



Ways to Win Special Report:

How to Promote Your Publication on the Newsstand

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## What is Newsstand Promotion?

Newsstand promotion encompasses both promotions to the reader and promotions to the trade. The purpose of the former is to push the sales of the product through the register; of the latter, to gain the support of wholesalers and retailers in order to enlist their help in improving display and visibility.

Nothing, however, is as convincing to wholesalers and retailers as strong sales and a high ranking in store lists. So while some small benefit may be gained by promoting a low sales and efficiency title to the trade, a much bigger benefit can be gained by promoting directly to the consumer and increasing sale thereby.

The single best way of insuring strong sales of your publication is to create a strong product. If your product is loaded with value and meets the needs of your readers, you will be able to build your sales on the newsstand with or without additional promotion. In addition, if you have a limited amount of money to spend, generally the best way of spending your extra dollars is by putting value back into the publication—adding pages, improving cover design, increasing the number of four-color pages throughout the magazine.

However, beyond product improvements there are a number of approaches to increasing your visibility and sale on the newsstand. Here are some of them:

- 1) **Point of Sale Promotion:** The purpose of promoting at point of sale is to get the best possible position and display in the store. Because of the impulse nature of the magazine buy, promoting at point of sale tends to be the most effective way of increasing sales of a publication. Some ways of promoting at the point of sale:
  - a. **Pockets at the front end:** this may include a pocket or flat display at the checkout of a store. For publications with a broad general appeal, this may be the most effective way of catching the eye of the customer and triggering an impulse purchase.
  - b. **Highlight on the mainline:** a full-face front shelf display on the mainline rack, highlighted with a rack card or “shelf talker”, can be more effective than checkout display for special interest publications whose potential readers are likely to be browsing the category looking for a magazine to purchase.

- c. **Featured title display:** an end cap or special rack highlighting publications in a particular category can be an effective way of catching the attention of potential browsers, particularly during seasonally appropriate times of year.
- d. **Floor displays:** also called “dump” displays or floorstands, these temporary cardboard standing floor racks may be placed in supermarkets and other retailers during times of year when it is desirable to have many thousands additional copies of your publication in the stores.
- e. **Cross merchandising rack:** this allows you to promote your publication in parts of the store where related products are selling—for example, a music magazine rack in a store’s music section, or a parenting magazine rack in a store’s baby food section.

- 2) **Consumer Image Advertising:** This might include taking out an ad in a store circular, buying advertising on the radio or TV, putting your logo on store bags, advertising on the side of a wholesaler delivery truck, or getting seen buy your potential customer in any one of a hundred other ways.

This kind of advertising tends to be very expensive and pretty risky. How many of the people seeing your ad are your potential customers? How many impressions that your ad receives are completely irrelevant.

To be successful, this kind of advertising has to be repeated; a one-off is rarely going to work at all. It is best used in conjunction with a consistent and well-planned PR campaign, which includes television and radio appearances, newspaper articles, and maybe contests, sweeps, and other tactics that will interest and excite the customer.

In some cases you might find that this kind of image advertising has other benefits—for example, a supermarket buyer might agree to place a floor display for your product if you agree to advertise in the store circular. In such cases it is best to weigh the total cost against the total benefit and see which carries the day.

- 3) **Trade Advertising:** This might include taking out ads in trade publications, purchasing a booth at a trade fair, buying space in a retailer newsletter, or creating premiums for the merchandisers at a wholesale agency.

For a wholesaler or retailer, the best salesperson for your publication is the publication itself—more specifically, your publication's sales in their store, chain, or agency. If your sales are low, no amount of advertising is going to carry the day; conversely, if your sales are strong you can expect support at every point in the distribution channel.

However, there might be reasons for considering trade advertising. Will an important chain retailer agree to a special display in their stores but in return expect your participation at the annual managers' expo? Can a trade publication offer an online affiliation that might benefit you, with a space ad in the print publication as part of that? Both are occasions in which you might consider participating.

If you have a publication that for some reason needs special attention at retail—because of its checkout placement, its special frequency, the possibility of re-distribution, or a unique promotion you've set up—then it makes sense, if you can organize it with your key wholesalers, to meet with the agency merchandisers, give them each a small gift, and talk about your needs and expectations. This expense can be considered a promotion—in any case, it is likely to come out of your promotion budget—and it is likely to help you accomplish your distribution goals.

### **Why Promote Your Publication?**

To sell more copies, right? Well, yes, that is one reason to promote; it isn't, however, the only reason. And even when the end goal is to sell more copies, it might be reached through an intermediate step or two.

Reasons to promote include:

- 1) **Promote to create a strong launch for a new publication.** If you can create good sales for your first issue, it will make life immeasurably easier for you in subsequent issues. Your launch issue's sales will affect your authorization base and distribution in subsequent issues. A strong launch issue will create opportunities in new channels, it will create a stronger distribution, and it will lead retailers to keep your publication on the shelves. If you sell well in many chains you will get better positioning on the mainline for subsequent issues. A weak launch issue, on the other hand, will lead to draw reductions, premature returns, withholding at the wholesale level, difficulty in building your authorization base, and a host of problems you would really rather avoid.

Promoting your launch issue will ensure that more potential readers will see it, as it is displayed in highly visible locations. It will ensure that some of your retailers—notably the bookstores—will give you full chain distribution, so you can appear in all promotions pockets, rather than just a try in the top stores.

Plus, today there is an increasing number of retail chains that are difficult or impossible to get distribution into if you don't promote. Target, Albertsons, Safeway, CVS are just a few of the key chains that demand promotions or are unlikely to consider your launch. Distribution into some of these chains is important to the long term success of a publication.

So, while it is certainly very possible to launch a publication without promotions, allowing it to find its own level and grow organically, if you hope to have a strong national launch promotions may be a key part of it.

- 2) **Promote to increase or maintain market share versus your competitors.** I once worked for a publisher of sporting enthusiast titles—magazines in the sailing and boating world. The publisher allocated a fair amount of money in promotions for a particular year, and promoted in airports, bookstores, and, in a more limited manner, in the mass market. At the end of that year, the publisher hadn't grown sales at all—they were completely flat. This publisher's immediate competitor had stopped promoting entirely that year, and at first glance it appeared that the competitor had been wiser—after all, why promote if not to grow sales? On analysis, however, we discovered that the competitive publisher had lost 20% in sales over the past year—the market was taking a dive, and interest had cooled off a bit in the publications. So it turned out that my publisher had spent several hundred thousand dollars—but had maintained sales against a probable loss of about 20%. In his opinion, it was money well spent—and, as the competitive publications continued to lose momentum, and sales, over the coming years, and his titles maintained their place, his wisdom was confirmed.

If your competitor is promoting and you are not, it is unfair to expect equal newsstand distribution and sale. While your distribution may be tighter and more profitable, you may not be seen in key outlets where your competition is selling.

- 3) **Promote to open up new channels of sale.** Particularly in specialty, there may be chains that are important to you that are only available through a one-time promotion or an ongoing investment in a pocket at the front end. You'll find chains in the crafts category, the music category, the electronics category, automotive—in fact, in any number of categories where this is the case. Before either jumping into or turning away from this kind of opportunity, run an analysis to see what level of sale you would have to make in order for this kind of investment to be worth it. If the number of sales per store you'd have to achieve looks like a reasonable possibility, why not give it a try? You can always pull out if sales don't make up for the cost of the promotion.
- 4) **Promote to reverse attrition.** In the bookstores in particular you might find you are selling enough copies per store to satisfy you, but not the bookstore manager. Store managers in important bookstore chains might be dropping your publication, while to you these stores continue to be important outlets. By participating in a promotion for one issue, you can regain lost stores at least for an issue or two; if sales are strong enough in these stores you might not be dropped again.
- 5) **Promote to highlight a special issue.** If you know that, given the exposure, you can capture many additional sales for a special issue of your publication, then that may be the time to promote. The increase in sales for that issue could carry over to residual sales for the subsequent issues and create greater momentum for the year.
- 6) **Promote for visibility and branding.** National publications and those with a broad interest base especially get some value simply from being seen. Your cover is your best salesperson, and a promotion at point of sale can be better than a billboard for your publication. You may develop a relationship with your customers simply by being seen—a relationship that may translate into sales in future issues.
- 7) **Promote for your advertisers.** Many of your advertisers will want to see your publication on newsstands, in airports, in bookstores, and in specialty stores. Even if you can't totally make up your promotion expenses by increased sales, you may find that the credibility it gives with your advertisers is worth the price of promotion.

## Promotions Can Backfire

If you have a very vertical special interest publication with a targeted readership, it is likely that your readers are looking for you on the mainline. It is also likely that a display at the checkout will not create the impulse buy that checkout placement is supposed to trigger.

The reason is that, while magazines are indeed an impulse buy, the reader of special interest publications tend to browse by category. A potential reader might go to the newsstand looking for a magazine on C++ programming. This reader might not have made the decision which magazine on that topic to buy, and the display on the newsstand, the cover of the magazine, the cover lines appealing to the need of the moment, is what swings the decision.

At the checkout, however, your magazine must appeal to a much wider readership. Many special interest titles can succeed in this location—home design magazines, health magazines, computer or sports or crafts magazines. All might do well at checkout because there are likely people that didn't know they wanted a magazine on that topic who see it and decide to buy. But for very targeted magazines such as the one mentioned above, the vast majority of people going through the checkout will have no interest in the topic covered. If they are interested, they'll look on the mainline for a publication on the topic. As a result, you can actually **lose** sales through a front end promotion.

Even if your publication is also displayed on the mainline during such a promotion (and most retailers have learned that they need to duplicate distribution on the mainline for promoted publications), the increase in copies distributed can drive efficiency down to a point that the chain's order regulation will reduce distribution to below the level at which you started. An excess of copies can also cause individual stores to cancel.

This doesn't mean that a very special interest publication cannot have a successful promotions strategy. It does mean that that strategy must be crafted with care. Promotions on the front shelf of the mainline might be more successful than promotions off the mainline; promotions in very targeted small chains are likely to work better than mass market promotions.

## Distribution and Compliance

Once you have booked a promotion, you must make sure that it goes through. Too often publishers pay money for promotions that aren't carried through effectively, hence result in no benefit.

Step one is to make sure you have enough copies going to promoting outlets. When you set up the promotion you should get from the retailer the recommended number of stores promoting and the number of copies per store. This is important information in any case, one you should know in order to budget your draw increase and project whether the promotion can break even for you. And without this information, you can't set up your promotion distribution.

Step two is to get a servicing wholesaler report—a report that shows how many stores in the chain are serviced by each individual wholesaler. This enables you to add, in each agency, enough copies to your distribution for each promoting outlet.

Step three is to make sure that the wholesalers are on board. Each wholesaler must accept the additional copies and make sure they get to the promoting stores. Your national distributor will organize this for you, but it's important for you to understand the process in order to ensure nothing goes wrong.

Step four is to make sure the stores are complying. If there are any stores near you, drop by and take a look at the display. Your national distributor will also help with this compliance check.

Step five is to follow up with sales results. Check your premature return reports to make sure the additional copies you allocated are not coming back in the first week or two of the on sale period. As sales become more final, you'll be able to see the degree to which your promotional copies sold.

## Promotions to Consider

There are different reasons to consider different classes of trade for your promotions efforts. Here, in brief, are a few:

- 1) **Bookstores:** an important location for most magazines—after all, they attract readers. Promotions here tend to increase sales pretty significantly. Also, bookstores on the whole regulate to a higher efficiency than most publishers would; in other words, they will



reduce allotments based on returns percentages sooner than you would likely choose to do. A promotion in a bookstore chain can boost store count, allotment per store, and sales; it's probably a good place to start your promotions program.

- 2) **Airports:** most publishers would ideally like to be seen in these high-traffic, high-visibility locations. It is incredibly expensive to promote here, and unlikely to pay off in copies sold. Still, you can sell a lot of copies there—for some publishers, 10-15% or more of total newsstand sale. So if rate base is important to you, or your presence there is important to your advertisers, it doesn't make sense to ignore this channel of sale.
- 3) **Supermarkets:** checkout at the supermarket is also an expensive way to go, though necessary for high-profile national and regional titles. Checkout placement does require continual follow up to make sure pockets are protected and adequate copies are allocated. Checkout placement is gained through a combination of IPOs (which are placement offerings—the price you pay for checkout space) and store profitability rankings. If you rank high enough, the supermarkets will begin to come to you. If you have a low profitability ranking for the chain, your chances of getting this space are slim.

Many supermarkets also have mainline and feature pocket promotions available to publishers. It makes most sense to take advantage of these promotions when looking for authorization or a significant increase in penetration.
- 4) **Wholesaler Hot Pockets:** some wholesalers have promotions that give you access to their top retailers. Before participating, make sure that distribution is continued into these retailers after the promoted issue, and that authorization can result from the program. Otherwise don't bother.
- 5) **Mass Market:** another channel through which you might use promotion to establish distribution. If you have the opportunity for an ongoing cross-merchandising pocket in Walmart or another mass merchandiser (for example, a crafts magazine sidekick rack in the crafts section), grab it.
- 6) **Specialty:** to be seen in the location where your most targeted customers shop. What's not to like? Except, perhaps, high costs and low efficiencies. Watch these promotions carefully.

## How to Promote Effectively

Your promotions program might be a significant portion of your single copy sales budget. As such, it is essential that you use your promotions money in ways that build your sales reliably and systematically. Too many publishers use their promotions money in a scattershot sort of way and never really see the results. Here are some things you can do to make sure that you get the most out of your promotions spend.

- 1) **Promote Strong Issues.** There is sometimes the temptation to use promotions money to support an issue that is weak either seasonally or editorially. It makes more sense to choose your seasonally and editorially strong issues to promote. The sales you gain will be that much greater on an incremental basis, and they will give you a momentum that is likely to carry over to your weaker issues and lift them a bit as well. In contrast, using your promotions money for your weak issues just doesn't provide as great a percentage increase in sale, nor does it supply enough momentum to help the following issues.
- 2) **Promote in Strong Channels.** Likewise, it doesn't make sense to try to build a weak channel with your promotions money. Save your promotions spend for channels that already show promise, and make them even stronger.
- 3) **Promote at Point of Sale.** While there are plenty of ways to promote other than at the point of sale—on radio, in posters, through bundle stuffers or retailer newsletters—nothing gives as much bang for the buck as does promotion at point of sale. Magazine sales at retail is still an impulse business, and it is at the point of sale that the buying decision is made. While seeing your magazine mentioned elsewhere might provide an additional impetus to buy—and by all means, do use all the PR and publicity at your disposal to get your latest issue mentioned everywhere possible—if the browser does not find your publication at point of sale, no purchase will be made.
- 4) **Leverage Promotion at Every Point in the Distribution Channel.** If you have a promotions program of any significant size coming up—whether it includes cash wraps or floor displays, media coverage or partnerships at the retail level—make sure that your distributors, wholesalers, and retailers are all informed. They will be encouraged to know that you are supporting your product with promotions money, and if the promotions program warrants it might well give

you additional support in terms of distribution increases, notification to their merchandisers, or mention in a trade newsletter.

Partner with the media to the extent you can. If you are buying any kind of ad space, leverage it to include free spots and PR. Contests and sweeps can draw media attention and support. A mention of media sponsorship in your advertising is also a way of increasing your reach.

- 5) **Use Today's Technology.** Include store listings on your web site, do a banner ad, link to stores that carry products review, have a newsstand contest entry form posted online; the possibilities are endless.
- 6) **Promote Local Content.** If you have an article coming up about dude ranching near San Antonio or a special appearance by an editor to talk about children's education in Minneapolis, make sure you let the local wholesaler know. Put a starburst sticker on the cover to pull the sales through. Notify the big book chains as well—they are likely to want to increase distribution for the issue.
- 7) **Front Load Promotions for a Launch.** If you spend your promotions money up front, you get the benefit of the distribution acquired thereby for all succeeding issues. Why wait?
- 8) **Promote to Accomplish Specific Ends.** Use your promotions money to open new channels of distribution, to counteract the loss of outlets in important chains, to increase distribution for an important special issue. Know why you are promoting and you are more likely to accomplish your end.
- 9) **Analyze Promotions Results.** Put your sales in a spreadsheet and look at the sales before the promoted issue, the sales of the promoted issue, and the subsequent sales. Look at the cost of the promotion, the cost per copy sold, the percent increase in draw, sale, and number of outlets, and how much of that distribution and sale you were able to maintain subsequent to the promoted issue. Amortize your costs over the issues affected and you might find that promotions break even more often than you anticipated. Include subscription acquisition and contribution to rate base as factors and you may well find you come out ahead. (Click here to buy [an effective template for promotions analysis](#)).

10) **Plan and Book Early.** August of the previous year is the time to plan your promotions strategy and start your bookings for the next year. Wait too long and you might find that the promotions you want the most are those that are least available.

11) **Add Value to Promoted Issues.** If you intend to include a special section or polybagged premium in any of your issues this year, that is a good issue to promote. The combination of premium placement and added value can create large sales leaps for your publication.

Promoting effectively requires planning and follow through, but, done well, can be a significant factor in the success of your magazine.



## 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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