PSCS

Ways to Win Special Report:

How to Test Your Magazine Covers Online

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Why Test Online?

Nothing is more crucial to the success of a magazine on the newsstand than the cover. Over 30% of shoppers in magazine aisles end up making a purchase; the majority of those buyers did not intend to make a purchase that day. What tipped them to the impulse buy, in 75% of those cases, was the cover of the magazine itself.

Because the purchasers spend only 2-3 minutes in the aisle the cover must do its work fast. It must be constructed in such a way as to reach out and grab the browser immediately. In the normal process of selecting an image for the cover and writing the cover lines to go with it one cannot always anticipate that subliminal, split second reaction of the newsstand browser to the product. That is the reason that cover testing is so essential.

When considering a program of online testing, it is important to remember that it is different from split testing on the newsstand and will yield different results. A split test on the newsstand will yield actual, quantifiable results, ones that can be extrapolated to your entire distribution. An online cover test, by contrast, goes to a self-selecting group of engaged participants; frequently that group comprises your subscribers, and your most involved ones at that.

Also, the process of selecting a preferred cover on line is very different from the process of browsing a newsstand packed with hundreds of publications. A cover displays differently on a computer monitor than it does on a newsstand. And having potential customers tell you what they *would* purchase can be very different from watching what it is that they actually *do* purchase.

Having said that, there is an ease and flexibility to online cover testing that makes it a wonderful tool for the consumer-oriented publisher. As an adjunct to an ongoing program of split testing and analysis, a publisher can easily set up an ongoing program of online cover testing.

Benefits of Online Cover Testing

Online cover testing has a number of benefits not duplicated in other testing modalities:

1) **It is relatively inexpensive.** It is possible to set up a split test entirely in-house using a free survey company (such as Survey Monkey). You can use your own lists, and your own design

team, as many publishers do; in short, the only additional costs are the costs of creating a second cover and sending it to your list.

2) **Results can be read immediately.** Because the bulk of the responses to an online survey come in within the first 24 to 48 hours, many publishers turn this whole process around in a week or less. The timeframe is dictated by how quickly you can get two or more cover versions put up into the survey, blasted to your test panel, and read upon return. Since online surveys include the compilation of results as a feature, it is far from a time-intensive process to read the results of the survey.

3) **Changes can be made to the cover currently in the works.** Nowadays publishers add this element into their cover creation process, in the same way they include meetings to brainstorm possible cover treatments. They use it to test images, cover lines, and overall cover treatment; the final cover selection for each issue is influenced by the responses that come in from the online testing panel.

4) **Online cover testing enables a publisher to choose between two cover treatments.** A split test on the newsstand is a poor way to test two wholly different cover treatments. The results of such a test are hard to analyze and apply as the sales results don't make it clear which element of the winning cover did the trick. The main reason for testing two wholly different cover treatments is to choose which specific treatment to use for an upcoming issue—something that can be done very handily in the context of online testing.

5) **When properly executed, online cover testing can increase sales efficiency and profitability.** While less quantifiable than split testing, online cover testing can definitely indicate areas of reader interest, tendencies of reader responsiveness, and even highlight areas of concern. For example, one publisher was testing covers on line to his subscriber base, being of the opinion that subscribers would pick up on subtleties in the cover art and inside jokes in the cover lines that the newsstand reader was unlikely to understand. He discovered that his subscribers were looking for things very similar to that which the newsstand reader wanted; and that the subtleties were equally lost on this sophisticated audience. His resulting cover improvements supported both his subscriber and newsstand sales.

What to Test

While it is not really possible to test price points or all of the elements of the package online, there are a number of things that can be tested:

1) **Compare two wholly different cover concepts.** If you are unsure, for example, if a lifestyle approach will work for your how-to magazine, and are unwilling to risk a live experiment, online cover testing will help clear up your doubts. You can not only find out which of two approaches appeals most to your readers, you can also include room for their comments, to get an idea of why one approach worked over the other.

2) **Cover image**. Will adding a person to your cover enhance or reduce your cover's appeal? Do you want a landscape or a cozy indoor scene? You can try both versions, and as long as you keep your cover lines and other cover elements the same, you can focus on what cover image has the most appeal to your test audience.

3) **Phrasing of cover lines.** What are the words and phrases that your audience is most likely to respond to? This is information that will help you create the cover lines that have the most sales appeal. Are they looking for a vacation, a retreat, or a getaway? Do they want to be new, creative, or innovative? Find the words that are the "hot buttons" of your audience, and use them—cover after cover.

4) **Content of cover lines.** You have a handful of top stories to feature on your cover, and are not sure which ones are most likely to excite your potential audience. You can test them all by having your test panel rank them. One publisher who did this said "it changed everything I thought I knew" about what would make his cover sell.

What Will the Test Measure?

Depending on what you are looking for and how you set up your test, you can measure:

1) **The cover's ability to attract attention.** Some online cover tests set up a virtual newsstand with one or more test covers included

in it. Subsequent pages can test the participants' recollection of the cover in question and its placement on the newsstand; this test is most effective if the placement on the newsstand is randomized from person to person. Another option is to just display the cover choices together on the page and allow the panelists to reflexively click on the favored cover treatment; again, the placement of the covers must be randomized to prevent a placement bias from affecting test results.

2) **How likely the cover is to stimulate the intent to purchase the magazine.** A simple way of doing this is to display the covers individually and ask a series of questions regarding how likely the test respondent is to want to buy this product on the newsstand.

3) **The appeal of the cover art.** The image can be tested independent of cover lines.

4) **The appeal of the lead story and the other featured stories.** Possible story selections can be listed and rated or ranked by participants.

5) **The reasons why a cover is liked or disliked.** By setting up a response box in which survey participants can add their comments it is possible to discover a great deal about one's potential readership.

Using online cover testing, a publisher can continue to develop the overall look of the magazine. In this approach, you can follow a methodology in which you isolate specific test elements, as you would in a split test on the newsstand. In this way it is possible to test certain words or combinations of words, a person versus a thing, a photograph versus an illustration, and so on.

Another approach is to survey the online panel with two separate cover treatments being considered for an upcoming issue and allow these panelists to help choose the final cover. Using this approach, you are likely to discover certain general truths, as well. For example, if your audience always chooses a landscape cover over an art cover, or a photo over an illustration, you have learned something that may be applicable not only for the particular covers tested, but also for future cover treatments as well.

How Valid is Your Online Cover Test?

As you begin testing, it is helpful to establish benchmarks in order to discover how quantifiable your results might be. There are several ways in which you might do this. Ideally for the first several issues of online cover testing, you also run a split newsstand cover; the resulting data will enable you to set up an algorithm to determine how to apply the results learned online.

Another, or complementary, approach is to take some historical covers and run them past your test group. For example, if you have a best and worst cover in the past year or two, see if your online panel agrees with the verdict that your consumer audience delivered. Or perhaps you have a seasonal flow of covers—every January, for example, you cover topics that you know will be of more interest to your audience than those topics you cover in August. In that case, try taking your last three January issues and have your test panel assess them. To what degree do their findings support your newsstand results for those issues? Based on the results, you can set up your benchmarks.

Setting up Your Panel

Your existing database of email names, collected from the correspondence that you have collected over the years and from visitors registering at your web site, is the best source of test panelists.

You can send your survey out to portions of your list with a simple appeal to participate. One publisher, with a list of about 20,000 names, surveys groups of 1,000, achieving a response of 15-20%. When it is necessary to re-do a test for a particular reason—for example, adding or dropping certain of the covers—this publisher moves on to the next segment of the list. In this manner not too much is asked of any particular group, and burnout is avoided. It is interesting to note that results tend to be pretty consistent from group to group of this in house list.

Another option is to approach your full universe of names with an email inviting their participation as panelists. This creates a sense of ownership in the process in those who have chosen to participate. While the connection with a favorite publisher and the honor of giving an opinion on the look of the cover might be ample reward, you might also consider rewarding your panelists with a drawing for a prize. This will increase the response to the test and prevent your panelists from burning out.

You can also set up a place on your website inviting the participation of site visitors, and giving them the option of signing up for the panel. This will give you additional names of very engaged visitors.

Getting Started

Once you have set up the operational aspects of administering an online cover survey, you can begin testing each and every issue. Begin with a meeting to discuss the possible test covers and the elements you want to test. Your art director can then create 2-3 possible covers to send out. From the time that the covers are received, you might be able to turn the entire test around in a week or less, allowing three days of live cover testing and a day or two for analysis. If you find you have questions on what came back, you can make adjustments, send it out again, and still have answers in time to create your final cover.

Through the live feedback from your readers that you can get from online cover testing, you may confirm your newsstand instinct or completely overturn your preconceptions. You will discover if you are on the right track or find that readers give completely new perspectives on what you are doing.

Online cover testing will bring your editorial, design, market research, and newsstand departments together. Through it, you will create a dialog between your various departments and find out things about your audience and their preferences that you may have been unable to discover previously.

And it's fast, cheap and easy. What's not to like?

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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