for your zine, use essentially that same formula and place features in the same place in every

issue. Readers like the familiar, the predictable. Make your zine error-free. Always double-check facts, figures, grammar, report or book titles, and the spelling of people's names. Create a style sheet for your zine and distribute it to everyone who works on the publication.

➤ **Frequency of Publication**

Zines can be published on any schedule, including weekly, monthly, or quarterly. To maintain a continuous presence in your readers' minds, you should publish at least once per month. The trick is to strike a balance between maintaining visibility and inundating your subscribers with more than they want. In a survey by Quris, Inc., 68 percent of respondents cited "too frequent" mailings as their top grievance about e-mail marketers.⁴

As to what day of the week is best for publishing a zine, opinions differ among the experts, with little hard data to support their preferences. Pick a weekday, publish on that same day every time, and indicate in your zine what day that will be. You might want to indicate what time zone governs your publishing schedule, as your zine may appear on a different day in some countries.

➤ **Length**

Most zines are two to eight pages long. The length of your zine will depend on how much information will be regularly available to you and the frequency of publication you choose. If you decide to publish your zine every week, even one page will be a lot of work. For guerrillas, a tight, two-page zine is usually sufficient. Aim for the same length with every issue; don't mail two pages one month and ten pages the next.

➤ **Format**

Publish your zine in Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) rather than text format or Portable Document Format (PDF). These days, 90 percent of browsers can read HTML, and your printer-friendly, text version will take care of those that can't. The HTML format offers significant advantages in design features and measuring and reporting capabilities.

Text format is harder to work with, has much less visual appeal, and provides no reliable way to find out how many subscribers are reading your zine. PDF looks better and preserves the format and graphics of original documents.

The HTML format allows you to track important data, such as how many readers actually open your zine (open rates), how many

click through to your Web site from your zine (click-through rates), how many forward your zine to others (forward rates), and how many readers subscribe and unsubscribe.

Whatever format you choose, keep in mind that industry and readers' standards for e-mail publications are getting higher all the time. Subscribers will have little patience for zines that don't look right on their e-mail programs or don't correctly display on their monitors.

► **Advertising Policy**

Marketers frequently place ads in successful zines. However, like self-promotion, outside ads can detract from the image of your zine. They can also raise questions about conflict of interest on your part. Ads can defray the cost of producing your zine, but they may not be worth it in the end. Instead, propose link exchanges with reputable marketers of products and services that would be of interest to your readers. If you do take ads, identify them clearly as paid advertising.

► **Subscription Fees**

You will attract more subscribers if you don't charge for your zine. You may need to consider a fee if the expenses of designing and publishing your zine prove too great a drain on the resources of your practice. Some consultants don't charge for their zines, but give readers brief summaries of their articles in the zine, and then charge for access to the full text. Unless your full report is quite substantial, most readers will find this practice annoying.

If your zine is in great demand, you may want to charge a high fee for subscriptions to limit your audience to a select group. For most zines, though, free access is the best way to get and keep subscribers.

► **Administrative Matters**

You or someone in your practice must consistently attend to administrative activities for your zine. Make it easy for readers to subscribe, unsubscribe, put their subscriptions on hold for vacations or other reasons, change their e-mail addresses, and tell you what they think.

People expect speed, so respond to change requests within 24 hours. You want to keep the goodwill even of those who unsubscribe—they may be back. Don't ask for too much information from people signing up for your zine; keep it to a minimum. Send standard, but polite and personable letters to confirm any changes a subscriber makes.

For initial subscriptions, your confirmation letter should welcome readers, tell them when to expect your zine to arrive, and how

they can unsubscribe. You also should refer them to your privacy and editorial policies. Stay on top of administrative matters to make a good impression on your readers.

Consistency with all the preceding elements will ensure that your zine gets the respect it deserves. Another way to improve the professional aspect of your publication is by outsourcing some of its production.

► Outsourcing

Guerrillas emphasize collaboration, and publishing a zine can be much easier if you have help. Do you have the resources to produce your entire zine in house? If not, many services are available to help at reasonable costs. The two most likely candidates for outsourcing are graphic design and list management.

Hire a talented graphic designer to translate your vision into an easy-to-use template for your zine. Many designers will help you through the process the first time or two and will set you up with Web-based tools that allow you to build your zine with ease, step by step. Some designers also provide services to help you find content for your zine. Design services are not that expensive and an appealing design is well worth the money.

Find a competent list management service to handle subscribe and unsubscribe requests, store your confirmation letters, host your zine, send it out on your signal, and keep statistics for you. A service will keep your subscriber list up to date; handle duplicate subscriptions, e-mail address changes, necessary interfaces with various Internet service providers (ISPs), bounces (returned or undeliverable e-mail); and allow you to send mail to subscribers with a click of the mouse. Good list managers are preapproved by the major ISPs (on what's called a "White List"), so your zine won't be filtered or blocked by e-mail programs as spam.

GUERRILLA INTELLIGENCE: OUTSOURCING

Publishing a zine can be challenging; unforeseen problems always seem to arise. Once you commit, you have obligated yourself to continue publishing your zine and that can be hard work. To ease your burden, consider outsourcing the graphic design of your zine and the ongoing management of your list of subscribers. Find reliable sources of help and stick with them. Good help is hard to find.

List management services are economical and will free up your time for more important activities, like finding and writing the content of your zine. Plus, a service takes the most mundane aspects of being a publisher off your hands.

Outsourcing design and list management will add to the professionalism of your zine. You may want to consider outsourcing more aspects of your publication, but be sure to maintain editorial control. And don't get too far removed from your readers or your zine will not provide an opportunity to establish relationships with them.

► **Get Legit**

Add the stamp of authenticity to your zine by registering the publication with the appropriate agencies. Apply for an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) from the Library of Congress, and send copies of your zine to the Library's Register of Copyrights. Place a link in your zine to the statement of terms and conditions of use on your Web site. Include copyright and ISSN notations in your zine.

■ **HIT YOUR TARGET MARKETS**

Even if you publish the world's most engaging, valuable, professional-quality zine, it won't do your practice any good if no one knows it's available. Promotion is essential to reach potential readers and to build a base of subscribers. That effort starts, naturally, on your Web site.

Include a prominent sign-up box for your zine on every page of your site. If subscriptions are free, make that clear. In the text of your home page, highlight the main features of the current issue of your zine and tout the coming attractions for subsequent issues. Also, make it easy to access the archives of past issues from the home page.

Avail yourself of the many free ways to promote your zine. Use free directory listings and propose link exchanges with other consultants and industry associations. Ask clients to list your zine as a resource on their sites or intranets. If you conduct interviews, ask interviewees to add links on their sites to that issue of your zine. You can also take the following steps:

- Write articles for other publications and include in your signature file your Web site address and zine name.
- Include the basics about your zine on your business cards and in speech and presentation materials.

- Make hard copies of your zines to distribute at meetings, conferences, and conventions; keep a stack of the current issue on your desk and in the reception area of your office.
- Tell friends, relatives, and colleagues about your zine. Ask them to sign up and to spread the word.

Especially in the start-up phase, it's worth the investment to list your zine with zine directories, major Web search engines like Google, and on other Web sites, such as Business.com. You will have to pay small fees for some of these listings, but your investment will pay dividends in the form of new subscribers. You can also pay for subscribers by making arrangements with companies that promote zines and send e-mail subscribers to you. Often, though, these subscribers are untargeted and not likely to become clients, so tread lightly with this option.

■ CREATE A REALISTIC BUDGET

Promotion is not your only zine expense, but it will be an ongoing cost. Create a realistic budget for your publication that includes design (including periodic modifications), preparation, list administration, technical assistance, promotion, and content (for example, if you have to pay for access to reports). Keep track of what you spend so you will be able to accurately judge the success of your zine.

■ MEASURE SUCCESS

After putting forth the effort of publishing a zine, how will you know whether it is working? Sometimes, you will know that business came to you from your interactions with subscribers. More often, you won't be able to see obvious connections. Since lead generation is the primary goal of your zine, the best way to gauge success is by keeping a close eye on statistics, which your list management service will track.

Monitor open rates, click-through rates, forward rates, and unsubscribe rates on a regular basis. Keep a record of all feedback from readers. These data will indicate whether your readers value the zine. If you see a negative trend, revise your zine until you get the results you want.