



**Couple finds niche in print**  
Magazine owners in Newport News learn from their mistakes. C8



### Lessons Learned

Build customer relationships with care

Give customers what they need and want.

Be loyal and flexible with employees and contractors.

Be selective among advertisers and always invest in quality.

### Where are they?

703 Juniper Dr.,  
Newport News  
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Newport News publisher Bill Dittmar will release the 52nd issue of the quarterly Peninsula magazine this month. PHOTO BY DAVE BOWMAN/DAILY PRESS

# Finding their niche

*Bill and Heidi Dittmar learned from mistakes while building their magazines and now plan to expand.*

BY JOY BUCHANAN

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**NEWPORT NEWS** -- Bill Dittmar didn't know what he was getting into when he started a magazine 15 years ago, but now he hopes to duplicate his success around the country.

Dittmar and his wife, Heidi, produce the quarterly Peninsula magazine and Southside magazine, from their home office. The Dittmars easily can say what

went wrong when they started in 1991 and what works well now.

Build strong relationships and listen to your customers are two of the most important lessons they learned, Bill Dittmar said. Originally, they produced a monthly magazine for Peninsula tourists, but they lost a lot of readers in the winter.

By 1994 they were going broke.

Saving the magazine required a lot of money and a measure of faith. The Ditt-

tmars found out readers wanted useful information for local business owners and professionals. They filled the magazine with articles about regional trends, news, events, and business and leisure tips. They mailed the magazine directly to customers and switched to quarterly publications. They closed their rarely used second office in Hampton and replaced their PCs with more expensive Macs to accommodate a new layout and better quality photographs.

The changes required an investment six times larger than the money they made from the first six issues. They got

a loan from the Industrial Development Authority and put up their house as collateral.

"It was a little scary for Heidi and I," Dittmar said. "But we were going to make it work even if we had to wait tables, teach or referee."

The changes worked.

They already printed their latest issue of Peninsula magazine. The next issue of Southside magazine, which they started in 2000, will be come out Jan. 28.

They print 42,500 copies of both maga-

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Heidi Dittmar with the early issues of Peninsula Magazine in the background

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## Listening to readers is one key to success

zines quarterly. Nearly two thirds - about 28,000 - of Hampton Roads businesses get the magazines mailed directly to them. The Dittmars printed their millionth copy last year and Carter Printing in Richmond, who they've worked with for more than 11 years, pulled the copy off the presses for them to keep.

"People who know you will go the extra mile," Bill Dittmar said. "We've had other companies tell us they could do the job better and cheaper, but you don't just go for price. It's fun working with the same people."

The Dittmars have two full-time employees, eight freelance writers, photographers and graphic artists and more than 25 contributing writers. They have 87 regular advertisers. Twenty-nine of them have been with the magazines for more than five years. Their customers and advertisers also write advice about issues including banking, fitness, technology and real estate. The columns are designed to help local business owners solve problems and to learn new things about the region, Heidi Dittmar said. Bill Dittmar also added a

regular feature called "Reflections," which is a collection of poems and essays penned by his late father, Rich Dittmar.

"You wouldn't expect business owners to want that, but I've got people like the director of Ferguson Enterprises tell me they love it and e-mail it to people," Bill Dittmar said. "That's a good example of listening to readers."

They're not rich, Bill Dittmar said, but the magazine allows the couple to do the things they love, especially traveling, spending time with family and refereeing soccer matches all over the world. Bill Dittmar has also coached the Denbigh High School boy's soccer team for more than 20 years.

Bill Dittmar envisions his magazine as a national enterprise. In the future, he hopes to help people in other cities develop similar magazines using his model. He wants to help new business owners avoid the same mistakes he made.

"That's part of our surviving in business, figuring out our little niche and doing it well," he said.