Time is of the essence!

Check out these strategies for dealing with missed deadlines

Be realistic. Unless there's some mandate that your publication must come out weekly or monthly, it's not a bad idea to start small.

Every project has a schedule. If you work on a regular publication, you likely have a regular schedule with regular deadlines. Ideally, your production schedules are made well in advance; take into account the time needed to write, edit, design and produce the publication; and are distributed to everyone involved. You can use online calendars to post deadlines or e-mail the schedule in a PDF or Word format. The key is for everyone to know when things are due.

But even with the best of intentions, deadlines may be missed. A story or important information doesn't come in on time, or it's unusable. A key internal reviewer might be tied up with another project and put yours on the back burner. Any number of other mini-crises could come up that threaten to delay the whole project.

Here are a few ideas to help prevent a potential crisis.

Keep "evergreen" stories on hand

This is certainly the most obvious strategy for filling holes, yet it's amazing how few editors I know actually keep so-called evergreen stories at the ready. These are articles that have a long shelf life and require minimal editing or updating if and when they're needed.

Where do evergreen stories come from? They're stories that for some reason didn't make it into a previous issue, or that you assigned specifically for a rainy day. For example, an article about the company fitness center or the pension plan might be an excellent fit for an internal newsletter. Travel pieces often make good substitutes when something falls through, especially if you have photos on hand (just be sure they're up to date). How-to's, top-10 lists, book reviews and "did you know?" articles are other options. Even if you don't have the actual story, jot down some ideas for articles you could probably write on the fly, or at the very least create a folder of press releases that you could work with.

Expect the unexpected

Build some leeway in your production schedules. Not everything is within your control, so assume that occasionally an article won't work out or the company's servers will crash or even that you might come down with the flu and be out of the office for a couple of days. If there's a little air in your schedule, there's less reason to panic. And if everything runs like clockwork, then enjoy the fact that you can skip out of the office at 5.

One magazine I've worked on is notorious for missing deadlines—not just by a day or two, but by weeks. Of course, that throws off the work schedules of the outside design firm and the printer, not to
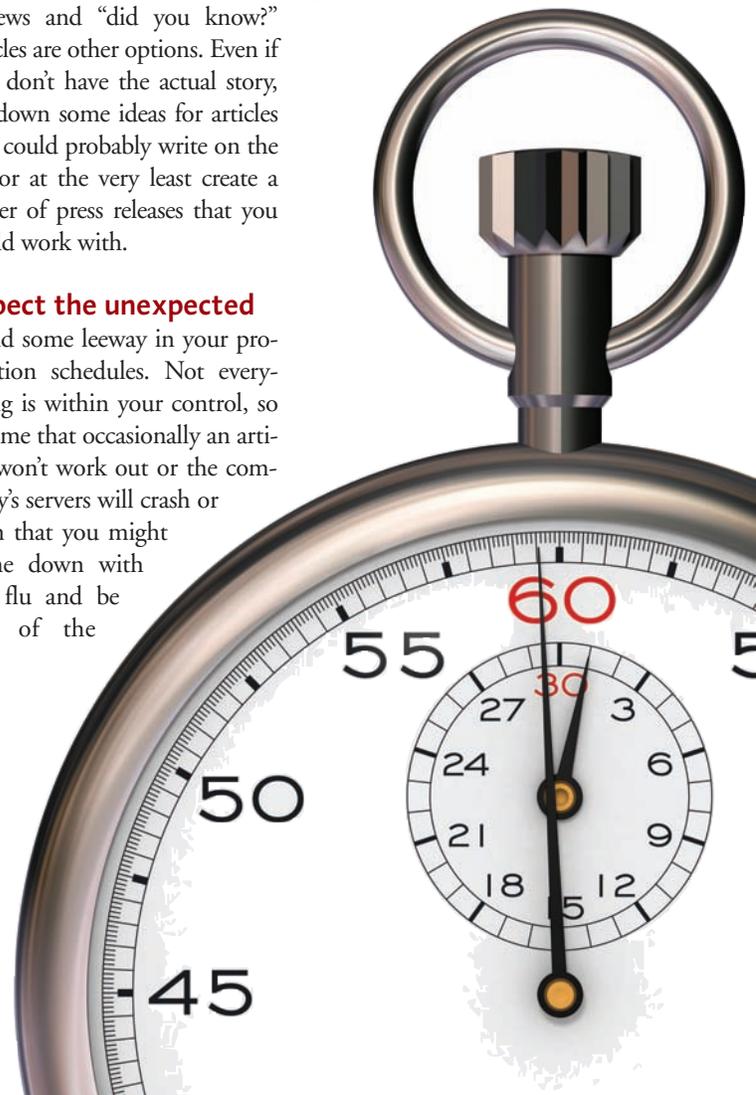
mention the internal team working on the magazine. You could say that the editor in chief is something of a procrastinator, but that's not the main reason for the delays. The main reason is that everyone quoted or featured in the magazine gets to review—and make changes to—the relevant copy. And no matter what the schedule says, that always takes more time than is allotted. In addition, one section of the magazine showcases events within the organization, and there's a drive to include as many of these events as possible, even if it means holding up the page.

If reviews are part of your process, make sure you anticipate how long they might take—and then add a few days. And remember that at some point you have to say, "No more. This issue is closed."

At *CW,* our yearlong schedule is created months in advance and includes ample time for assigning, editing, design and production. That helps when things don't go as planned. Even better, it allows us to accommodate "late" items. For example, in this issue, we knew ahead of time that the figures for the IABC annual report would not be ready until after our standard editorial deadlines. Even so, we knew that part was coming, left space for it and squeezed it in within the proofreading window. Our schedule also includes staggered deadlines for editorial.

After all, can you really review, edit and design 10 stories that all arrive on the same day? Staggering that part of the schedule is often more efficient, especially if your staff is small.

Consider your resources

Last November, a local professional organization announced with great fanfare the premier issue of its monthly e-newsletter. In seven months, I have seen exactly two issues. Because it's produced as a PDF, the number of pages isn't critical—the first issue had four pages, the second had three—so lack of content isn't necessarily the reason for the delay. More likely, a monthly publication, even a small one, was too ambitious, given the group's volunteer staff and the work involved in coming up with ideas, writing the articles, and designing and formatting the newsletter.

Be realistic. Unless there's some mandate that your publication must come out weekly or monthly, it's not a bad idea to start small. You can always increase the frequency if you find you can manage it, but drowning in a sea of unattainable deadlines won't do your publication—or you—much good. And if you're launching a publication, make sure there's ample time in your schedule to accommodate review and comment from any higher-ups. •

Communication challenge: Making deadlines matter

How would you handle this deadline challenge?

Lynne works on a contract basis for a nonprofit organization, putting together several newsletters whose main purpose is to promote the organization's programs, such as summer camps for kids and activities for the elderly. Most of these newsletters are monthly. Lynne doesn't make the schedule, but she's responsible for adhering to it. She writes some of the articles, including news items, announcements and profiles of interesting people, and the rest of the material—including program descriptions and schedules—is supposed to come from other people in the organization. For every issue, Lynne or her client e-mails the managers whose programs will be featured with the deadlines for submitting information.

And for every issue, at least one program manager ignores (or forgets) the request. That leaves Lynne with two options: (1) Chase down the missing information (or ask her client-boss to do so), and poten-tially hold up the publication; or (2) ignore it and fill the space with one of those evergreen stories—and potentially incur the wrath of the program managers who failed to turn in the requested material when they see that the publication went to press without their program information.

When Lynne worked full time for the organization, option 1 was more feasible than option 2, but not foolproof, she says. As a contractor working off-site, however, she has no face-to-face contact with the program managers, which makes it harder to get them to submit the needed information. Even on-site, her boss hasn't had much success either.

So here's the communication challenge: How should Lynne convey the importance of the publication deadlines to the program managers? What strategies do you use to adhere to production schedules? E-mail your responses to *cwmagazine@iabc.com.*

—S.K

about the author

Sue Khodarahmi, who was two days late with this column, is managing editor of *CW.*