

# Time for a nip and a tuck?

An effective redesign will boost newsstand sales and grow subscriptions

BY SCOTT BULLOCK

If your magazine's newsstand sales and renewal rates are down or flat, it may be time to consider some radical cosmetic surgery, or at least a nip-and-tuck job.

Overpaid Hollywood movie stars understand the importance of a fresh-looking face. They're in the entertainment business after all and, let's be honest, so are we.

It's budget time, so lobby the publisher for that long overdue facelift that the art director is probably eager to perform. Providing, of course, that enough time and appropriate financial resources are allocated to do the job right. We don't want a botched nose job after all.

At this year's annual Coast to Coast Retail Day, *Toronto Life's* award-winning art director, Carol Moskot, talked about the process of redesign. What she didn't get into, because she's too modest, is how a redesigned product can make a circulator's job a lot easier.

Smart publishers know that if circulators can sell more copies more efficiently, the ripple effect often includes: generating more paid subscriptions from insert cards, improved readership metrics, and consequently better CPMs for advertisers. Plus, renewal rates often jump up, too, which can dramatically lower a circulator's

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blood pressure, and raise the bottom line.

*Toronto Life*, which just turned 40, introduced its latest redesign with the April 2005 number, and eight of the next 12 issues outsold the prior year's issues.

Need another example? Let's take a look at *Maclean's*, which turned 100 last year. Editor/publisher Ken Whyte wasted little time getting his old girl to the surgeon for a radical makeover, which debuted on November 21st 2005. The results were staggering. Twenty of the next 23 issues sold more copies than the same issue before redesign. During this period, average newsstand sales skyrocketed from 5,293 to 8,333 per week, a 57% boost. Plus, sell-through efficiency improved despite an increase in the copies distributed, which is a rare accomplishment. You can only imagine how much easier it is for *Maclean's* ad sales folks, too, when they can crow about overtaking *Time* at the newsstand!

"Ken and the *Maclean's* team have definitely delivered the engaging covers needed to inspire the impulse buy," says Tracey McKinley, Rogers Publishing's vice-president of consumer marketing. "Plus we've had lots of support for the relaunch from the retail supply chain and our own retail team. Also, studies show subscriber engagement is linked to strong inviting covers

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and we are seeing nice strength on the subscription side as well."

What about smaller, niche titles you ask? Well, let's look at *The Beaver*, which recently celebrated its 85th birthday by debuting a radical new look. Since that time, all five issues have outsold the last year's version, and by a wide margin. Sales have increased from an average sale of 858 copies per issue to 1,891 copies—a 120% improvement. As a result, the publisher was able to bump the cover price 17%, from \$5.95 to \$6.95, which would not have been possible without the momentum created by the redesign. Renewal rates have improved, too.

Another recent makeover was performed by James Ireland's design studio on the *Western Standard*. While it's too early to make the case based on newsstand results, I think we can agree that the transformation is profound. Veteran ad sales rep Brian Stendel says a magazine that looks smart can make or break the pitch with agency folks. "A well-redesigned magazine, particularly one that was truly in need of a major facelift, is a pleasure to share with prospective clients and agencies," he says. "Advertisers do not want to be associated with anything that is sub-standard. Because media planners don't have the time to read many of the publications that pour

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Century Home launched 1983 as a regional title. Avid Media acquired it in 2000 and in September 2002 rolled out the new name with a radical redesign and repositioned it as a national player. Newsstand sales jumped 57%

over their threshold, the visual appeal of the magazine is critical. With so much competition in this industry, the first impression can also be the final impression."

There is nothing quite so radical as completely changing the brand name of your magazine. But that's just what Jacqueline Howe did after purchasing *Century Home* magazine.

"I'm a firm believer in test, test and back-test. And that's exactly what we did when we considered the potential for broadening the category for *Century Home* magazine. We thought we had the content mix right but thought the name may be holding potential

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subscribers and newsstand buyers back. So our circulation team ran many direct-mail panel tests. Response rates on *Canadian Home & Country* were triple to *Century Home*. We rolled out and never looked back."

**"With so much competition...the first impression can be the final impression"**

—Brian Stendel

Under the *Century Home* banner, newsstand sales were averaging 5,936 copies sold. In the year after the redesign to *Canadian Home & Country*, newsstands sales jumped 57% to an average sale of 9,326 copies. Today, newsstand sales average closer to 11,000 copies.

So circulators, polish up your political skills and get busy making the case for some cosmetic surgery. Your art director and ad sales director will thank you later when they are winning awards and cashing their bonus cheques.



Scott Bullock operates Circ3, a circulation consultancy. He has been consumer marketing director with Toronto Life, managing partner with Coast to Coast Newsstand Services and in 2003 was named Magazine Marketer of the Year by the Circulation Management Association of Canada. His column appears regularly in Masthead. You can reach him at [scott@circ3.com](mailto:scott@circ3.com).

