
 MANAGEMENT

Extra! Extra! Firm of Rieck and Crotty writes all about it

by Paul Zelewsky

When the law firm of Rieck and Crotty writes, people read.

Or so hope name partners Thomas W. Rieck and Jerome F. Crotty, who have sweat for more than nine years to meet deadlines for their homespun newsletter, *A Potpourri*.

Written in plain English, the 12-page newsletter lacks case cites and legal jargon but not information or a sense of humor. It arrives every other month in the mailboxes of 1,000 clients, prospective clients, accountants, insurance executives, bankers, lawyers and friends.

"I've always had that promotional mentality," Rieck explains. "I thought this would be a great tool to generate business. I've always sent out articles and information to clients in one form or another, and this was just another way to do that."

Topics since the premiere issue of March 1982 range from Judge Richard L. Curry's decision allowing lights at Wrigley Field, to decisions regarding snow shoveling, to a bank's duty to keep customer information confidential.

Rieck dons the proverbial green visor and serves as editor-in-chief, assigning articles, ordering rewrites and overseeing production. Crotty rolls his sleeves and plays copy editor, checking punctuation and grammar and writing headlines.

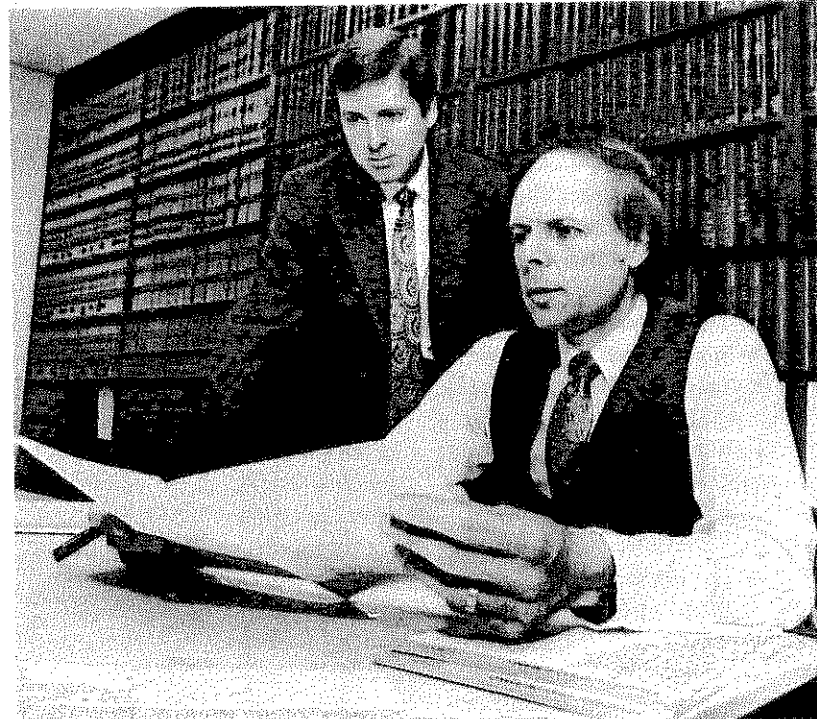
Everyone at the seven-lawyer firm, including the name partners, writes one or two articles per issue.

The investment — approximately 50 hours of the lawyers' time per issue, plus word processing, printing and mailing costs — pays each time clients call and say, "About your last issue . . ."

"The cost is manageable and well worth it for all of the business it's brought in," Rieck said. "It's paid for itself with the clients' continued business."

Crotty said the cost is a "trade secret, and it's difficult to put a particular dollar on the cost because the attorneys' time is something we have to factor into it. So you can bet there's a fair amount of money that goes into it."

The editorial calendar begins two months before the publication date, when Rieck formulates what he wants to tell the readers, who include everyone from clients and



Jerome F. Crotty (left) and Thomas W. Rieck confer about the firm's newsletter.

friends to Mayor Richard M. Daley.

The newsletter reflects the firm's practice areas, which include business law, litigation, real estate, estate planning and bankruptcy. Rieck chooses a mix from those areas and always ends the 12-page newsletter with an anecdote or jokes.

Rieck culls ideas from a 3- or 4-inch stack of court opinions, news stories and journals that cross his desk each day. Client questions and comments also provide fodder when Rieck assigns articles to the firm's lawyers.

After receiving the assignments,
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lawyers have four weeks to write one or two articles, which take about one-half day to craft. Revisions and rewrites are common, but less so now as lawyers have learned how to write for editor-in-chief Rieck.

Rieck spends the next three weeks editing the articles, checking spelling and grammar, and selecting the order in which the articles appear.

"It was rather burdensome at the very beginning," Rieck said. "I had to use a whip to get everybody to comply with schedules, but it's evolved to the point where the lawyers have become better writers. It's taken less and less time. In terms of seeing the whole thing through, from 'A' to 'Z', it takes me maybe 25 hours per issue."

Crotty reviews the articles, too, and writes the headlines — often with tongue stuffed in cheek. Take, for example, "Look under 'L' for lawsuit" about a downtown hotel suing the publisher of a visitors' guide, or "Turkey hunter can't go after big game or who's the bigger turkey?" about one sportsman mistaking another hunter for a bird

and shooting him.

Although the two (who move in social circles as Tom and Jerry) pepper newsletters with humor, they turn serious when writing about wills and estates, taxation, employment matters or corporate law.

After a final review by the firm's four partners, the 8½-by-11-inch newsletter is printed on heavy, buff-colored paper and stapled on its spine.

Clerks handle the mailing list and labels, while attorneys write personal notes calling a client's attention to particular articles. Often the attorneys will target an article to clients facing a common problem.

"We might have a particular issue we will write about so that a particular client or group of clients will think, 'You know, that's a problem that I have. I ought to call or do something,'" Rieck said.

Crotty recalls a client who had "a dire need for a buy-sell agreement."

"He was in essence playing the ostrich role," Crotty said, "so he wouldn't have to look at his problem. I knew it was a problem that he'd have to face one day.

"I wrote an article designed specifically for him. Although the

newsletter at that time went to 2,000 people, the article was geared for one person."

The client called: "About your last issue, this one particular article really hit home. I've got to do something about this," the client told Crotty.

"It hit the mark right in the bull's eye," Crotty added.

The newsletter once struck the wrong target when several women complained that an anecdote was sexist. One asked that her name be removed from the mailing list.

But with 55 issues published to date, Rieck prides himself on accuracy and keeping most readers satisfied.

"When I look at it the last time around, I have to put myself in the seat of every single reader of the issue and make sure everything in there is acceptable," Rieck explained.

Rieck is mostly a self-taught editor but did spend "a couple of long weeks" in the proofreading department of an accounting firm. "That's the extent of my editing background, other than all the reading and writing that I do now. It's just natural to me," he said.

By now, Rieck figures that the newsletter is a natural to generate business — or at least a friend. When he meets a prospect, he adds another name to the list, as he did with a retired businessman living in Florida.

"I thought he might need an estate plan done at some time," Rieck said. "So we put him on the mailing list. He never needed us; but after about six years on the mailing list, he sent us a check for 10 bucks and said, 'I really enjoy the newsletter. Here's some money for postage. Keep it coming.' "*"