

Entrants name: Chris Freek

Title of entry: *goodprospects magazine*

Division and category: Division 2: Communication Skills, Category 19: Publications

Organization: Prospera Credit Union | Insurance

Time period of project: 2005

Description: *goodprospects magazine* is an employee magazine strategically planned and produced to support Prospera's communications mandate by engaging and compelling employees to read the magazine and absorb both the culture and the vision of Prospera.

Need/opportunity

Prospera Credit Union and Insurance is one of the largest credit unions in Canada and the province of British Columbia's fourth-largest credit union with combined assets of more than \$2.2 billion under administration. We are 525 employees serving 60,000 members at 17 branches, nine insurance offices, a contact centre, six commercial banking centres and a virtual banking division. Our operational footprint covers the lower left quadrant of the province.

Between 2001 and 2004, Prospera had completed a significant merger, a total re-branding effort, and successfully expanded into a new geographic region. This rapid pace of change was coupled with staffing trends where 45% of employees had less than two years tenure and 67% had less than five. Staff who had been with the credit union prior to the merger were looking for an entirely new "Prospera" culture that would both amalgamate and replace the previous cultures while the new staff were looking for the "cues" for how to become part of "Prospera".

A need for established communications channels was cited by employees during a communications assessment, early in 2002. The response was the creation of the organization's first formal Internal Communications department who, in consultation with staff groups and executive, flagged three main channels for communications to develop: a corporate newsletter for culture building and strategic operations information, a corporate intranet to act as our knowledge base, and a staff email newsletter to push updates to the staff in an easy-to-read synopsis. These three channels were seen as strong first-steps to create consistent communications to all divisions and locations where only ad-hoc solutions had existed before and reasonably affordable given the current level of technology.

Due to technical and budgetary constraints, the electronic channels were planned for development in 2003. Only the newsletter was possible to launch immediately, as such the newsletter became our first priority. For this first version, budget dictated that the newsletter was to be 8-12 pages, published every 4-8 weeks and delivered directly to only 35% of staff with the bulk of the issues being shared in common staff areas, such as break rooms. A staff contest generated the name *goodprospects* for the first issue of the newsletter.

In 2003 the newsletter was moved to a more "magazine-like" format when the weekly email newsletter, developed as a coordinating publication under the *goodprospects* internal communications brand, allowed the more timely information to be extracted from the newsletter to the weekly email. With the newly created free space in the magazine, culture building and strategic operations content was given a larger role. In 2004 the new intranet came online, also under the *goodprospects* brand, further removing ephemeral content from the magazine. An opportunity now existed to re-brand *goodprospects magazine* into a true magazine. To affect the perceptual change from a staff newsletter to a magazine, the decision was made to research both magazine best practices as well as staff perceptions of what a magazine comprised.

Intended audiences

Line staff

Demographic research in the employee database revealed the average employee magazine reader (excluding executive and senior managers) to be female (85%), lower-middle class (\$35-40k in earnings, less than two years post secondary), middle-aged (38), and married with children. This group would comprise the target audience of the redesigned magazine.

In focus group research employees reflecting this group from throughout Prospera were asked what their favorite magazines were and what they enjoyed about them. Employees' responses focused our attention onto two types of magazines: 1) lifestyle magazines like "Martha Stewart Living", "Chatelaine", or "Oprah". Employees liked reading inspirational stories about people who had changed their lives, done something unique, or overcome an obstacle. 2) Pop-culture news magazines like "People", "Us Weekly", or "Entertainment Weekly". While they laughingly referred to these magazines as "trash", they also found them compelling and addictive. Employees liked the highly packaged "read it in a second" approach and the extensive use of sidebars and pull-outs.

Senior management

Senior management was targeted as an influencer group. They are a homogenous group by age (average 51), education (four-year university program on average) and earnings (these numbers are confidential, but are a significant multiple of the average employee's earnings), range from middle to upper-middle class, and are predominantly 65% males. Although they are decidedly different in constitution to the target audience of the magazine, it is they who control the budget and direction of the magazine so it is essential to keep them aligned with the target audience rather than referring to their own preferences.

Goals and objectives

Goal

- Strategically plan and produce a magazine that would support Prospera's communications mandate by engaging and compelling employees to read the magazine and absorb both the culture and the vision of Prospera. We propose to measure this shift in attitude through our employee engagement ranking in the *Report on Business* 50 Best Employers in Canada list and its subsequent affect on our customers through our customer satisfaction survey.

Objectives

- To use this publication to help improve our 50 Best Employers in Canada employee engagement ranking by at least 25 places from 77th in 2004 to 50th in 2005.
- To improve our total customer service ranking as assessed by the marketing research department by at least eight percent across 2005.
- To improve employee recall of key stories in the magazine from near zero to three or more specific stories and a recognition of the theme of the magazine
- To encourage employees to participate in the writing of the magazine to create a sense of engagement with the management of Prospera.
At least three articles in each issue should be under staff by-line.
- To bring individual employees who exemplify the desired attributes of the new culture to the attention of management and create peer recognition for those employees. A minimum of 40% of content of every issue will be targeted to feature employees.
- To create consistent delivery of corporate information and culture across lines of business and geographic areas of operation. The average issue will be on balance 60% corporate information.

Solution overview

Senior management directed the magazine be aligned within the framework of Prospera's eight corporate values. An editorial calendar was developed in consultation with the Executive Strategic Council which rotated through these values.

After taking several test groups to a local magazine rack to confirm our target publications group and analyzing the content and style of these women's magazines, several mock-ups of a Prospera magazine were made. These designs were consistent with our new Prospera branding guidelines, yet mimicked those magazines directed to women in our demographic.

Several mock-ups, showing different layouts and articles written in various styles, were presented to employee focus groups. Comments from the focus groups indicated that the “Oprah type” of magazine invoked the greatest emotional resonance. The greatest readership interest was still generated by highly-packaged content similar to “Us Weekly”. When these two layout methodologies were combined, the women in our focus groups recognized the magazine as a woman’s magazine, found the content engaging, and felt compelled to read the articles to completion.

As the magazine was to be integrated into Prospera’s communication’s framework, two main constraints existed: The magazine needed to reinforce the look and feel of other “*goodprospects*” branded communications vehicles (for example, the intranet and the weekly email newsletter) as well as Prospera’s external customer-facing communications. To achieve this, the color palette of the magazine was severely restricted to colors approved in our corporate branding guidelines. The primary accent color for layout is Prospera yellow (PMS 128) with the secondary accent colors predominantly in pewter (PMS 425) and light blue (PMS 290). Approved font usage for external publications required the main font usage to be Helvetica Nue, with Garamond as optimal body copy font. As this was an internal-only publication, we decided to reverse the convention and use Garamond predominantly with Helvetica Nue as an accent.

The result was a distinct expression of the Prospera brand that clearly is both part of the Prospera brand and its own unique entity. A stand-alone style guide was developed for both visual and written tone. This is housed in a comprehensive intranet site which allows volunteer contributors access to all the information they would need to contribute to the magazine. The site includes the editorial calendar, writing samples, style guides, research, past issues, and links to training and resources.

Implementation and challenges

Budget

The initial iteration of the magazine in 2003 was designed to print 600 copies, 6 times per year with a budget of \$1200 per issue. To meet these constraints we initially used digital full color only on the front and back covers; inside pages were done in two-color offset printing and the page count was limited to an 8.5” x 11” 12 –page magazine. As we knew from our focus groups, employees equated color and inviting layout with the desire to read and engage with the magazine. To match the employee expectations we increased the page size of the magazine to the maximum trim size of the digital press, 9.125” x 12.0625”, and went full-color throughout. The increase in page size was a zero-cost improvement as the process of trimming the finished magazine to 8.5 x 11” was wasting the extra inches. The Executive Strategic committee also approved a budget increase to \$3,100 per issue to accommodate both the move to full color and a move from 12 pages to 20 pages to allow for more multi-page magazine-style layouts.

Staffing constraints

The design, layout, and editing of the magazine is done completely in-house by the sole Internal Communications employee, Chris Freek. While Prospera employees provide significant amounts of writing, a freelance writer and Chris Freek contribute the larger corporate stories. For a bi-monthly staff publication this creates a significant challenge as the same single staff member is also responsible for all other internal communications at Prospera, from the intranet through to speeches and presentations. Scheduling and tight adherence to the editorial calendar is essential. Typically more than one issue of the magazine is in production at a given time to allow flexibility and reasonable lead times for contributors.

Measurement/evaluation of outcomes

To use this publication to help improve our 50 Best Employers in Canada employee engagement ranking by at least 25 places from 77th in 2004 to 50th in 2005.

- In December 2005, Prospera Credit Union was awarded the 19th position on Canada’s prestigious 50 Best Employers in Canada list.

Employees cited benefits, corporate social responsibility, and career development opportunities as the high-points of working at Prospera. All three of these topics were covered by *goodprospects* as a feature issue in 2005.

To improve our total customer service ranking as assessed by the marketing research department by at least eight percent across 2005.

- By recognizing the desired traits of the ideal Prospera employee with real-life examples, Prospera has raised the bar for customer service. In the last five months Prospera member satisfaction, as assessed by survey, has improved 1% per month from 77% to 82%. We believe *goodprospects magazine* is an integral part in the change of the service model as it was featured in one issue at the start of this five-month cycle with lesser features in each following issue. The surveys planned by marketing for 2005 did not start until September due to staffing issues.

To improve employee recall of key stories in the magazine from near zero to three or more specific stories and a recognition of the theme of the magazine

- Two series of Internal Communications focus groups were held at every branch in the system, one at the start of the magazines publication in the third quarter of 2003, and another in the first quarter of 2005 following the redesign. In the 2005 focus groups, in unaided awareness, employees recognized and recalled the corporate values featured in the past three issues and could name at least one feature article. When aided, recall rose to an average of four. In the 2003 focus groups, employees had no recall of issues covered in the past three newsletters.
- When called to be interviewed for a *goodprospects* article, employees ask if the article will be similar to articles or profiles published in previous issues, indicating that outside of the focus groups, the articles are not only read but retained.

To encourage employees to participate in the writing of the magazine to create a sense of engagement with the management of

Prospera. At least three articles in each issue should be under staff by-line.

- Between six and eight articles in each issue are written by a constantly changing line-up of employee authors. As they are volunteering their own time and effort to do this, we conclude that this shows that the magazine is read and discussed and the profile of authorship is deemed valuable.

To bring individual employees who exemplify the desired attributes of the new culture to the attention of management and create peer recognition for those employees. A minimum of 40% of content of every issue will targeted to feature employees.

- Each issue dedicates roughly 40% to human interest stories, quick facts, and sound-bites.
- 58% of the employees given prominent features have received a significant promotion to new duties or authority.

To create consistent delivery of corporate information and culture across lines of business and geographic areas of operation. The average issue will be on balance 60% corporate information.

- The magazine commands a fair degree of editorial autonomy, allowing us to tell staff stories in a decidedly non-corporate way. Each issue dedicates roughly 60% corporate explanations of large projects, management direction, and service articles. These articles are well-seeded with employees as examples, making corporate articles seems lighter and more reader-friendly.
- The staff magazine is now delivered individually to all staff in all divisions and regions. An increase in printing from less than 100 issues to 600 issues. Prospera no longer relies on pass-along readership.
- Each feature story tightly aligns to the feature value and clearly demonstrates cultural integrity by using staff from all regions and operations to illustrate examples.