



Ways to Win Special Report:

Ways to Win with Newsstand Covers

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## **You Can Win with Newsstand Sales**

Your newsstand circulation benefits your publication, and your publishing company, in a number of ways, both overt and hidden. On the overt level, it is clear that your sales on the newsstand delivers revenue that you wouldn't otherwise get; it adds readers to your rate base, and it is a source of subscribers—indeed, for many publishers, it is the best source of subscribers both in terms of cost of acquisition and, later, renewal rate.

There are, however, hidden benefits to your newsstand circulation as well. Your newsstand circulation delivers a high quality reader—a reader that has committed to paying full price for your publication, and is likely, therefore, to read it through. That is why your advertisers want newsstand readers as part of your publications circulation—they know that the newsstand reader is the best indicator of a magazine's vitality. If you have a magazine that can sell on the newsstand, you have a robust, vital publication. If you can't get readers to pay full price for a newsstand issue, your magazine is seen as less viable to many.

### **The Newsstand Reader**

The newsstand reader is not the same person as the magazine subscriber. The subscriber is committed to your brand, and has elected to receive it each and every issue—at a deep discount. The newsstand reader is, by contrast, a “cherry picker.” They are inspired by the cover and feature stories promised in a particular issue, and are therefore committed to that issue and likely to read it. There are people out there who will never subscribe to your magazine—perhaps not to any magazine. They want to pick and choose. If your magazine is not on the newsstand, they will never read it. So in getting your magazine into the hands of that consumer, you are getting an unduplicated reader—one you would not have obtained through any subscription offer or direct mail promotion.

The average newsstand reader will buy three or four issues in a year of a monthly publication. They are not going to the newsstand to buy it every issue. But what does it mean to your publication to move that reader from a three time buyer to a four time buyer? What does it mean to your sales efficiency, your profitability, your subscription acquisition, your rate base? The answers to these questions point you to the importance of your newsstand cover.

## The Economics of Cover Design

What difference does one percent in sale mean to your publication in terms of bottom line revenue? That is a number that every publisher, every editor, every art director should know. Is it \$1,000 a year? \$10,000 a year? \$30,000 a year? Or much more? That 1% difference in sale is the effect of your newsstand cover. Indeed, the effect can be much greater than that. Look at your sales throughout the year. There is likely a fair degree of change in sales and sales efficiency from one issue to the next—a line on the graph would probably be a fairly jagged one. After accounting for differences due to seasonality, expansion work, promotions, and other known factors you probably still see inconsistency in sales from issue to issue. That inconsistency is entirely due to your cover.

This swing could be a point or two—or it could be as great as ten, twenty, even thirty points for an exceptionally good or bad cover. The greater the swing, the more cover-driven your sales are—the more your sales depend on the cover work that you do.

## How to Create a Great Newsstand Cover

Surveys show that the cover is the single most important factor in enticing a browser to pick up your publication and carry it through the register. A whopping 75% of the people surveyed said that it was the cover that converted them from browsers to buyers, with the name of the magazine and the table of contents a distant second and third at 15% and 10% respectively. It is the cover's job to create interest in what is inside the publication and to close the sale.

The newsstand itself is an attraction, not a destination. And the magazines featured on that newsstand are still an impulse buy. The newsstand reader has, in the overwhelming majority of cases, not approached the display with the express purpose of buying your magazine. They drifted over to the rack to browse, perhaps to browse a category—perhaps even with the intention of purchasing a magazine within a particular category. Their magazine selection has awaited this moment; the magazine selected will have sold itself by cover alone.

A browser may stand six or eight feet from the magazine rack and scan the rack to take in the covers. Observers have reported that the cover has about six seconds to grab the reader's attention. If it has failed to do that in the available time, it has failed to make the sale.

So what makes a great cover, a cover that creates that impetus to stop, to look more closely, then to follow through with a purchase? It is a cover that is immediate, expressive; it tells its story at a glance; and it represents your brand in a clear and consistent way.

So this brings us to the first great principle of cover design: **your cover must be the same every month, and different every month.**

Your cover must look like a brand; it must be immediately recognizable to the browser; it must have a consistent look and feel to it issue after issue. How will you accomplish that? Each publication will have its own formula, but it is likely to comprise several consistent elements and several variable elements.

1. **Logo:** your logo must be big, bold, and immediately visible. It should be left-justified or, if centered, should take up the entire top portion of the cover, spanning it from left to right. The size should not vary from issue to issue; the type font should not vary; the positioning should not vary. It might be that the color of the logo changes from issue to issue, or color of a box around it; there might be some variations in the use of drop shadows with it. But your logo is your brand; protect it. Studies have shown that an unobscured logo creates the greatest recognition and response. It is common for publishers to overlay a partial image on a portion of their logos, but think twice: recognition is greater when your logo stands alone.
2. **Image:** the size and positioning of your image should have a fair degree of consistency from issue to issue. By all means test to discover what kind of image works best for you—a close-up or a distant shot; an interior or exterior view; a person or concept or object; a photo or an illustration. Once you have discovered your strength, by all means continue to test, but exercise your creativity within the parameters of the look you have established. Look at the most successful publications on the newsstand and you will see that the image chosen each issue has a remarkable consistency from one issue to the next.
3. **Background Color:** while your publication should be recognizable and consistent, it should also be recognizably different from one issue to the next. An issue that looks too much like the last is going to lose sales. Why? People are going to believe they already purchased the publication and give it a pass. One way to distinguish one issue from the next is through the use of background color. While this is not a hard and fast rule—you will see publishers

successfully using a consistent background color every issue, and establishing their difference through font color, banner color, image color—it is a useful tool to have a variable background color from one issue to the next.

4. **Font Color and Size:** Another useful tool is a standardized font and size for your lead and secondary cover lines. Will they be straight or slanted, serif or sans serif? An approach that some leading publishers have found to be powerful is to focus on a single font or family of fonts for the lead line, and a range of type size, and to work within these limits using font color and background color to create the freshness with each issue.

Once you have established the elements of your look that will remain consistent from issue to issue, you can begin to turn your attention to those elements that vary.

### Cover Lines

Do not underestimate the importance of cover lines. They are among the most important elements of your cover. For many newsstand publishers, they have proven to be more important than the image or any other design element other than the logo. The image might (possibly) be what catches the readers' eyes and makes them approach the newsstand. It is the cover lines without a doubt, however, that make your reader pick up your publication, start thumbing through it, and take it through the checkout.

1. **Choose Your Cover Lines.** How many will you have? The answer is: the more the better—within reason. Don't turn your cover into a table of contents, wherein it is difficult to read any one line or focus on it. It shouldn't be difficult, however, using your cover space wisely, to easily get at least half a dozen cover topics on it. Have a cover line for each of the key features in the magazine. For example, for a fitness magazine you might have a feature on exercise, one on diet, one on lifestyle, and one on health. Each of these features should be highlighted with a cover line each and every issue. The newsstand browser who is not interested in your lead article might be drawn in by your second lead, or your third. Each new feature highlighted on your cover is one more opportunity to draw in a potential reader.

Remember that your lead cover line should tie in to your cover image. You cannot afford to confuse the reader. Clarity is your

goal. Part of the process of achieving that clarity is to have your lead cover line and primary image tell the same story, speak in one voice.

2. **Your Cover Lines are Copywriting.** Remember this: your cover lines are not editorial. They are ad copy. While they must reflect what is inside the cover, their job is to get the newsstand shopper to want to read the article. You are selling each article, and your magazine itself, with each cover line. Don't think of them as anything else. In three or four words, you need to intrigue, to fascinate, and to create desire in the newsstand shopper to know more, to learn more. To do this, use some of the standard tools at your disposal:

- a. **Numbers:** People want to know what they are getting, how much they are getting. Tell them! The number doesn't have to be huge—in fact, an overly-large number can be overwhelming. Seven great getaways; 12 holiday recipes; 21 easy patterns. The numbers tell the people precisely what they are going to get, and whet their appetites for what is to come.

Odd numbers tend to work better than even ones: seven secrets might be more intriguing than eight or ten. And you don't have to have numbers on all your cover lines—one or two of them are plenty.

- b. **Effective Words:** Copywriters in different media have found certain words to be powerful and effective. Those words retain their appeal year after year, cover after cover.

They include:

- i. **New**
- ii. **Hot**
- iii. **Best**
- iv. **First**
- v. **Big**
- vi. **Win**
- vii. **Anniversary**
- viii. **Premiere**
- ix. **Plus!**
- x. **Bonus**

You will identify words that are effective for your particular category. A business magazine might find that words such

as leadership, innovation, inspiration pull. A do-it-yourself publication is likely to find that words like fast, easy, or simple do the trick. A cooking magazine might find homemade, country, fresh, or light are key. Email your subscribers; insert a survey in your magazine for your newsstand readers; do newsstand splits to test cover lines; or just track the effect of your choices on newsstand sales year in, year out. However you go about it, find your key words and phrases and use them issue after issue.

- c. **Benefits:** What will your readers get from this purchase? What benefits will they carry away? Will they learn a new skill, acquire must-have knowledge, make better buying decisions? These benefits must be conveyed in your cover lines.
- d. **Practicality:** The benefits offered should have a practical value in the reader's life. Most effective for the newsstand buyer:
- i. **Free**
  - ii. **How To**
  - iii. **Tips**
  - iv. **Tactics**
  - v. **Do's and Don't's**
  - vi. **Guide/Buyer's Guide**
- e. **Specificity:** The benefits conveyed in your cover lines, the information promised, must be very specific as well. Your readers might respond to tips; they are more likely to respond to 100 Gardening Tips. The number provides some specificity, the modifier more. Let them know what they are going to get. With this in mind, avoid the too-clever puns or plays on words. Save them for inside the magazine! If you are offering special section on small homes, that should be your line. Another, less specific line—say, "Get Cozy" can be used as the sub-lead, not as the main lead. Too often publishers forget this principle and bury the lead. Remembering that you are writing ad copy, not entertaining, should help.
- f. **Excitement:** At the same time, do not let your specificity become pedestrian. Create excitement with your cover lines! Use them to create a sense of urgency in your newsstand browsers, a sense that they must not miss out



on whatever it is that you are offering. There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of ways of doing this—with slanted lines, with exclamation points, with colors and fonts—and one way that should not be overlooked is the use of effective words. Some examples:

- i. **Special**
- ii. **Exclusive**
- iii. **Ultimate**
- iv. **Spectacular**
- v. **Must-have**
- vi. **Extra**

3. **Place your Cover Lines.** By now almost every publisher, editor, art director, and circulator knows the thinking behind left-justified cover lines. Your magazine is fanned on the newsstand, or it is stacked. If it is stacked, the top 2-3 inches are visible; if it is fanned, the leftmost 2-3 inches. Put your most important cover lines where they are most likely to be seen, with the lead line in the top left quadrant, just under the logo.

There is also some thinking that the left-justification of cover lines plays to the tendency of the reader's eye to start at the left. You'll find that posters, mail pieces, web pages, and various other marketing pieces also exhibit this kind of "left thinking." The left-justification of cover lines might look like a trite formula to you—but it is a formula that serious newsstand publishers have learned to use, for the simple reason that it works.

4. **Energize Your Cover Lines.** Another rule of good ad writing is to bring in the reader, to imply the "you." For this reason, drop the "ings" wherever possible. Make your cover lines active, directive, imperative, not passive and indirect. Instead of saying "Directing Your Own Movie" say "Direct Your Own Movie". Don't say "Enjoying Your Summer"—tell your readers to "Enjoy Your Summer."
5. **Your Cover Lines Must be Legible.** Remember these cover lines need to be seen from where the browser stands, six to ten feet from the rack. Can your lines be read from there? If not, use size, type font, color and contrast to make them more legible. If the value, or shade, of your cover line is too close to the value or shade of the background or surrounding image, it will not be legible. If you have to add an outline or drop shadow to make

your cover lines legible, you are already in trouble. Instead, use contrast and type size to make these lines stand out.

If you make one change in your cover process, make it this one: take your cover, **before** it is finalized, down to your local newsstand and put it up. Walk away (the requisite six to ten feet), turn around, and look for it. You know where you put it! Does it jump right out at you? Or do you have to scan the rack to find it? If you can't find it in less than six seconds, neither will your newsstand buyer.

## Cover Image

Your cover image must be clear, immediately recognizable. It needs to tell its story at a glance. Some guidelines in choosing your image:

1. **Put the Product on the Cover.** The image on your cover—that one, clear, focused, central image that commands attention and sells its story at a glance—should whenever possible be a picture of the “product” covered by your magazine. What is the product? If you publish a computer magazine, it's a computer. If you publish a child magazine, it's the child—not the parents, not the child with the parents, but the child itself. If you publish a travel magazine it's the destination; for a yoga magazine it's the posture. Despite the received wisdom from the time of general interest precedence that a person, eye contact, could sell a magazine, in the age of special interest publications we find this to not always be the case. A random person—one who is not a model, not a celebrity, and not the focus of the feature article—does not sell a magazine. A fit person can sell your magazine—if you publish a fitness magazine. A beautiful person can sell your magazine—if you sell a beauty magazine. But there is no need to put a person into a shot just to warm it up and make it appear friendlier. Generally, it doesn't work.
2. **Keep the Image Simple.** Don't make your newsstand reader work to figure out what your image is trying to say. Let it tell its story at a glance.
3. **Keep the Background Simple.** A busy background confuses the eye, detracts from the central image, and makes the cover lines difficult to read. On the other side of the equation, there is virtually no benefit to a busy background. Why use it?

4. **Choose a Photo Over an Illustration.** There may be exceptions to this rule—for your political or opinion magazine, for example, you may find an illustration or even a cartoon to be more effective; for your videogaming magazine you are likely to find that a character from a popular game works better than a photo of anything at all. Unless you are in such a special category, however, you will find that your newsstand response is better with a photograph.
5. **Use a Full Bleed Over a Frame.** Again, you might find your category contains exceptions—for example, the auto category contains successful titles that use frames, and in any category you can create an exceptional space for your title. But why not use the tools at your disposal? A full bleed indicates that you are offering a consumer publication; a framed picture says “journal” to the average reader. Perhaps you want to convey that sense of authority to your readers, and a frame is a tool you choose to use. But test after test has confirmed that overwhelmingly the newsstand reader prefers the look of a full bleed cover.

### Other Tools for Top Covers

In addition to the image and cover lines, there are additional design tricks you may use to catch the readers attention, create excitement and urgency, and ultimately close the sale. Here are a few of them:

1. **Skylines:** The use of a skyline or banner over the logo to add a cover line gives you an easily-visible place for an additional cover line. It’s almost a freebie—it gives you a place to highlight a story without taking up any of the valuable space elsewhere on the cover. Who could resist?
2. **Starbursts:** The use of a starburst, sticker, or dot whack anywhere on the cover will create excitement for a special, bonus, or featured story. One publisher with a magazine whose cover, for various reasons, didn’t have a lot of flexibility, found that by adding a featured story in a starburst to each issue raised sales by three points each and every issue.
3. **Corner Cuts:** Another place to squeeze another benefit of buying is the top right corner, and a corner cut is just the way to do it.

4. **Highlight What Is Inside:** Inexplicably, time after time publishers will include an insert, a premium, or some special offer—and not include it on the cover. Do you have a 16-page bonus insert inside? Put it on the cover! Does your polybagged CD or DVD offer valuable applications or hours of entertainment? Make sure it is mentioned on the cover of the magazine, highlighted on the bag, emblazoned across the CD or DVD sleeve. Is it your anniversary issue? Don't miss the opportunity to put it on the cover.

Likewise, if you have an issue that contains an article of special local or regional interest, why fail to announce it, at least to those who would be the most interested? Sticker those copies going to that city or state and watch sales skyrocket in that area.

5. **Try New Things.** Yes, I mean it. Learn these rules, use them, issue after issue, year after year. No one knows your market, your audience, better than you, the publisher. If you know your audience will respond to something outside the so-called “rules”—go for it! One publisher created an opaque polybag one Christmas season—a polybag with NO cover lines, nothing but the logo to give an inkling of what was inside—nothing but a big ribbon and bow around the package. Many were convinced that the issue would bomb—perhaps from a certain perspective, even, it should have bombed—but sales went sky-high with the alluring promise of the unnamed wonders inside. Other publishers have tried vertical cover lines, cover lines behind the image, image only. Some efforts have succeeded, others failed. If in doubt, test it first. But don't be afraid to try.

### Cover Testing

Through resources available on line, it is more possible than ever before to get a quick, inexpensive read on consumer response to your newsstand covers. Whether you are testing your covers on line via your website, through an email survey, or through a newsstand split, there are a few things to keep in mind.

1. **Isolate Your Test Elements.** If you want to tell whether an image or concept will work best for your cover, a person or object, a full bleed or a frame, or whether it is better to highlight a personality profile or a section on health tips, you need to decide what it is that you are trying to ascertain and change only that element. Every other element on the cover should remain the same. Too often a

publisher, while trying to get a read on a specific cover element, will create two completely separate covers and test them against one another. This approach will not yield any results that are actionable over the long term.

The exception is when you do have two completely different cover concepts proposed for an upcoming issue and are trying to decide between the two of them. In that case it is perfectly valid to run an on line test to see which has greater newsstand appeal, and to use the winning cover on the issue in question. It won't give you information for future issues, but it will show you the direction to take for the issue coming up.

2. **Test One Element at a Time.** Once you have isolated your test element(s), you want to make sure that only that element is changed in your test split. Don't change background color **and** type of image, or type and size of image together, or image and bleed together. Doing so will make it impossible to quantify the impact that each element has upon sales.
3. **Test a Significant Group.** The online program *Decision Analysis* provides a statistical model that can help in setting up price groups. Using it, you can see that for a desired confidence level of 99 percent and maximum error of only 2 percent, at an average sale of 5,000 copies, you will want to test about half your draw; at an average sale of 10,000 copies, you can reduce your test group to about 33 percent; and at an average sale of about 15,000 copies, you can test about 20 percent of the draw.

In other words, there is an inverse relationship between the size of your newsstand sale and the percentage that you must use for a test group in order to get statistically significant results. If you up your scale to 100,000 or 200,000 you can test as little as 16 percent and still feel confident. And that's good, because then you can get to multiple splits-test maybe three different price points.

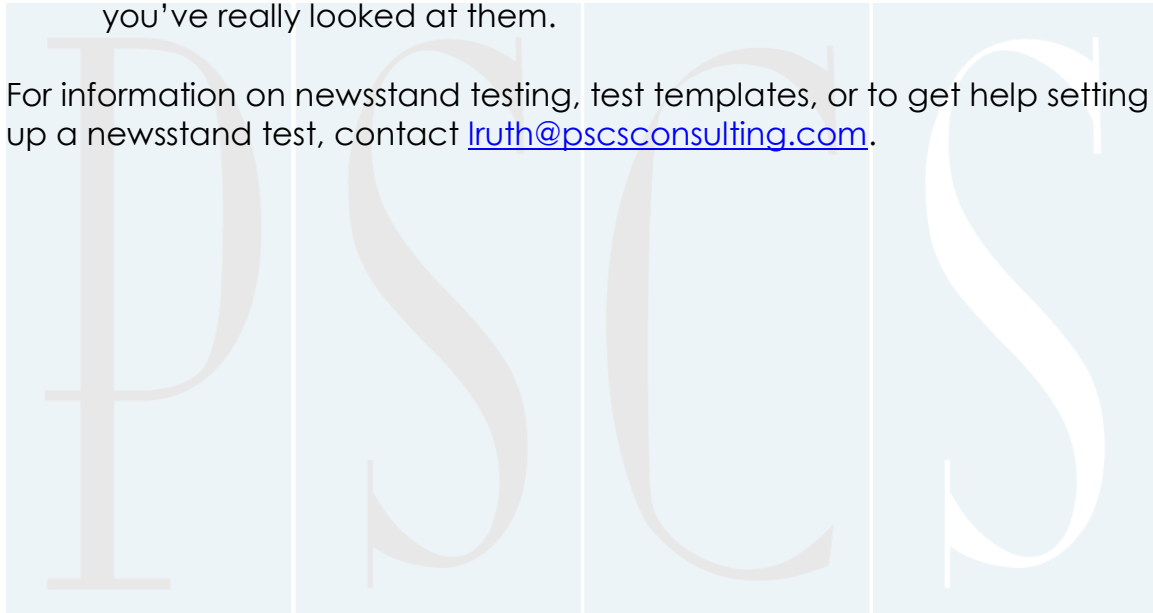
4. **Test for Several Issues.** The newsstand is volatile, and people's responses are going to change from one issue to the next. Perhaps they appreciate a certain treatment as a novelty but it doesn't work for the long term. Test for at least three issues, and repeat your testing periodically.
5. **Give Yourself Time to Analyze.** Some people say that they can have actionable test results within five weeks of putting the issue

out. If you analyze based on returns flow, you may find in the end that the rate of return is different in the test group than in the control group, and might not accurately reflect final sale. This could result in your jumping to a conclusion that later turns out to be incorrect.

The danger in this is that frequently the first results presented are the only ones remembered. It is very difficult to correct that initial impression that was created, even if it is counteracted by the final test analysis.

For this reason, it makes sense to take the extra few weeks to get the final test results rather than trying to draw conclusions from the early returns flow. Don't analyze too early, and if you do track it early, don't broadcast the results until the issues are final and you've really looked at them.

For information on newsstand testing, test templates, or to get help setting up a newsstand test, contact [l ruth@pscsc consulting.com](mailto:l ruth@pscsc consulting.com).



## 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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