

Upfront

Want a behind-the-scenes look at the fun and glamor of magazine publishing? We – I, as some of the salutations read “Dear Scott – received a handful of impassioned emails/ letters the week of March 4. The senders were animated by a letter to the editor that ran in the issue prior to this one. My team and/or I responded in detail to the writers, encouraging each to publish his or her thoughts. Unfortunately, they all declined our invitation. We respect their wishes to remain anonymous. However, revealing a bit of the back-and-forth sheds light on our editorial process, imperfect as it is. With a very small staff, we publish a content-rich magazine every two weeks. We have done so for more than 20 years. We do things well and we make mistakes. But we maintain fidelity to our core ethos – to provide thoughtful and entertaining content AND to provide community members with an open forum for communication and discussion that is not restricted by the agenda or implicit biases that influence other outlets.

I offer a sampling of my recent week. I have shortened (some) letters and responses because of space constraints. But the edits do not alter the underlying themes:

Letter Writer One: “Why do you print this crap? How about fact checking what you decide to publish?”

Me: “...we actively welcome all letters, regardless of their points of view. We take pride in our commitment to free and open exchanges of ideas. We make no judgments as to which of our readers are “crazy people” (a reference to a second email from the letter writer) and which are guardians of absolute truths. Our only demand is that letter writers refrain from (named) ad hominem attacks against members of our shared community... We applaud and admire anyone who exhibits the courage to publicly articulate his or her thoughts. We are grateful for those who choose to enjoy any of the close-to-600 issues we have produced over the years...a group into which you must fall, so we thank you.”

Letter Writer 2: “Dear Scott – I’m very disappointed that the Skinnie published the current

Letter to the Editor with its hateful, divisive, political rhetoric. If you truly are a publication that is The Definitive Voice of Skidaway Island then you would have published two political points of view of Justice for All. Because the view from my living room is not represented by Dick Berkowitz who supports a three-time married, rapist, liar, who incited an insurrection, grifter, with 91 indictments. Calling me a Neo-Marxist who is disrupting his version of a ‘perfect union?’ My expectations are that you do not support this drivel and that you provide more amicable content. Do better.”

Me: “The letter you reference is simply one man’s opinion and, as clearly stated in the magazine (as it has been for 20 years), not the opinion of the magazine...We would have happily published an alternative letter, except that nobody wrote one, and nobody (yet) who objects to the letter has been willing to sign his or her name to an alternative point of view. With your permission, we will publish your letter in our next issue, as I’m sure many people will appreciate your sentiments. As for the “do better” directive...in the main, I am very comfortable with the quality of work we have done over the last 20+ years. Thank you for your readership.”

Letter Writer 2 responded to my response: “...Actually, within The Landings, we are not allowed to display political flags or clothing with political messages. Politic (sic) discussions are not only discouraged, but not allowed...I do not want to participate in a back-and-forth political debate. There’s no win. And it also could be of danger to me and my home. If you do support this type of free speech, I will ask that the Skinnie not be delivered to our residence.”

I was surprised to learn that the community intentionally squelches free speech.

Letter Writer(s) 3: “I have become increasingly dismayed with the content of the last few letters to the editor. When did The Skinnie become a political football? You state on your table of contents page that you reserve the right to edit letters for clarity and content and that the opinions of the writers does (sic) not necessarily reflect the opinion of the magazine and its publisher. You also say The Skinnie is ‘the definitive voice of Skidaway Island, including the Landings, Modena Island, South Harbor and the Village on Skidaway Island.’ The letter to the editor in the March issue does not reflect my voice. And I not talking about taking a political side. I’m talking about irrelevant content in a community-based, ad-magazine focusing

on services and local businesses. As far as I can tell, this magazine is NOT intended to be a political FORUM. You can, as editors, refuse this type of letter as it has no relevance to the rest of the content of your magazine. If you feel it does, then you should be prepared to have letters from, and accept, all side of the issues. And by then, I will be gone as a reader. There is enough vitriolic, political rhetoric these days without have to read it in a local ad magazine. And how do all your advertisers feel about this? Maybe not so good if you lose readership.”

Me: I didn’t respond to this one, but we are very prepared to entertain letters from anybody, regardless of slant. I would hate to think our readers would punish our hard-working advertisers for one reader’s opinion.

Letter Writer 4: “After reading Duck (sic) Berkowitz’s letter your magazine will go directly into my trash bin every week.”

Me: “Thank you for reading... We have published letters that deal with community controversies and broader political opinions and never consciously denied any point of view access to our pages. We have published as many – probably more – letters from people who fundamentally disagree with Mr. Berkowitz than from his compatriots...We imagine a world where the power of logic and facts wins the day. Should you feel empowered by throwing our magazine in your trash can, it is your right, just as Mr. Berkowitz’s speech is his. However, I would invite you to consider the value of the 2,500+ pieces of unique content that we have produced over the years for the benefit of our readers at zero cost to them...Should you be willing to advance a discussion that thrives through strength of reason, we would be delighted to publish your letter, or any letter from you... and we have no problem highlighting your direct criticism of us. If, however, you hold to the notion that destroying our work is your most articulate form of self-expression, we will still attempt to entertain, inform, and serve as a community asset – regrettably without your readership – at times succeeding and at times course-correcting when necessary.”

I’m still waiting for a reply, but I’m not holding my breath.



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