

# The wisdom of the crowd

Getting readers to judge a magazine by its cover—prior to publication

BY SCOTT BULLOCK

One of my favourite all-time quotes came from former *Maclean's* and *Canadian Business* publisher Paul Jones, who, when asked to comment on a cover, quipped, “Not another cover featuring logo with art.” In his witty and succinct style, my fellow *Masthead* columnist summed up a recurring problem with that all-important front page: Too many magazine covers are executed at the last minute, with little thought given to marketing concerns.

You may not be able to judge a book by its cover, but readers judge magazines by page one every time they visit the newsstands. Unfortunately, by that point, all control is out of the publisher and editor's hands. To avoid this, *Canadian Geographic* and St. Joseph Media have developed initiatives where readers judge covers prior to publication.

Rick Boychuk, editor-in-chief of *Canadian Geographic*, knows that a logo and art alone won't cut it in the newsstand jungle. “The cover is a marketing page,” he declares. “We take the process of cover development extremely seriously, and we invest a lot of time in getting it right. We're not content to wait months to find out after the fact from our distributor how many readers voted with their wallets. We're very proactive.”

The *CG* cover process starts with a meeting between the editor-in-chief, art director and executive editor. They brainstorm, then develop six to eight versions. Once these are completed, the circulation director and publisher help create a shortlist of the three best.

The Web department then e-mails the finalists out to a list of over 43,000. Through trial and error, they've learned not to send the poll out on weekends, as response is higher at the beginning of the week.

Typically, 5,000 responses (nearly 12%) come back. Respondents are asked to rank each cover on a scale of one to five; to identify himself or herself as a subscriber, a newsstand buyer or as a pass-along reader; and to identify where in the country he or she resides.

According to Boychuk, many respondents add written commentary, which he vets for common threads of thought. “This can be time consuming, but we pride ourselves on having tremendous engagement with our audience.”

To minimize variables, the same cover lines are

used on all three covers. “Don't post a cover and ask your audience for input unless you're prepared to publish it,” Boychuk advises.

As an incentive for readers, there is a contest component, where one respondent from the “winning” group receives a free one-year subscription to the magazine.

*CG* began the initiative with the September/

tested within a competitive newsstand set. “It's not enough to simply know if a test cover is good or even great. What we need to know is whether it increases the likelihood that someone will choose one of our magazines before choosing the competitors,” say Poirier. St. Joseph Media also offers a \$200 gift certificate to a major department store to encourage participation.

While research is great, and eight out of 10 survey results yield very definitive responses, veto power still resides with the editor. (In earlier times, the great editor John Macfarlane backed his *Toronto Life* covers by betting a bottle of Tanqueray Gin that his newest front page would sell more copies than the benchmark average, or the last issue.)

Editorial control over covers is something I think all magazine professionals can agree remains critical. While we should collaborate and bring our various expertises to the table, the business of cover design still has as much to

do with protecting and promoting the brand, keeping subscribers and advertisers happy, and the artistic sensibilities and instincts that only great editors and art directors are trained and qualified for.

And after witnessing the firing of the editor of *Golfweek* magazine for its controversial Jan. 18 cover, which carried a photo of a noose (i.e. the only way to beat Tiger Woods), I'm sure most circulators are happy to let the final responsibility remain with the editor and publisher. (Curiously, I'm still not sure how the *Golfweek* publisher escaped the noose.) While judging a book by its cover may be foolish, I'll bet the editor of *Golfweek* magazine wishes he'd taken a lesson from *CG* and St. Joseph Media. **M**



*Canadian Geographic* sent three versions of its Sept/Oct 2007 cover to a reader panel. The image on the left was a “clear winner,” editor Rick Boychuk says, and “a very strong seller.”

October 2006 issue and according to their distributors' records and current forecasts, six of the eight issues since have shown increased sales.

The magazine professionals at St. Joseph Media are also testing covers before they hit newsstands. The process is similar at *Toronto Life*, *Fashion*, *Wish*, *Canadian Family* and *Weddingbells*, according to Clarence Poirier, vice president of research.

The editor and art director begin the process early in the production cycle and typically develop three covers. The publisher and newsstand director are then asked for input.

Folks who have opted into the process through websites, contests and electronic newsletters are asked to participate. The readers help bring some clarity to the marketing process, “particularly if some of the cover treatments are a bit non-traditional,” says Yasmin Seneviratne, St. Joseph's newsstand director. Depending on the magazine, anywhere from 2,500 to 5,000 e-mails are sent out soliciting advice, and responses range from 500 (20%) to 1200 (24%).

St. Joseph Media segments the responses it receives from readers by demographic, including gender, geographic location and household income. But the key element of testing involves measuring the purchase intent of the cover being



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