



TOPTIPS

One way of promoting a positive image of church is to set up a community magazine. Caroline Masom, who has helped to do just that, explains how to go about it.

What's the point of a community magazine?

Do you ever feel that churches, and Christians, are misunderstood? Many churches are doing fabulous work in their communities, yet Christians are often portrayed by the media as being out-of-date and inward-looking, if not bigoted, irrelevant kill-joys.

One way of counteracting a negative image of church is to set up a community magazine. But beware - it's not for the fainthearted. Community magazines need to be widely distributed and professional-looking if they are to do their job. They don't come cheap.

What it is...and what it isn't

A community magazine is not an evangelistic tool or a Gospel presentation. Neither is it a vehicle to tell your community about your church, in a 'take it or leave it' kind of way.

The prime task of a community magazine is gradually chip away at people's negative preconceptions, issue by issue. Its goal is to bring its readers to the point of wondering whether they might have been wrong and whether there could be something in this whole Christianity thing after all...

Producing a good community magazine is a pre-evangelistic seed-sowing exercise.

All aboard?

If you're considering setting up a community magazine, make sure that the church leadership understands and is fully behind the vision for it.

It takes time and effort to understand the culture and the community you are trying to connect with. But the task is essential. You need to be able to identify the interests and concerns of the people who will receive the magazine and to work out how you can say relevant things about these issues from a point of view which is unashamedly Christian without being clichéd, jargon-ridden or off-puttingly churchy. It's a tightrope which you're unlikely to get right all the time.

Why should anyone read this?

Unlike a church magazine, which is usually targeted at church members who have an interest in reading it (you hope!), there's no reason why the recipient of a community magazine should pick it up.

Unless you make it look so interesting that they just can't resist...

A professional-looking production is really important. Visually, the magazine has to make an impact straight away or no one will ever bother to read your cunningly crafted and relevant contents. You may need to consider paying for the services of a professional designer.

Getting it out there

Another issue that should be considered at an early stage is how your community magazine is going to be delivered. Can you train up a team of committed volunteers willing to pound the streets with it three or four times a year, stopping for friendly chats with people as they go?

Is it worth it?

Done well, it's definitely worth it. It will certainly take months, probably years, but regularly distributing a quality magazine into your local community can really affect people's perception of church. It can open up conversations, break down barriers of misunderstanding and lead to Christians and church activities being widely and positively recognised in their own communities. Sometimes lonely, isolated people will contact the church as a result of something they've seen or read in your magazine. Sometimes a bereaved family will call, asking for support from your pastor. Sometimes a troubled parent will come along to your parenting classes feeling comfortable about attending a church-run event for the first time ever, because he's read your magazine.

Having said all that, the results of having a community magazine are often hard to quantify. It's best seen as part of a long-term project, part of a fundamentally outward-looking church attitude which says 'yes, our faith is relevant to what's going on in the world today. We don't stick to our holy huddle – our God is too big for that.'

Caroline Masom was part of a team at Gold Hill Baptist Church, Chalfont St Peter which set up and produced *Infusion*, a full-colour 12-page magazine delivered free to 6,500 houses in South Bucks. It ran for 17 issues between 2001 and 2004. Caroline is a freelance writer and is on the committee of the Association of Christian Writers.