



Ways to Win Special Report:
How to Launch a Successful Magazine

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Every year hundreds of new magazines are launched and about three quarters of them fail. Web sites have sprung up to forecast the life spans of new and existing titles and to predict their deaths. Yet every year you see new titles launched that do have longevity--that fill a niche, meet a need, and turn a profit. What distinguishes these publications from their less-fortunate peers? Let's take a look at what is required for a successful magazine launch.

Who Wants Your Magazine?

Before you begin work on your first issue, the question must be asked: who wants your magazine? Do you have a ready audience of readers out there looking for the editorial material you stand ready to provide? Is it a strong advertising base that exists, looking for additional channels into which to pour their annual budget? Or is it you, perhaps only you, that has a story to tell, a passion to explore, a point of view to articulate?

Beginning from any of the above places can lead to a successful launch. It is essential, however, to understand the place at which you stand in order to more fully comprehend the path you must take and the goal at which you will ultimately arrive. This sounds very Zen, and perhaps it is. It is also the basis of successful magazine publishing.

The Reader-Driven Launch

Perhaps you have identified a need not met by the thousands of magazine titles on the market. Independent publishers and non-publishers just entering the market find success most frequently through this route. It's a logical place to start from. Successful independent launches often originate with impassioned hobbyists or talented entrepreneurs. The early 1980s, for example, saw the launches of some of the most long-lived and financially successful computing and videogaming titles. This resulted from a fortunate confluence of an impassioned hobbyist and emerging business-based readership with a nascent base of manufacturers looking for ways to reach this readership.

There have been many other successful reader-based launches over the years in markets where the various elements were less perfectly positioned for explosive growth. Videomaker magazine was launched in the 1980s by a home video enthusiast who saw that there was no magazine serving his passion. Discovery Girls began in the 1990s, launched by a mother who couldn't find a magazine to her liking for her "tween" daughter. The *Versus* line of videogaming strategy guides was started by a gamer who believed that there was a niche for glossy, four-color magazine quality in

this area. More recent years have seen the launch of titles for anime enthusiasts, people longing for a simpler lifestyle, shopping magazines, and of course the emergence of the “laddie” titles. Not all the publications are still in existence—reader interests, like everything else, have their life cycles. But all achieved success in their day.

Whether a reader-driven launch comes from an independent or multi-title publisher, a successful one is likely to have a product champion behind it, someone who has identified the need and is impassioned about the product. A successful reader-oriented publication comes from someone who can create a sense that you, the reader, and I, the publisher, share an interest, a lifestyle, or an outlook; that somehow we’re in it together.

The Advertiser-Driven Launch

Many, many publications have been launched for advertisers rather than readers; with advertisers in mind to please, to market to, to create editorial content around. Many of these magazines have succeeded. While no magazine can neglect the reader with impunity and all magazines must find some way of reaching out and drawing in the end user, it by no means spells failure to launch a magazine for the advertising market.

Some of our most successful brands cater largely to the advertisers. Not only is it an open secret with the readers, but in many cases the reader will pick up a magazine for the advertising within the pages. The shopping magazines that have sprung up are only recent examples of a venerable tradition extending back beyond the computer titles (think Computer Shopper) to the fashion and beauty magazines (think Vogue).

In launching an ad-driven magazine, it is necessary to know your market niche, including the advertisers, well. It is also necessary to be able to demonstrate that you have an audience of readers likely to see and respond to the advertising. Knowing the costs of developing paid circulation, many publishers choose to launch a free-circulation magazine and use the advertising base as the primary source of revenue. Examples where this model may work well include city and regional magazines, especially the more targeted ones; magazines whose advertisers are trying to reach an audience of professionals in a specific field; and association magazines.

A word of caution in launching a free circulation magazine: these magazines tend to be difficult to convert to paid, and a mixed paid-and-free model is fraught with pitfalls. However, if the business plan does change down the road and paid circulation becomes the order of the

day, be assured that it is not impossible to navigate the transition. Remember, for example, the degree of success that the Spiegel catalog had with its newsstand circulation and you will realize that it is possible to persuade readers to buy that which they had been accustomed to receiving for free—even if the publication in question is 100% advertising with no stand-alone editorial.

The Personal Approach

Perhaps you are someone who has a story to tell, a world view to communicate, and you want to launch a publication to help you get the word out. This approach is obviously the riskiest, as you don't have either a consumer or an advertising base to pin down at least one corner of the revenue stream.

There have, of course, been notable successes amongst practitioners of this kind of publishing. In recent decades, *Wired* magazine might be considered a poster child of both the benefits and downfalls of this approach. On the plus side, if you hit a nerve, capture the zeitgeist, resonate with the collective consciousness, you may end up with a product displaying a unique editorial voice, one who sets new creative standards in editorial, design, layout, brand extension, media platforms, and so on. On the other, success may be more deadly than failure to the voice of the original product, which will become subject to all the pressures of the market, the need to turn a profit, the responsibility to readers and advertisers, the paralysis that can set in when failure is no longer an option. The original product champion, perhaps someone with boundless creativity and a breathtaking new vision, may lack the business and financial skills needed to keep the product successful, or under the founders' control; it is possible to cite many cases in which the creators of the concept came away with little or nothing, though the magazine found longevity under corporate ownership.

A successful magazine launch must contain all the elements: a clear and engaging editorial voice; an audience that wants or needs what the editorial and advertising has to offer; and a business plan that will cover the projected expenses with the anticipated revenue streams. Whether the product is to be a personal 'zine with a small local circulation, put out as a labor of love; an opinion journal supported by the convictions (and donations) of groups of adherents; or a rare example of a voice that influences the thought of an entire generation—someone's got to pay for it. And the first step in figuring out whom that "someone" is going to be is to figure out *what* the publications is going to be—and who wants it.

Where do You Fit in Your Market?

Early on in your launch process you want to get a complete picture of the competitive set. Define the competitive set both narrowly and broadly. While you might be most similar in editorial focus to, for example, Bass Fishing magazine, Fly Fishing is still part of that set. While there might be no competitive title covering college lacrosse, you want to get a picture of the full range of titles in the sports field so you can identify your niche.

You will need to identify ways in which you are similar to other titles in your set, but to begin with, identify the primary way in which you are different. What need are you meeting that will not be met without the addition of your publication? Perhaps there are dozens of celebrity titles, but none written strictly from the point of view of the celebrities' best friends; or none written as if the reader is the best friend. Perhaps the difference is less editorial, and more in terms of quality, or frequency, or price. Whatever that difference, it becomes the kernel of what you are bringing to the market, what you are offering your readership.

In identifying the unique qualities that you bring to the market, you must bring into focus the underlying assumptions that inform your editorial voice. Several dozen computer magazines teach how to use the computer as a business application; yours covers how to use the computer to save the world.

These underlying assumptions may be defined in terms of humor, but they must not in any way be trivial, or trivialized. They form the core of who you are; your core assumptions make up the DNA that structures your magazine and makes you unique. Every decision you make, every person you hire, will be evaluated in light of this unique identity. It will form the basis of your mission statement and be understood by everyone in your organization, from the top level executives to the mailroom clerks.

About the Author

Linda Ruth, President of PSCS Consulting, has been teaching publishers how to maximize their marketing and sales efforts for over 20 years. She has led seminars, panels, and workshops at industry conferences throughout the nation, including Folio: the Show, the Folio Entrepreneur Summit, Circulation Management, Publishers and Book Association of America (PBAA), City and Regional Magazine Association (CRMA), Lighthouse, Blue Dolphin, and Catalyst. She often tailors her seminar presentations to the needs of individual publishers, and in this capacity has taught publishers large and small throughout the country, including American Wildlife, Aspire Media, Future Network, Harris Publishing, IDG, McGraw Hill, and many others.

Articles she has authored have appeared in leading magazines and newsletters in the industry, including *Folio*, *Circulation Management*, *Subscription Marketing*, *Magazine Week*, and others. Her books include the three installments of the *Ways to Win* series: *Internet Marketing for Magazine Publishers*, *Secrets of SEO for Publishers*, and *How to Market Your Newsstand Magazine: Tactics, Tips and Case Histories*.

She is a founder of Exceptional Women in Publishing (EWIP) and a member of the Folio Advisory Board.

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