

AN architect? You've got to be out of your mind. They're far too expensive. My wife can design the house – after all, she has been on a calligraphy course!"

Does this sound ridiculous? Familiar? Well, it certainly happens. Even though building a house is one of the most important tasks people can undertake, they are often surprisingly short-sighted when it comes to employing an architect to design and oversee the project. People still believe employing an architect is a luxury. And, by the same token, trained artisans are often overlooked in favour of off-the-street labourers. It's called the 'Bucket Shop' syndrome and there are an extraordinary number of sufferers of this common malady in the corporate communications field.

Inevitably the indigestion must follow. Penny wise, pound foolish is stock-in-trade for the building industry as all too often what started out as an exercise in domestic economy leads directly to the bank manager's office – usually on your knees!

This is an apt metaphor for the burgeoning house journal industry in South Africa, which, for some strange reason, also suffers chronically from 'Bucket Shop' syndrome.

In this time of change and transition, everyone is climbing on the communications bandwagon and boardrooms across the country have committed themselves to communicating through staff journals, which, in many instances, are the only means companies have of reaching their widely distributed staff.

How do we know the house journal industry is growing? Well, membership of the South African Association of Industrial Editors (SAAIE) is growing in leaps and bounds. House journals have become a major growth industry.

Usually, however, and certainly in companies without established public relations departments, responsibility for the staff journal falls to the 'human resources executive' (what we used to call the 'personnel manager'). And more often than not, the human resources executive wouldn't know news if it jumped up and bit him in the shiniest part of his three-piece suit. He only compounds the overall editorial shortcomings when he

LET'S PUT MORE PROS IN THE HOUSE JOURNAL HOT SEAT

The house journal, once a subject of derision among journalists, has come into its own with the growing demand for effective communication in the workplace.
TOM FERREIRA
argues that as management relies increasingly on staff journals to communicate down the line, they need to employ suitably qualified editorial staff

delegates, which is what managers are supposed to do, and pressgangs old Bumstead from Pensions to edit the journal. Bumstead, after all, is secretary of the bowling club and he writes an occasional memo when he's got his gander up. Then there's Fanny from the typing pool who's never been short on gossip. She can collect the news, and Pompies in the postal department can handle the distribution. Hey presto, the 'A Team' rides again, but needless to say, this plan very seldom comes together.

Does this perhaps also sound ridiculous? Familiar?

Unfortunately this is how many house journals are born. Is it surprising therefore that the house journal is regarded as a poor cousin by mainstream newspaper and magazine journalists?

Put it in perspective. No construction manager in his right mind would ask a secretary to design a bridge because there is a shortage of engineers. Nor would a mine manager ask a filing clerk to act as geologist. But when it comes to editing and producing the company staff journal, well, it appears anyone will do!

Naturally the result is a jerry-built house. Patching it up won't help because the foundations have not been correctly laid. What started off as a low-budget, in-house production often ends up as a very expensive white elephant and, as the old Nigerian proverb goes, where elephants tread the grass gets flattened. Put another way, the wrong message being packaged down the line could lead to major staff problems. Conversely, the right message wrongly packaged leads to similar failure.

Clearly editing house journals is no longer a job for amateurs or armchair communicators; the Bumstead brigade will no longer suffice, not in the context of communication in the changing South Africa. Today's communications tasks are stretching many of the finest minds in the business and the book on corporate communications is going to be rewritten as the enormous challenges of multi-cultural communication in commerce and industry continue to present themselves.

In a nutshell, there's nothing humble about the house journal any longer. In many ways it has become a far more demanding editorial task than mainstream journalism.

Returning to our metaphor, establishing a house journal is much like building a house. The editor, as architect of the publication, has to do thorough research of the target market, the readers, long before thinking about origination, design or production logistics.

The editor must also act as a quantity surveyor establishing a budget and then planning how much house will be left over after installing the jacuzzi. In many respects the budget will dictate the physical attributes of the publication; whether it will run full colour on coated paper or spot colour on newsprint, that is whether the house will be built with Corobrick's finest or cement brick.

Only then does the editor turn to the design package. The grid is the foundation and must be carefully designed to fit the favoured format. It is on the grid, the visual foundation if you like, that the entire house will stand or fall.

Each page, to pursue the metaphor even further, is a room that is to be individually planned and decorated to blend in with the rest of the house. Then each word has to be laid, carefully, brick by brick, because a weak brick – a single word that is out of line – can spoil the entire house.

Adjectives, adverbs and punctuation signs must be combined to form a perfect dagha, which will ensure that each word fits into place. Too much of any one ingredient will weaken the mixture and cause cracks in the walls.

As in any home, paint also plays an important role in providing a perfect finish. Now the editor changes hats again and becomes an interior designer. The



Premier News...some house journals can teach mainstream a thing or two.

next job is to give thorough consideration to the painting of each room, the colouring of every page. A touch of red here or a dash of blue can work wonders, but too much colour will spoil the effect.

And again, each painting on the wall is like a photograph or illustration. It must be chosen judiciously and placed in exactly the right spot.

Any interior designer knows that the choice and positioning of paintings can make or break a room and you should

choose one or two large paintings, or group smaller ones together and use frames to portray them as a unified visual element. Poor paintings are not displayed, they are stuck away in attics or given to church bazaars. So it should be with visual elements like photographs and graphics – project the good image or group weaker images and relegate the rest to the wastepaper bin.

Headlines can equally make or break a house journal. Well-crafted heads invite readers to enter, poor heads chase them away, and make no mistake, headline writing is a highly skilled craft.

Lighting is also important, as the designer has to focus a spotlight on a certain area on each and every page to create a focal point that will attract and hold the reader's attention.

And lastly, there is the question of a suitable masthead, the roof of the building. It has to be the right size, colour and design as it spans your entire home and gives you the security you need. Would you put a flat zinc roof on a yuppie cathedral in Sandton or tiles on the Taj Mahal?

So building effective house journals requires considerable skill and planning. And, if you want them to last and to do the job they are intended for, give them to professionals to edit and design or you might end up with the toilet in the kitchen – even if your wife can do calligraphy.

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