Special issues and supplements

BY TRACEY LINDEMAN

In 2006-2007, the Link organized 15 special issues out of 31 issue publishing year. We did it all — the queer issue, media democracy, women against violence, creativity, consumerism and sustainability, housing and poverty, culture and diversity, disabilities, orientation, sexuality, women, and the list goes on.

Publishing supplements and special issues is a fun and useful way to attract new writers who may not be interested in writing traditional news stories. Supplements are also a good way to reach out to other campus groups who address the specific topics you will be discussing in your supplement.

Doing a queer issue? Invite the campus queer rights group to your staff brainstorming session. It fosters a sense of solidarity and these groups may be a lot quicker to help you in the future. Having contributions from people who know what’s going on also allows you to draw from a much larger pool of story ideas than your staff alone could create.

SO YOU WANT TO CREATE A SUPPLEMENT . . .

One of the reasons we publish supplements is because something isn’t being covered in our normal issues. Some staffers might be adverse to the idea of more “controversial” supplements, but journalism isn’t just about reporting the news, it’s also about pushing boundaries and writing about communities.

If something is taboo on your campus or in your community, perhaps it’s time to write about it — in depth. If anything, it will give your letters section a boost. If you’re experiencing some resistance from other editors about the topic you’d like to address, try using a different angle on the pitch. Talk about bringing in new writers, getting topic-specific advertising (i.e. Apple ads for a Science and Technology issue), boosting readership, and increasing participation. Also mention the potential for writers to have their material published in other campus papers via the CUP wire.

Supplements tend to cover social issues, but covering social issues doesn’t automatically make you some sort of Marxist-Leninist. This is why it’s good to solicit ideas from a wide range of people from all areas of the political spectrum. Invite them to write about these topics in your special issue. A special issue shouldn’t just be 12 pages of opinion articles, though. Having solid, well-researched pieces is incredibly redeeming and appreciated by writers and readers alike.

There are a number of different ways to approach a special issue, but it’s usually good to know how many pages you’re working with: will it be a 4-8 page extra section or a special issue (from a 12 page insert to the Gateway’s Herculean 40-page sex issue)? It’s often hard to predict how many pages you’ll have in advance.

You could discover that you have way more content than you can cram into your pages or that you have far more pages than you have content to fill them with. If your paper has a website, you can throw some extra articles online as “Online Exclusives”, which is also useful for directing traffic to your web page. If you have blank pages, it’s time to get creative and do what you do best — it’s happened before.

GETTING YOUR IDEAS ON PAPER

Try to schedule brainstorming sessions at least three weeks before the issue is supposed to come out. Advertise the meeting over your paper’s email list and put some house ads in the weeks leading up to the brainstorming session. Try writing e-mails to organizations that are relevant to the discussion, inviting them to come to the meeting to share their experiences and educated opinions.

Some dates worth remembering

Oct. 18: International Media Democracy Day
www.uberculture.org/projects/imdd.html

Nov. 25: Buy Nothing Day
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buy_Nothing_Day

Dec. 6: École Polytechnique Massacre anniversary
en.wikipedia.org/wiki/École_Polytechnique_massacre

Feb. 14: Valentine’s Day

Mar 8: International Women’s Day
www.internationalwomensday.com

Mar 21: International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination
www.canadianheritage.gc.ca/march-21-mars/index_e.cfm

April 22: Earth Day
www.earthday.ca
It’s usually a bit slow-going at the beginning of the meeting, so you can always ask your editors to come with some ideas prepared to get the ball rolling. Then you won’t be able to get people to shut up — many brainstorming sessions have exceeded their designated hour of discussion. It’s a good way to motivate people and get writers enthusiastic about the topic at hand.

When someone suggests a topic, ask if they’d like to write it. At the end of the meeting, ask people to come and put their names beside the stories they’d like to write. Give them their deadlines, word counts and about two weeks to write it up.

WHO DOES WHAT NOW?

Who organizes special issues, you ask? The Link schedules its special issues at the beginning of the year and asks editors (and some keen volunteer staff members) to coordinate the issues. Those people act like section editors for the issue, which is useful if your editorial staff doesn’t have the time to co-ordinate a supplement.

Usually, two people is a good way to go, especially when there is a lot of content. Try to assign photos and graphics as story ideas come in. This gives photo and graphics editors more time to do their work in addition to the work for regular issues.

Need help? CUP also maintains a supplements bureau chief, who you can reach at supplements.bureau@cup.ca.

Tracey Lindeman was Editor-in-Chief of the Link (Concordia University), CUP 68 supplements bureau chief, and Quebec Board Representative for CUP 69 and CUP 70.