Small is beautiful for MoneySaver newsletter

PERSONAL FINANCE

By Bruce Cohen

WHILE recession-plagued slickly written glossy magazines downsize — or shut down — Canadian MoneySaver is starting its 11th year and publisher Dale Ennis sounds as relaxed as ever.

But then, this personal finance grab-bag has little in common with big-time magazines.

Produced 11 times a year in Bath, Ont. — a village on Lake Ontario near Kingston — the Money-Saver is about as far from slick as you can get. The cover photo is unchanged from month to month and you won't find any fancy art inside. What you will find is a bizarre mix of articles and tables aimed at boosting investment gains or saving a few bucks here and there.

Most articles are written for free by professionals, salespeople and academics to promote their names, products or philosophies — or just share what they know.

For example, the last few issues included a professor's learned discourse on the time value of money, a tax lawyer's review of the interest deductibility rules and a money manager's thoughts on asset allocation.

Articles also come from "amateur" readers who pass on their own tips. In May, a Toronto woman outlined a strategy in which she saves up to 30% on groceries by loading up on sale-priced items with long or indefinite shelf lives. Last month a man from Guelph detailed how to save 25% or more on home insurance.

"The MoneySaver is eclectic and so are our readers," Ennis says, adding they range from low-income workers to highly paid senior executives.

Circulation is stable, he adds, at about 25,000 across Canada.

Loyalty is so strong that in correspondence, readers often refer to their subscription codes as "membership numbers." And it runs both ways. In his latest issue, Ennis writes: "If you are visiting this area, please drop in. We enjoy meeting people and subscribers are most welcome."

Of course, unlike his big-time publishing counterparts, Ennis has time to chat because he doesn't worry about the current slump in advertising. He doesn't sell any. The magazine is funded by readers who pay $33 a year.

Ennis does print some ads, but gives the space to companies that offer discounts or free service to his readers. Many of these "advertisers" also contribute articles.

Before starting the MoneySaver, Ennis was a teacher in the Bath area for 16 years. He began learning about money management for his own use and joined an investment club. As his expertise grew, colleagues and neighbors began tapping his brain and Ennis began wondering if he shouldn't start a newsletter.

Queen's University's small business consulting group confirmed there was a need for a do-it-yourselfer personal finance newsletter. So Ennis wrote his first issue in June 1981 — just in time for a postal strike.

Fortunately, he was able to drum up publicity through the Kingston-area media and began sending free copies to people who phoned in. "Lo and behold, when the strike ended we had subscribers."

Ennis still sends one free copy to anyone who requests it. (PO Box 370; Bath, Ont. K0H 1G0). And he stresses that he doesn't sell or rent his mailing list; "a lot of people are very concerned about that."

Ennis planned to do the newsletter part-time but gave up his teaching job within three months. Five years ago, wife Betty also quit the classroom to join the business full-time.

Since 1981 the MoneySaver has mushroomed from an eight-page newsletter to a 36-page magazine. "As long as subscribers have supported us, we've simply put money back into the business and added more pages," Ennis says.

He also now sells discount-priced money books and software, and holds an annual conference at a Thousand Islands resort.

Readers from Fredericton to Regina have already signed up for this year's session, Sept. 20-22, paying up to $329 for a weekend of seminars, personal consultations and social events. Ennis says about 25% have attended at least once before. "This will be the sixth conference for the woman from Regina," he adds. "She knows so many of the people now that she ties it in with her holidays and keeps coming back."