

Market

Your Magazine

by Lawrence Darmani

Magazine readers are unpredictable. They have sophisticated tastes and seek new products. Magazine publishers have to work hard to keep regular readers and to attract new ones. To do so, they must use a variety of strategies and tactics.

What is on the cover?

Observe how people buy magazines. They survey the array of magazines available, study the cover titles and then pick up the ones that seem to attract them. They then leaf through, starting on the last page and ending on the cover, where they take some time to read the titles before making their decision.

Marketing gurus have found that browsers decide to purchase a product when they hold it in their hands. At that point a magazine's packaging—the headline, layout, cover, and color—is crucial.

Catchy cover titles and graphics can be appetizers for buyers, but the cover ought to truthfully reflect the inside. There is a limit to the number of times readers can be deceived by empty, sensational titles. Readers purchase magazines because of their content. If you meet their needs, they are sure to come for more.

Sell in bookshops

Magazines are not books, yet some bookshop managers handle them as such. One manager kept our newly published magazine in the warehouse instead of promptly displaying adequate quantities to the customers. When readers complained they could not find the magazine, Step Publishers contacted the manager. He apologized for keeping it out of sight. Later, he told readers he had run out of the magazine when he still had some in the warehouse. Even though bookshops are inevitable selling points for magazines, publishers must keep watching to ensure maximum benefits.

Other outlets

Do not limit sales to bookshops. How about selling in supermarkets where people go to buy groceries? One supermarket in Accra accepted a specially made stand for display in a small space near the counter, along with a sign stating, "Step sold here." Our distribution points include grocery stores, boutiques, petrol filling stations, and huge clothes and provisions stores.

To successfully sell your publication in non-traditional places for periodicals, do not take "No" for an answer. Describe how sales records of your magazine (and other periodicals) show that consumers appreciate having their favorite items made available to them.

Wherever people are gathered

Give readers the opportunity to buy and read your periodicals where they gather. Attend book fairs, bonanza sales, and other activities that pull in the crowds. At times sales are lower than expected, but reaching out to new readers is good for future growth.

Market magazines at Christian events. Whether the meetings are held in open spaces or in auditoriums, participants expect bookstands to visit during break times or at the close of the event. Coax organizers to introduce your magazine during the program and you may experience even greater sales than usual.

Over the years Step Publishers has participated in children's programs and youth events—whether they are Christian or not. Churches and schools are known for assembling people, and they offer a ready market for magazines. Contact the pastors or heads of institutions for permission. Sometimes they even appoint a trustworthy person to help.

Another idea is to pitch a tent where there is a high concentration of workers. In many capital cities, government offices are located in one geographical area. In Accra, "The Ministries" is a place where one finds a cluster of organizations with many employees. One vendor, who also sells most of the newspapers in the city, has managed to create a monopoly for himself among the workers.

Partner with the media

The proliferation of local FM radio stations and television networks in Ghana opened the floodgates for promoting magazines. Recently, Step Publishers arranged to advertise a national television station's programs in its magazines. In exchange, the station will present copies of the magazine to participants on their children's shows. The same arrangement can work for radio stations. Commercial radio and TV stations do not enter into such arrangements without maximizing their benefits, but wide promotion helps



Step and *Surprise* keep its regular readers and attract new ones.

Organizations buy magazines

Review opportunities to collaborate with church, parachurch, and even secular organizations. Step approached a Christian organization whose mission statement included evangelism, Christian education, and holistic development, and showed how its magazine could help the organization achieve its mission. The organization ordered 1,600 copies per issue for the people in the rural areas whom they were helping.

Build a subscription list

Subscription is a popular way of selling magazines. In some economies, subscriptions are the sole method of selling as magazines are not sold on newsstands or in bookshops. In Ghana, Step has tried to build up a subscription list, but exorbitant postage rates make subscriptions unattractive for readers. Subscriptions are still convenient for readers in rural areas, or outside the country, who cannot pick up *Step* and *Surprise* at a local newsstand. Bulk delivery is also advantageous for schools or churches.

Distribution companies

The most cost-effective way to ensure a magazine gets to every corner of the country is to use an established distributor. In Kenya, the Nation Newspaper Company distributes over 20 African magazines. *Step* and *Surprise* are sent directly from the printing press to Nation's distribution center for circulation to vendors throughout the country. At the end of the month, Nation compiles the sales records, receives returns, and pays moneys due to magazine publishers, less a 40 percent discount. Periodical distributors are a far more convenient option than self-distribution.

Use agents

Where a distribution company is not available, the use of agents—people selling the magazines for a commission—is inevitable. In Ghana agents do business with Step on a “sale or return” agreement. Some of them are hard to deal with, requiring constant debt collection. Every week they invent new excuses why

they cannot pay. Unfaithful ones can even squander the sales revenues and vanish! Set up systems to work with agents effectively. For example, have them complete a form where a guarantor undertakes to pay any liabilities they incur.

Maintain good relationships with vendors

Whether you use agents, vendors, shopkeepers, or any other distributors, these people are a lifeline to link you with your readers. Maintain businesslike and cordial relationships with them. Meet them, listen to their concerns, encourage them, pray with them, and even give them small incentives.

Diversification increases circulation

In an effort to reach young readers, some publishers devote a page or two for kids, calling it the “Children’s Corner.” Others reserve a page for women’s affairs or even “for mother’s only.” Such efforts show the need for diversification in magazine publishing.

Early in Step Publishers’ history, its editors saw the need for reaching children and wondered whether reserving a corner for them in *Step*, the youth magazine, was the most appropriate way to reach them. In the end, the editors chose to publish *Surprise*, a magazine for children. This product now has a circulation that equals that of the youth magazine. And, 12 years later, Step Publishers is considering another magazine to address leadership issues. Instead of marketing a single magazine, diversification may enable publishers to market two or three products with higher circulation.

Be geared to the times

Readers are like the passengers of a bus—as the bus journeys on some of the passengers drop off and others get on board. To have fewer readers drop off and more coming on board, keep up with their needs and satisfy them. The issues confronting readers keep changing. A magazine’s sustainability is contingent on readers who faithfully patronize the product. A magazine anchored to Christ and geared to the times will survive and grow.❖

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