Magazines

‘Do you know what this means?’ Ralph Boffard, maverick publisher of Penthouse and Longevity, asked me way back in 1994. It was two days after the first democratic election and the meaning of everything was changing. But as I looked at the acronym OBC, the future of SA was clearer to me than the meaning of those three letters.

A Place in Space

By Ann Donald

Ten minutes earlier, in his wisdom but more likely his desperation, Ralph had offered me the position of editor of Longevity magazine. I was about to have the offer withdrawn: ‘No,’ I answered.

He didn’t flinch, and for that I shall be eternally grateful. He simply took me by the shoulders, looked intently into my eyes, and told me I was now an editor and should believe it.

“You foolish, foolish man,” I thought, as I slipped out into the Jo’burg evening and made my way back to Pretoria to face the wrath of my Pretoria News editor, Deon du Plessis, when I handed in my resignation. ‘She’s going to some wrinkly magazine,’ he told the staff at my farewell after 10 years on the paper. It was 10 years before we spoke again.

Not that I spoke to anyone much for at least a year after assuming the editorship of Longevity (my family couldn’t talk; they were too busy laughing at the thought of my non-veggie-eating self having the gall to edit a health magazine). No, I wasn’t talking, just taking ever-deeper breaths as I tried to convince myself that I knew what I was doing.

Copy. Pictures. Adverts. I’d repeat these words over and over as I tried to break down the magazine into bite-sized pieces. I leaped on the blank flatplans like a drowning woman to a lifebelt. As each ad came in, I’d rework the pagination to accommodate it. By the time the first copy came in, the poor beleaguered art director would have had at least 12 flatplans presented to her.

Sad as it may seem, in 11 years I never lost my love for doing flatplans. I never felt comfortable embarking on the production cycle of an issue unless I had plotted it out first. As I moved between titles, I evolved systems and structures to minimise redesigning the editorial to accommodate late or ‘creative’ ad pages. I was, I admit, anal. I revelled in knowing down to .17 of a page, how many ads had been booked and where they would fit. I loved finding the perfect position for the creative execution of a brilliant ad to be showcased. Finding a satisfying rhythm between advertising images and editorial layouts brought a smile to my face. Working with people who felt the same way was a joy; those who understood that while no magazine can survive without advertising, it is the readers’ experience that counts.

Readers open their magazine much as they enter their sitting room – with a sense of relief, this being the place they can kick off their shoes and relax, without intrusion. In the right frame of mind, a reader coming across a magazine ad that is artfully placed will be highly receptive to its message. If the ad is creatively executed and is relevant to the reader, all the better. I think here of a print campaign run by Woolworths a couple of years back: eight pages of full-bleed pictures, beautiful images that reflected the target market, placed between plain sheets of coloured tracing paper. No one could miss or ignore the message. Nor did they, judging by the response we received. How, then, to explain the craft of pagination to agency creatives who believe the only way to get their ad noticed is to make it as intrusive or disruptive as possible? Who insist on four or more consecutive right-hand page solus positions for quarter-page ads? Who demand that their retail food ad should be placed upfront among the fragrance ads? Who want a right-hand halway right-hand – have these people no imagination, or do they never read the research that left-hand pages are equally noticed? Position for their haemorrhoids cream in the food section? Not that I have a problem with piles, but surely you can respect that I’d rather read about them in the health section?

The issue of clutter is less of a problem in those magazines that don’t get much advertising. But, for those one or two mags in a stable that do attract ads, and which sustain less profitable titles, media owners are reluctant to say no to anyone. When ad loading pushes up to 48-50%, it is impossible to paginate to the satisfaction of everyone.

So, here’s the conundrum: advertisers want their ad to stand out from the clutter; media owners want as much revenue per issue as they can get. My solution? Advertisers should pay full rate and insist that the media owner limits ad loading to a maximum of 40% by volume. Even better, book the OBC, where it’s guaranteed to be noticed.

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