



Circulation Management & Audience Development

Requalifying Your Controlled Circulation Magazine By Elaine Tyson

REQUALIFICATIONS

Controlled publications aren't just "free" paid magazines. There are a number of differences that figure into the process of managing this type of circulation and requalifying your file for each audit cycle.

Audit requirements are different. You should take full advantage of the services offered to members by BPA and ABC to be certain you understand exactly what is required of members to qualify a subscription and what records must be produced to pass an audit.

The use of controlled circulation is generally a business-to-business technique although there are some consumer magazines that use it to some extent. Therefore, the type of prospect you're approaching is generally a business prospect rather than a consumer. Business-to-business mailing universes are usually smaller than consumer markets as are promotion budgets. Newsstand sales is primarily a consumer distribution channel even through there are some B2B publications with limited distribution.

One of the biggest differences between paid and controlled circulation is collecting demographics. Consumer magazines are highly sensitive to extraneous material on order forms. Controlled publications have to require a certain amount of information to qualify the subscriptions but controlled publication order forms should be restricted to the minimum required because the more questions you ask and the more time it takes to qualify, the lower your response will be.

Because controlled publications don't generate income and cash flow from subscriptions, any income has to come from ancillary sources. But, controlled publications can penetrate the subscriber universe at high percentages compared to paid magazines. Controlled subscriptions, unlike paid subscriptions, don't expire, they age.

When controlled subscriptions age (right after the analyzed issue – either May or November – depending on your audit cycle), you need to requalify them to meet your analyzed issue objectives for the next cycle and to contain the cost of acquiring new subscriptions.

The publisher decides the goals for controlled publications – how many one year names and whether two and three year names are acceptable. It's a good idea to ask the publisher to review the qualification form prior to the end of each audit cycle for potential changes because it is best to make any changes at the beginning of a cycle.

Once you've done that, you need to review your history. What qualification efforts worked? Were there some that didn't? You need a plan to renew the file. Keep in mind, there are a number of formats you can use:

Email
Broadcast Fax
Tip Ons/Wraps
Telemarketing
Direct Mail

To avoid asking subscribers who renewed late in the cycle to renew again in a month or two, consider splitting your file into two groups by qualification date. For instance, for a publication on a November cycle, you could split the qualification dates as follows:

Group One – All qualification dates from December to May
Group Two – All qualification dates from June to November.

Be sure you use the right dates. You can check the exact dates for your magazine with the audit bureau if you aren't sure.

The promotion efforts used in Group One are also used in Group Two – not necessarily in the same order. This prevents your asking subscribers who just renewed to renew again immediately. Subscribers don't understand audit regulations and qualification dates. But they do get annoyed at being asked to renew immediately after renewing.

Most publishers use less expensive sources for the first few efforts. Less expensive sources are probably a series of email efforts, a broadcast fax and cover tips or wraps. Telemarketing is generally a pretty important source of renewals for controlled publications but telemarketing does cost more than email or faxing so get in as many renewals as possible through inexpensive sources before you turn over the file to telemarketing.

Because the cost of telemarketing has come down and the cost of mail has gone up, the number of controlled publications using direct mail to requalify subscriptions has declined. You are the best judge of whether or not direct mail is a viable source of renewals for your publication. A lot depends on your objectives and how many email addresses and fax numbers you have available on your file. You need to reach all your subscribers more than once to renew them.

Here's an example of a requalification plan:

- Effort 1 Cover Tip On
- Effort 2 Email
- Effort 3 Email
- Effort 4 Email
- Effort 5 Tip On
- Effort 6 Broadcast Fax
- Effort 7 Email
- Effort 8 Email
- Effort 9 Telemarketing
- Effort 10 Tip On

The email efforts are spaced about a week apart. Don't forget you need to leave enough time between the tip ons and email or fax efforts to get the renewals from the tips and faxes processed at your service bureau. **Tip ons and faxes take longer to process than email.**

The above plan is only an example. You need to tailor your magazine's plan based on goals, response history and the number of email addresses and fax numbers you have available to work with.

When it comes to fax efforts, you should limit requalification faxes to one page, make your instructions clear and keep the design simple. If faxing works for you but you need more fax numbers, make a bigger effort to collect them and consider appending them if possible. You might want to test a fax using a personalized URL. This would eliminate having to reproduce your qualification form on the fax itself. The subscriber would enter the personalized URL from the fax and be redirected to a pre-populated online form at your service bureau. Just be sure your service bureau and broadcast fax company work together to get the logistics worked out. Most can do it with no problem.

Be sure you check results to each requalification effort as it comes in. Review your budget and promotion plan to be sure you're on track. Be flexible and understand your options. If renewals aren't going according to plan, you'll have to take some action to get back on track.

Sometimes you need a quick fix. These are band-aids and should be discussed with the publisher prior to implementing any of them. If you come up to the end of a cycle and you're short on anything, you can consider:

- Adding directory source names
- Adding a trade show list
- If you need more personal request names, get a telemarketing firm on the phone to call a directory list
- Send one final "clean up" fax
- Fax existing subscribers for referrals
- Try a short form
- Reduce your circulation

About the author: Elaine is a guest lecturer at the Columbia University Publishing Course and a frequent speaker at industry functions. She writes for the publishing trade press and for many years wrote a column for Circulation Management magazine. She is the recipient of the 2010 Angelo R. Venezian Award presented by The National Trade Circulation Foundation each year to an industry professional who has contributed to the advancement of the industry and the circulation discipline.

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