

Some Experts Comment on *MAGAZINE DESIGN & EDITING*

The following comments on magazine design and editing are by several experienced magazine professionals and may be helpful in designing, re-designing or evaluating your publication.

DESIGN

David Merrill, magazine design consultant; former art director, Time magazine.

“The primary aspect of designing a magazine is that it has to be designed to be read....Design is then packaging and advertising—it’s a support element.”

“Advertisers are very conscious of design. They’re judging you against the competition.”

“...no matter how good the design, the content is always the most important thing. Design is just a support element to get people to read it.”

[on choosing typefaces] “Some designers sometimes tend to forget that the primary function of type is to be read, and there are some typefaces that are totally unreadable....When it comes to choosing between serif and sans serif typefaces, serif is definitely better for body copy. That is a proven fact. Evelyn Wood’s Reading Dynamics proved absolutely that you can read serif type faster...Long copy should never be in sans serif.”

John Peter, head of John Peter Associates, Inc. and international consultant on magazine editorial and design; former art director at McCalls, and editor at Life.

“... every photo, illustration and graphic should have a caption. It is perhaps possible that all may not need them, but each represents an opportunity to entice the reader into reading the text. A caption channels visual attention and draws the reader into the text.”

“Your magazine’s format is the basis of all page layouts.... The right format will impart unity and style to your magazine’s editorial pages. It can help distinguish the editorial from the advertising pages. It can set feature pages off from departments. It can help establish your magazine’s character. Fully packed pages suggest ‘practical’ or ‘newsy.’ Properly employed white space implies ‘quality’ and ‘class.’ The right column measures will combine proper utilization of space with flexibility and readability.”

“A good layout is one that combines excellent design with the logical placement and flow of all the typography and visuals.”

“Type is the single most important visual element in a magazine....Readability is the primary requisite....It is the typeface for the prominent things—such as titles, subtitles, pullouts and so forth—that gives your magazines its character and individuality.”

John Johaneck, partner at Ayers/Johaneck Publication Design, Inc. specializing in magazine design consulting.

“...let’s not forget that readability is a primary function of magazine design.”

“Opening feature layouts should have a clear star-one design that grabs the reader. It can be a strong piece of art or photography or a large headline...But when layouts become more complex, many designers lose control. They don’t prioritize elements on the page. Designers have to have the discipline to bring readers into the layout at point A—the headline, for example—and lead them through the page or spread by gradually putting less emphasis on other design elements such as photos, drop caps, subheads or art.

“There are three ways to assign importance to something. You make it the largest item on the page...You can give it the brightest color...Or you can place it at the top of the page...But it’s what you do to the other elements to de-emphasize them that will ultimately make the layout succeed or fail.”

“Designers need to mentally assign a 1-2-3 priority to each item and make sure one graphic doesn’t compete with another. Once the reader is properly led—from artwork to headline to subhead to drop cap, for example—then the layout is doing its job.”

“As they turn from the opening spread or page, readers expect to continue reading. So the first thing they should see at the top of the next page is more text. It’s not realistic to design every carryover page with body text at the very top, but it is possible to avoid placing too many obstacles between the last page and the continuing text. Don’t make a reader search through a maze of photos, sidebars, charts or pullquotes to figure out where the story continues.”

“The same thoughtful design that ensures proper story pacing should be applied to the entire issue. Many magazines lump all their feature stories in the middle of the magazine. But this will not work unless there’s a clear distinction between feature and non-feature material. The design of departments and columns should be highly formatted. Headlines should be strong but not overpowering. Visuals should not take on the prominence of those in features, and fixtures like overlines, headlines and subheads should be standardized.”

“The non-feature pages should be used to bookend the issue, providing a logical organization that becomes familiar to the reader. The design of feature layouts will create visual energy while the uniform look of departments and columns provides the magazine’s identity. To build on this concept, departments and columns should appear in the same basic position each issue.

“It’s also wise to clearly flag stories on the inside that may be highlighted on the cover or table of contents such as a special section or the cover story. When you do, also be sure that the headline wording from the cover to the contents to the story itself remains constant. And try to ensure that the first page of every story has a number on it so readers can locate it where the table of contents says it is.”

Jan V. White, magazine designer and consultant. Has designed the format of more than 100 magazines. Author of Editing by Design, and Designing for Magazines.

“To produce a magazine that communicates effectively, all the various elements that go into its makeup must be manipulated and balanced....

- The ideas themselves—the message.
- The flavor of the language in which the ideas are couched.
- Images through which the ideas can be transmitted.
- The scale of the elements, which becomes a clue to their relative importance.
- The sequencing of thoughts on the page, which should guide the reader logically through the presentation.
- The contrasts of size, scale, colorfulness, dullness, boldness and so forth...
- The typefaces used, which affect the mood of the piece and the first impression.
- The very size, shape and texture of the paper used, which elicits an immediate response from the reader.

All these elements (and many others) need to be orchestrated into a visually unified and intellectually consistent whole.”

“The purpose of editorial design is not to make a handsome piece, but a piece that *says something*. Good design should make the reason for publishing the message flare off the page at first glance. This should be the editor’s primary goal.....good design is a functional technique—the means to an end. And that end? Clarity in communicating ideas... Good design is an integral part of the story itself.”

Edmund Arnold, Editor’s Workshop Newsletter Jan. 1986 (Lawrence Ragan Communications, Inc.)

[on body type]”... the most important tool for communication that we have: body type...It ought to be Roman, for this type face has the highest readability...Some people believe that Sans Serifs give a feeling of modernity, or of high tech, and are willing to sacrifice some readability in order to create an ‘image.’...Look at a block of type, at least 4 x 5 inches. Look for a pleasing texture, the overall typographic ‘color’ of the block.”

“The size of the type we choose should be such that there are no fewer than 32 characters in a typical line of our selected column-width or more than 64 characters. At the same time we should seek to attain the ‘optimum line length,’ one with an average of 42 characters.”

Peter Smith, Peter Smith Associates, editor and graphic designer.

“In body copy, don’t use less than the minimum easy-to-read line length of 35 characters.... Use italics only for a few words on a page and only when essential. Long stretches of italic type are hard to read. Reserve boldface mostly for heads and subheads; in

body copy, use it for only a few words. Lines of boldface in body copy ‘flimmer’—the letters fill in and vibrate. Avoid using all caps; they slow reading speed and take 30% more space than lowercase.... For emphasis in body copy, use italics or boldface—but use them sparingly or they become ineffective.”

Peter Jacobi, publication consultant and former professor of journalism at Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University.

“Ideas should control layout, not layout ideas. Layouts should be planned, obviously, so they get the stories off the page and into the reader’s head....Editors and artists need to work together on this.

[on typefaces]“Those types which are most familiar are most readable: Baskerville, Bodoni, Caslon, Clarendon, Garamond, Helvetica, Times Roman, Century.”

“...the goal will always be, as it has been, legibility. Some general rules:

- Because we read the top of letters rather than the bottom, it is easier to read blocks of upper and lower case than all caps.
- Black on white is easier than the reverse.
- Bold type is readable in small amounts but less so in large; lots of italics, also hard to read
- Serifs are more comfortable for reading.”

COVER

David Merrill, magazine design consultant; former art director, Time magazine.

[on cover design] “It’s the most important page of the magazine...A cover is an ad for that magazine—it provides its personality....”

“One thing I think is important when you’re designing covers...is to surround yourself with examples of good design...and see what other people are doing.”

Michael Gold, principal with West Gold Editorial, editorial consulting group.

Be sure to use active, concrete language in cover lines. “If you can solve a problem, or present truly useful information on a cover, that will go a long way toward selling your magazine. Give readers tempting tidbits of the actual payoff provided by the article on the cover.”

Dr. Samir Husni, editor, Guide to New Consumer Magazines.

Covers need attention getters... Numbers always work great (5 best.... 35 ways to...).

“Revising the Cover Story” by Sarah Gosner (Folio: Magazine March 2003) on the American Society of Magazine Editors seminar on cover design.

Coverlines:

Coverlines are the deciding “buy factor” and can account for as much as 90 percent of a cover’s impact. No consensus on number of words (4 to 10) but the preferred mix is “short and punchy.”

Coverlines need to be understood instantly.

The trend is toward somewhat fewer coverlines to keep a clean overall image.

Avoid questions in coverlines (unless the answer isn’t obvious); make declarative statements.

80 percent of coverlines should appeal to 80 percent of the readers.

Images:

Newsworthiness is important for some magazines. Relate to what readers are currently interested in.

One face is best, two is okay; group shots should be avoided.

The image should be clear, attractive and instantly recognizable.

The image has to match and reinforce the magazine image.

Colors:

No one color always works. Some cover colors need to be seasonal.

EDITING

Henry A. Grunwald, Editor in Chief, Time Inc.

“An editor serves his writer when he, in fact, represents the reader. The editor must ask all the questions that the reader is likely to have...”

“An editor must also know his audience.”

“An editor must be a guardian of the language, uncompromising enemy of cliché and jargon and faulty grammar and bad syntax...”

“...an editor should have an engineer’s eye for the structure of a story.”

Ronni Sandroff, senior editor RN magazine

“Perhaps the most crucial aspect of a magazine editor’s job is consistently taking the time to discover what readers really want and need to read.”

Dr. Samir Husni, editor, Guide to New Consumer Magazines

Good strong editorial content is a must or people will not buy or continue to subscribe.

Theodore A. Rees Cheney, Getting the Words Right: How to Rewrite, Edit & Revise (1990)

“Seventy-five percent of all revision is eliminating words already written; the remaining twenty-five percent is improving the words that remain.”

John Peter, head of John Peter Associates, Inc. and international consultant on magazine editorial and design; former art director at McCalls, and editor at Life.

“The basic element of editorial is content. The nucleus of content is formed from ideas. Content is the energy that power magazines. You must make sure that your magazine’s content is not just good, but good for your particular audience. The right content is both as simple and as difficult as

knowing what your particular reader wants to read—or will be impelled to read even if he didn't know beforehand that he wanted to read it.”

“Departments breed regular readership, issue after issue. Good departments are habit forming; they stabilize readership and balance editorial coverage over diverse interests; and they can give a magazine its character and identity.”

Peter Jacobi, publication consultant and former professor of journalism at Medill School of Journalism, Northwestern University.

“The editor must...put himself into the readers' head, somehow, and decide, ‘This will be of interest’ or ‘This will not.’ Everything put into a magazine must be of interest to readers, if not to all of them...then at least to a good batch of them, and the more the better.” [Interest factors involve competition, conflict, controversy, consequence, famous persons, strong emotions, humor, problem solving, revealing the unknown or unusual.]

William L. Needham
Manager, Publication Development
The Printing House, Ltd.
needhamb@theprintinghouse.com
(850) 875-1500 ext. 104