

BSME awards review The future

Doing quite nicely, thank you

While newspapers and other media panic in the face of the internet, the magazine industry seems to be doing rather well. That's because it hasn't lost sight of what's most important: the product, says **Richard Benson**

In the mid-1990s, I was working as a sort of editorial overseer on a highly respected British men's magazine that had a small but tasteful and big-spending readership of around 70,000 or 80,000. (Young publishers should note that, in those days, 70-80,000 was OK; hit 100,000 and you could expect champagne, and congratulatory telegrams from David Bowie and Terence Conran.) It was ticking over in its respected, small and tasteful way when suddenly, it happened. The ladmags landed on our desks.

Faced with this obvious and important challenge, I followed the British middle-manager's usual three-step procedure. First, I decided that as we were successful and they were different, they were doomed. Second, following their posting of quite-impressive first ABCs, I decided that it was always obvious they would be successful, but there was room in the market for all of us. And finally, on learning that they were selling about ten billion copies a month, I decided that because they were now more successful than us, we were not successful any more, and that we needed to be more like them.

Well, I was quite young. And in those sort of situations, it can be very hard for anyone of any age to hold their nerve. But still, it was a mistake to try to change the direction of the magazine in the way we did. It meant we made the classic mistakes of many brands that are under fire – overlooking the core audience who stick with you precisely because they don't want the new thing; and undervaluing the qualities that make you what you are as you rush headlong into change. In the end, long after the company had been taken over and I had left, a new team seemed to be tackling the job by reverting to some of those original values.

I've been reminded of this experience this summer as our national newspapers have got their variously sized pages in a flap over competition from the internet. In the offices of several titles there now seems to be more concern with blogs, podcasts and vodcasts – on top of their concern with magazine supplements and giveaways – than there is with actual newsgathering. There appears to be more enthusiasm for the various media themselves than the message, and the quality of the core product, or “newspaper” as we used to call them, has in many cases noticeably declined – along with sales.

In comparison, the magazine industry as a whole has played a blinder. British publishers have maintained an awareness of the things readers like about periodicals: things such as the communication of distinctive worlds, the intimate identification with readers, the use of pictures, the feel of the paper, the quick, vital, witty engagement with current affairs and lifestyle. As a result, magazine sales in general are holding up, and several classic glossies have put sales on by simply doing all those...glossy things they do so well. Many titles have used the internet very wisely, but none that I can think of have obsessed over it to the detriment of the magazine itself. The ongoing overall healthiness of the market suggests that whatever else future editors and publishers need to do, one essential task will be simply to look after the integrity of that old “core product”.

That said, there are surely going to be some major changes and challenges in the near future. One particular opportunity, so far only seriously grasped by Wallpaper, is to use a combination of international vision and local partners around the world to suck down advertising revenue from multinationals wanting quick, easy marketing fixes for their continent-sized sales areas. For marketing heads and media planners at companies such as Sony, Nokia and Nike, individual countries are an inconvenience; they would love to be able to order a few mega-BACS for a few publishers to look after all the potential customers from Madrid to Moscow with a handful of titles.

Of course the readers are travelling more too; we are already living in the age of Las Vegas stag nights and weekends away in Ibiza. You can reach them with different local editions of certain titles, but the editions don't always have uniform quality, and the process still feels cumbersome. Can anyone overcome the problems of language and maintain a sufficiently large network of journalists? Wallpaper does it, and a handful of European titles are making a good fist of it: the bilingual Paris-based WAD currently looks quite promising. But these are both magazines uniting people through fairly extreme aspirational vision: it will be interesting to see whether more mass-market, of-the-people publications can work the same way.

Reader power

Whether it be Europe-wide or at home, the reader is likely to feature at the heart of the process of editorial generation and brand-building over the next few years. There is a certain change in thinking taking place about how brands should be built and extended; in the 1990s, we thought that all you really needed to do was license a logo to a vaguely suitable manufacturer and let the people come to you. In the last five years a new collaborative media model has emerged. Think of websites like del.icious, digg.com, or of Lonely Planet's Thorn Tree, or of the tabloids inviting readers to send in their mobile phone photos, or even of Nuts' very successful assessmybreasts slot. It demands a different way of thinking about your relationship with the public. In this new model, the readers are not only invited in, they

are supplying content, networking with each other through your medium, and essentially developing your brand in conjunction with you.

As magazines thrive on making themselves the mouthpiece of communities, they will not be able to ignore this phenomenon. It could, however, present a certain challenge to aspirational lifestyle titles that peddle an idealised view of their readers and the worlds they inhabit. The people who buy advertising need to believe that this idealistic world, in which every street is like Bond Street, exists. Posh titles will need to address the problem of allowing their readers in while maintaining the fiction that they all look like Jude Law and Kate Moss.

On the subject of reader collaboration, the hypothetical talking point (for the pub) is: would it be possible to create a magazine where the content is decided by the readers rather than an editor? Digg.com is doing something similar for news on the internet, and the internet is probably where the idea should stay. Nevertheless, you sense that some interesting ideas – and yes, probably some really terrible ones – will fall out of the discussion.

With regard to the democratisation of magazines, though, there will be other engines of change besides the internet and reader collaboration. Distribution for instance; small publishers in Britain are fortunate to have Comag – a company that offers special deals for new, small-circulation titles. Even so, getting magazines into the shops remains one of the biggest problems they face. This is compounded by the increasing dominance of supermarkets who, with their insistence on uniform sizes, TV advertising support and low tolerance for low sales, make innovation extremely difficult.

It is hard for suppliers to feel cheerful in the face of this, but I like to think that eventually the supermarkets' power will lead to competition so intense they must seek out innovation and advantage wherever they can. The retail monsters could become the small magazine producer's

friend, in the way that Asda has become a friend to small local book publishers.

I stress the importance of an outlet for new, small-scale titles here because it seems possible that, as digital printing improves in quality, and PC design programs flower, we will see a growth in the numbers of micro-niches published on a shoestring for a tiny readership. Two personal favourites come to mind for me here. One, an A5, saddle-stitched local history and nostalgia bimonthly from Yorkshire called Around The Wolds, is put together by two people using local contributors, and for some years has been earning enough to keep its publishers ticking over. The other is The Shoreditch Twat, a now-defunct small A5-er which was put out by the writer and journalist Neil Boorman. It was hard to understand if you lived outside fashionable East London, but nevertheless very influential with the handful of people you need to impress in order to make an impact on the London media.

Both magazines looked fairly basic, but they worked because they had found a micro-niche, filled it, and balanced the books. Cheaper and better digital printing will mean it will become easier to make magazines such as these look better and to make the books balance.

And, should some smart software spud suddenly chuck a really easy magazine-design program for PCs into that mix, we could see a little boom that would be middle England's version of the underground publishing revolution between the late 1960s and mid 1980s.

Specialisms

I have a sneaking suspicion that if this were to happen, the really good stuff would be produced by and for the over-50s. We all know about the silver surfers, but there have been parallel innovations in the magazine market. The Oldie has quietly done all that collaboration thing with its readers, Emma Soames has transformed Saga magazine into an excellent, vital-feeling read, and Sue James has made middle age look positively enticing with her made-over Woman & Home.

Why? Because these are editors who believe in reading; people who know that readers are delighted to leave Instant Messenger alone and engage with a few thousand words if they are about interesting stuff that is well written.

I worry slightly that this idea is currently being undermined by all these media studies courses on which students are told relentlessly that magazines are like any other commodity; formulaic business propositions into which they will feed copy. This is true to an extent, but it won't encourage the new young mavericks who ought to be revitalising our pages. With things also relatively flat in the underground/style press – traditionally the incubators of new writers and designers – it could be that magazines will need to work harder to seek out truly innovative talent in future. Presumably a lot of said talent is busy on the web – if so, we should try to entice them back.

This shouldn't be too difficult, because as we move towards the second decade of the new century, magazines actually seem to have so many advantages that, had they been invented last month, we would all be acclaiming them as a terrific new idea – the natural accompaniment to the rather dully functional world wide web. They are intensely visual at a time when the converging world is divided by languages, but united by images. They are great at pursuing single agendas and uniting communities at a time when other mass media seem to be flailing in a bland, one-size-fits-none middle ground. They are terrific at finding out niche markets at a time when that is what advertisers need.

They may need to do some new things in new ways in the coming years, but the most important factor in their survival will be the management's continuing self-belief rather than the old three-step panic programme.

Richard Benson was editor of The Face, group editor of The Face, Arena, Arena Homme Plus and Frank, and his first book, The Farm, was one of the best selling non-fiction titles of 2005

British publishers have maintained an awareness of the things readers like about periodicals



Mixed fortunes: But the successful magazines have stuck by their core values – and by their readership