

Notes on the February 25 Fire Circle Discussion

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At my request (following my long email to essential on Jan. 31), after the business meeting, we held a discussion regarding the newsletter: what it means to us, individually and in regard to EBCoM's purpose, with the goal of understanding that, plus hopefully guiding next steps towards deciding what to do regarding the newsletter and our budget issues.

This is a summary of that meeting. This wasn't a sacred circle, and therefore wasn't confidential. But, we didn't discuss that explicitly (my bad), so I've only included names where I've received explicit permission.

14 men in-person, plus Woof

5 Zoom attendees It was a chilly evening, with a few minor sprinkles - thanks to all who showed up!

Goals of the meeting:

- Get a sense of the role of the newsletter to the men, EBCOM, and our families.
- What do we want that to look like in the future?
- Give men a chance to be heard, and have men understand each other, even (especially) if they have different opinions/interests
- Based on that, then what do we need/want
- What are the next steps to achieve that?

What do we know:

- We recently had vote on a proposal to end the current practice of EBCOM printing/ mailing newsletters to those who want it. The vote failed, but knowing what men *don't* want doesn't tell us what men *do* want.
- Brief history of the newsletter: originally hands-on copy-paste production and distribution by mail, addition of online version about 11 years ago. Then, strong encouragement of men to switch to online version-only for budget and environmental reasons. Switch to digital newsletter production a few months prior to COVID.
- We *do* need to decide whether we print/mail the newsletter, or some other solution that meets our needs as an organization. Do we mail newsletters, and if so, how does that get paid for?. But we don't have to decide that at this meeting; the first step is to understand the role of the newsletter, and what we actually want to do with the newsletter.

JT's Survey:

JT presented the results of his newsletter survey (Thanks, JT!). Some of the main points follow. But, I will send the full results and more summary separately: I strongly recommend you read that if interested in who is reading the newsletter and how.

- 51 respondents (over half of membership), and representative of print recipients vs. online-only
- Print recipients: 74% read most of the newsletter, or cover-to-cover, and 0% of print recipients don't read it at all, or just skim

- Online-only recipients: 24% read most of the newsletter, or cover-to-cover. 55% don't read it at all, or skim and read a few articles
- 32% of online-only say they would read the newsletter more often if they could subscribe to it
- if the print version became unavailable: only 21% of current print recipients say that they would use the online version as much as the print version, and 25% say they would use the online version rarely or never, which would be a significant decrease in readership from current status.

A very good point regarding correlation vs. causality was made later in the meeting - see comments regarding that later in these notes and in the separate survey email.

Summarize what men shared:

- Lots of diversity in men's relationship to the newsletter
- Many men value the newsletter a lot, and read it regularly
- Some men don't read it at all, or just some articles
- More than one expressed desire for on-time newsletter availability (well before Sat. meeting)
- A couple of men shared bad experiences with writing in the newsletter, because they didn't realize that the newsletter was often read by wives, etc.
- Concern that production of the newsletter wasn't shared evenly: on some (many, most?) teams, most of the newsletter production/printing/mailing work falls on one or two guys. Also, most MNOTs aren't involved at all.
- It was pointed out that people are more likely to support provision of a service if it is "free" to them
- EBCoM has a "scarcity mentality" whenever we are dealing with spending money on things.
- *What else???*

Correlation vs. causality

We shouldn't assume that correlation implies causality, but we didn't go into this in great depth at the meeting. But, I've given this some thought since then: for example, there are lots of reasons online recipients might read the newsletter less than print recipients. One is that men may have canceled their print subscription because they weren't reading it. However, I do think the fact that most men who went from print to online now read the newsletter significantly less, in combination with anecdotal evidence of *why* that has happened, is fairly strong evidence of some significant causality, though definitely not ironclad scientific proof. More on this in the separate survey email.

Takeaways:

- Jeff Randall disclosed that men who have joined in the last 5 (or so) years were not given the option of receiving a printed newsletter. It's not clear if there was any explicit decision on this, but there was definitely pressure from various sources to have men get the newsletter online-only rather than printed, because of budget and environmental issues. So, these guys have never had printed newsletters available, which might affect whether they ever started reading it. My understanding is that the Council will address this.
- It's important to make it clear, when soliciting articles, that the newsletter is often shared with family and friends. It's generally understood that the newsletter is not confidential (where is this actually stated?), but making the newsletter easily accessible to family and friends is a big step beyond just non-confidentiality.

- Remind teams that old-school in-person newsletter production is still an option. And, how much of a problem is it for teams that one or two guys are doing most of the work?

Near the end of the meeting, there seemed to be a strong consensus that:

- The newsletter has a lot of value to EBCoM, and many of its members.
- Men *reading* the newsletter has a lot of value to EBCoM as a whole, and thus we should do what we can as an organization to facilitate men reading the newsletter.

Straw Poll:

Based on that, at 8:55, Bryan called for a straw poll: "How many men would support a one dues structure vs. a tiered structure?" The unofficial, non-binding "vote" was 17-2 in favor of one dues for all men. In other words, the men who were there believe that the newsletter adds such value to the organization as a whole that it is worth subsidizing a printed/mailed version.

I've talked to Bryan and some of the other Council members since the meeting: most were at the meeting, and all are aware of all of the above. They are committed to determining next steps and moving forward in a timely manner. I'm sure you will be hearing from them.

My personal takeaway: while we didn't end with 100% agreement about everything, and there are quite a few things that could be further investigated/improved, the fact that we got to where we did in a single meeting is a testament to the value of getting together in person, sharing and listening to each other, and hashing things out in person, particularly when there are strong disagreements and strong emotions on an issue. Shooting emails and proposals back and forth may eventually result in a decision, but it's not a good way to reach an understanding of each other, or a place where we truly have "overwhelming support" for a path forward.