

# PSCS

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

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## **How to Create a Successful Magazine**

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, 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 from which to start. 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 video gaming 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 video gaming 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 Unique Voice 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.

### **What Makes You Unique?**

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.

Your similarities to other titles will inform many choices you make, many choices the market may make for you. Your cover price, your size, your category and sub-category; your mailing lists, your advertiser base, and where you will be placed on the newsstand all derive, to a greater or lesser degree, from your competitive set. Therefore it is of course necessary to identify ways in which you are similar to other titles in your set, but to begin with, identify the primary way or ways 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.

Once you have clearly articulated what the product is and what makes it unique, everything can grow from that basis in a coherent manner. Your publication's core assumptions will inform every aspect of its publication, from the editorial voice to the cover art to the layout to your approach to your potential advertisers. By extension, through the size of your market and how your potential readers are best approached, these core assumptions affect decisions having to do with manufacturing and production, reader acquisition, even the very form your magazine will take.

For example, if your publication has been created to make the world of business more intelligible to people wanting to launch a home-based business, you would want everything about the product to be simple, clear, and readily intelligible. Your layout will be clean, your cover will promise ease and simplicity, your editorial voice will be clear and easily understandable. Your direct mail pieces will exude clarity, promise solutions. If you are creating a magazine for would-be wizards, however, your whole look and approach will be different; the magic and mystery intrinsic to your topic will be present in everything you do, implicitly or explicitly.

This unique voice, so identified, becomes the core of your brand. We hear a lot about branding these days—we are not, we are told, creating a product; we are creating a brand. Let this concept fall into the wrong hands, or carry it to its logical extreme, and it has been found to verge on the ludicrous. The basic concept, however, is sound. Find your own voice and use it in a recognizable way across media platforms and you may create a product more successful than you dared dream.

### **How Will You Survive?**

On your way to this pinnacle of success, however, you will have to find ways of staying alive. What are your costs, what are your revenues, and which, at the end of the day, is the greater number? One of the gravest errors a prospective publisher can make in putting together a business plan is to fall prey to unjustified optimism. At the same time, you don't want to put yourself out of business before you first go to press by virtue of the obstacles expressed by numbers on paper. Your business plan must include all the prospective costs, all the potential revenues.

In building your business plan you will, of course, be identifying your major revenue streams: subscriptions, newsstand sales, and ad sales. Following relatively standard models you will layer in your ancillary revenues: list rental, sales of ancillary products, web-based revenues. Be realistic about the timing: how long will it take to develop these revenue streams, what will it cost to develop them?

Your revenue streams, the lifeblood of your publication, are the parts that make up the living, breathing whole. Each element, essential to your survival, reflects the overall mission of your publication; it's a part of the genetic makeup that identifies who you are. Having put together your plan, you are clear about what you must do and how you must do it. You have learned what your competitors are doing and how they are doing it. You know the ins and outs of your field, you know everything that is being done successfully, everything that has been tried and proven unsuccessful. You have followed existing blueprints and created a blueprint of your own.

Now you are ready to break new ground—to invent something new.

### **Develop Your Franchise**

Having gone through the steps of creating your product, you have identified perfectly who you are and where you fit in. You have your mission and your voice. You know what makes you unique.

The name of your company and your publication, your logo, the editorial content you are developing, your market and your audience all reflect this positioning. You have, in short, created your brand. What are you going to do with it?

You have created something of which words on paper is only one expression, one manifestation. What else does your audience want or need? In what additional or new ways can you begin to meet that need? And through what additional channels can you begin to monetize, and to extend, your brand?

Perhaps, like some of the political and opinion publications, you will set up an online community to create opportunities for activism and bring in new voices and opinions. In the craft, home design, and electronics fields, to name just a few, publishers have created consumer marketing events and trade shows to showcase new products and bring advertisers together with readers. In the sports field publishers may host games or other events. A video magazine has developed a partnership with You Tube, another

with America's Funniest Home Videos. Publishers of women's magazines have developed signature lines in Target, in Walmart, and in other large chains stores. Electronics magazines have created special editions for electronics stores. A music magazine has created events for DJs throughout the country. Magazine publishers have their own TV shows, their own lines of books, their own radio stations, their own web franchises. Wherever your audience is found, go there with your brand.

In short, having learned publishing's lessons and followed the tried and true, it is also important to find new ways of brand extension, new streams of revenue. Publishing a magazine creates opportunities often unimagined by the new magazine publisher. It provides a platform, a voice, a readership, an audience. A world of possibilities emerges for the magazine publisher; the publication is the first, best step into that world, and the rewards of magazine publishing may come from unexpected sources.



## 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 the 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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