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Good Lord. I'm a Publisher

by Judith Askew (Editor and Publisher of *Menopause News*)

In June, 1990, I left my job as a business editor in a fast-paced management consulting firm and stepped into the thin air of the unknown. This was not the first time I'd done so. But at 50, I might really have plunged myself into deep yogurt.

As you can guess from my age, my college degree was supposed to be an MRS. In the early 60s, women were not entering law school and medical school or even library school in droves. A woman graduating from college then had anything but reasonable career development in mind. Combined with unfortunate birth timing was another albatross—an inescapable love of writing.

I have tried to wrestle that bird from by back. I have done so many other things—as writers will do. I had also written everything from a review of the Beatles' latest movie to vocabulary exercises for middle-school children; I had edited everything from a book about women's dreams to a report of chugging (and I'm not going to give you a clue what that's about, primarily because I'm still not sure).

And now my hormones were doing all sorts of somersaults and raising dizzying havoc with my body.

One day, in the business section of the public library, I pulled and enticing book from the shelf: *Eight Moneymaking Ideas for an Entrepreneur*. I skimmed the table of contents and there it was: "Publishing a Subscription Newsletter."

I felt a rush of adrenalin.

Concurrent with my search for the energizing employment idea had been a rising interest in the thing of my body. Now I had headaches and hot flashes, insomnia, joint pain, and other

unmentionables related to a woman's midlife changes. I wanted to learn what in the world was going on, and the information wasn't readily or easily available.

I checked the *Oxbridge Directory of Newsletters* to see if a newsletter about menopause existed or, for purposes of comparison, about adoption.

One newsletter about menopause was listed and 18 about adoption! I ignored the idea that maybe there was only one newsletter on menopause because there was no market for it. Instead, I focused on the potential market.

Soon I had learned from the American College of OB/GYN there were 30,000 OB/GYN doctors. The ALA told me over 5,000 public libraries existed in large cities. There were smaller public libraries; hospital libraries; hospital community outreach programs. And all those baby boom women moving into menopause.

Quite frankly, I thought I had hit upon a decent moneymaking idea, but could I do it? Could I understand medical journal articles? Could I get the interviews I would need? Would there be enough information on the subject?

I began visiting UC San Francisco's medical school library and Planetree, a fine consumer health publications library. I explored my idea with Dr. Sadja Greenwood, author of *Menopause, Naturally*, who encouraged me, gave me referrals and assured me that women would probably subscribe for 7 or 8 years as they followed the research on estrogen therapy.

So, I drafted my first newsletter, xeroxed it, and sent it off to 25 women for feedback. The response was ex-

tremely positive; only three women said they would not subscribe. One had done her reading all ready; one had had a hysterectomy, but would have paid \$50 for the information a few years ago (and has since subscribed); and one didn't see the need for it.

I thought the light was green, but there was much controversy about its name, *Menopause News*: "I don't want my sons to know I'm going through this." "At least, don't put the name on the envelope!" I knew enough about marketing to believe the name should tell a little about the product. And I wanted a woman to be able to find it if she were looking under 'menopause' on a card catalogue or on a computer.

I decided temporarily to stay with *Menopause News* — it said what I wanted to say. On the envelope, however, I used an abbreviation: *M-News*

Now the time had come to think about the design and layout. I modeled *Menopause News* on successful and interesting health newsletters: the *UC Berkeley Wellness Letter*, *Health After 50*, *Diet and Nutrition*, and others.

A TV channel logo with several different shapes and bright colors inspired it. At first, my design was too complicated, and I reluctantly simplified it. A retired advertising designer and the award-winning art director of a large company (where my work in the communications department had given me considerable experience putting together newsletters) advised me that keeping the design simple would keep my printer happy and my printing costs down. Reluctantly, I relinquished tight registration (exactly fitting a square of color inside a black outline) and moved "In This Issue" from its jaunty

angle to a more conservative vertical.

I never hesitated about the color and recycled paper. I knew that I wanted the print in black and that I wanted one other color. My favorite color over the past few years has been a cinnebar green, which I thought was appropriate for a health newsletter.

Finding the people I wanted to work with as my little family was far more difficult than color and design. I wanted people who knew what they were doing, were reliable, interested in the project, and didn't cost too much. I was fortunate in my choice of a typesetter primarily because he's fast, knows about computers, has good ideas, but gives way when I want something my way. And after struggling these past eight years as an editor cajoling business men and women to, at least, follow standard rules of grammar, for example, regardless of the bottomline or deadline, I definitely wanted to do things my way. I wanted to rise and fall on my own ideas and talent.

Finding the perfect printer was another story. At first, I had *Menopause News* printed from a metal plate, which has a slick, professional look, but costs twice as much as printing from a paper plate. Because this process requires more careful monitoring, I had some difficulty finding a printer who would do it, but I preferred to put the cost saving into stamps on envelopes headed to prospective subscribers.

I spent a week researching modems, computer software, and upgrades for my Apple. I decided I definitely did not want to learn design software such as Pagemaker and Ventura. I wanted to focus on researching, writing, and promoting *M-News* and leave the lay out to someone else. At first, I scanned the 24 pages of text and delivered the disk to my typesetter who converted it from WordPerfect to Pagemaker. That was time-consuming and costly, so I soon invested in Crossworks (an Apple/IBM conversion program) and a modem and now send the newsletter to S.G.

Design over telephone wires.

While researching *Menopause News*, I invited a gentleman to lunch whose life work is direct mail advertising. I was depressed for a week afterward. He advised that publishing my newsletter would compare favorably to standing next to a large hole and throwing in my money. He pulled out a pencil and paper and ran the numbers. Truly daunting. PP&L; printing, postage and list. Those are the basic expenses, and if you consider that for every 100 letters you send out, you may get 2 subscriptions, you can understand why *M-News* nearly did not taxi out to the runway.

Let me say right here, I am enormously encouraged by the response to the newsletter, I think, primarily because there is nothing like it and women are hungry for this information. The function of a newsletter is to bring up-to-date, on-going information, in this case, medical research on estrogen, progesterin, osteoporosis, heart disease, mammography, etc., to the reader. For many women, finding this information is nearly impossible. Books on the subject, which I review, are often published by small presses. The taboo word 'menopause' stops polite conversation dead. And from what I hear from women, OB/GYN doctors are interested in babies and not middle-aged women. Often they attribute menopause problems to other sources, refer women to psychiatrists, prescribe tranquilizers, or deny menopause altogether.

My first marketing efforts were to friends of a certain age, 500 libraries in cities of 100,000 or more, and 250 OB/GYNs. (the direct marketing industry considers 10,000 a test mailing!)

I began receiving checks in the mail, but I was so nervous about the responsibility and cost of putting out at least six issues that I put the checks in a safe place. Two months later a friend called to tell me she

was sick of carrying the check in her records, so I opened an account and deposited my first checks.

Much to my surprise, the library mailing bombed. Then I learned about selling through vendors, so I registered with EBSCO, the name I remembered from my days working in two libraries. I also asked three librarians how they make decisions. I learned about journals that review serials and wrote 10 letters—to people like Katina Strauch, Bill Katz, Beverly Goldberg, Barry Braunstein, Fran Graf, Judith McGarry, Gail Pool, and Mary Jo Godwin. Professor Alan Rees, editor of the *Consumer Health and Nutrition Index*, immediately agreed to index *Menopause News*. Katina invited me to write an article about starting a subscription newsletter. Clearly, as a subscription newsletter publisher herself, she shares my joy in this work.

The past eight months, as I've put out my first four issues, have been the happiest of my life in terms of my work. My experience in corporate America as a writer and editor prepared me for this. I took a crash course in direct mail and fulfillment, which I'm still able to handle myself. However, I look forward to the time when my volume and promotion is sufficient to hire temporary help or a fulfillment house.

At last, my education, experience and interest have finally come together. I'm able to write something that I think is valuable to women. I perceive a desperate need for reliable, yet practical, information about menopause. And having my own business is truly exhilarating and not, really, as difficult as one might imagine.

Having accumulated some knowledge about publishing and taking each day, each challenge as it comes, *M-News* and I learn and grow together. The pride, excitement, and feeling of fulfillment is satisfying indeed. ♣