

# Turning the Page on Magazines

New tools and tactics enable brands to better measure the effectiveness of print magazine advertising

October 5, 2019

By **David Ward**



**P**rint magazine advertising may be down, but it's far from out.

Though unlikely to ever come close to matching its pre-internet glory years, print magazine advertising has been staging a bit of a renaissance in recent years, as CMOs and brand managers realize it can be an effective way to tell a great product story to the right audience, especially older, affluent consumers.

"Print magazines have lost a lot of scale when you look at the whole media universe," says Jim Smyth, president and CEO at the print/direct response specialty agency White Star Media. "But at the same time, they hold their own when it comes to how powerful a vehicle they can be."

Results metrics from the Association of Magazine Media (MPA) back that up, noting that **print magazine ads** still generate an ROI of \$3.94 for every dollar spent.

## The Receptive Audience for Print Magazine Ads

One of the reasons print magazines remain such a strong platform for the right brands is that, unlike the digital/social/mobile world where much of the content is free, most print magazines continue to rely on a paid-subscription model.

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**New metrics have brands re-subscribing to the idea of advertising in print magazines.**



"Magazines are invited guests into your home, so you are paying for the content and you're also giving your name and address and other information in order to get that content," says Susan Russ, SVP of communications, information, and member services at the MPA. She adds this is one reason why print magazine audiences tend to respond more positively to advertising within the publications.

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It's only been recently that magazine publishers have begun to more effectively tell that story. One key to that has been the willingness of magazine publishers to work with ad agencies, media buyers, and brands on developing better metrics and also to share at least some of the first-party data they have on subscribers.

"As someone who has spent their entire career entrenched in print media, it's refreshing to see that print publishers are more sophisticated on metrics and attribution solutions than they've been before," Smyth says. "Because of its paid subscriber-driven model, print generally performs better on both ROI and on a conversion basis than digital and social channels. It's now good to see this validation process playing out."

Hearst Data Studio, a division of the publisher of *Elle*, *Cosmopolitan*, *Country Living*, *Popular Mechanics*, and a host of other high-profile magazines, recently rolled out a program where it's able to serve ads in print based on a consumer's online habits **and other data**.

Todd Haskell, SVP and CMO at Hearst Magazines, says the program is still in its early days, but suggests advertisers are very excited about the opportunity, particularly because Hearst already has such robust first-party data about its magazine readers. "If we match that up with the incredible amount of really rich first-party data based upon a reader's interaction with our editorial sites online, then reach them in a print product based upon that behavior, it just intuitively makes a lot of sense for advertisers," he says.

Smyth agrees, noting the ability to leverage online consumer behavior and provide more targeted ads to those same people in print can be a real game changer for magazine advertising. "The one thing they need to do is make it more cost efficient, because it can be done, but when you drill down to the pricing, it becomes cost-prohibitive when you're working with marketers on a targeted cost-per-acquisition basis," he adds.

## **Improved Metrics and Lead Generation**

Melissa McGrath, director of marketing strategy and insights at media buying firm MNI Targeted Media, says she works with brands interested in print magazine advertising. However, she notes that many are looking for ways to streamline the metrics to make it easier to compare with other marketing spend.

MNI recently partnered with GfK Global to develop a custom study for a client that combines all the metrics surrounding print magazine ad performance into one report. "Traditionally you had to go to one vendor for ad recall and another for perception of the brand," McGrath explains. "Now we're able to provide our in-book magazine advertisers custom studies, so they can track the ad recall metrics, as well as any custom points, to learn about the ad's impact on those subscribers."

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— **Melissa McGrath, director of marketing strategy and insights at MNI Targeted Media**

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On a national level, print magazine ads have always tended to be better for more top-of-the-funnel brand awareness/enhancement messaging rather than lower-funnel calls to action. "Magazines really excel in inspiring and immersing consumers in your brand and getting your brand into an intimate subconscious consideration set," McGrath explains.

But with the right targeted audience, great magazine creative can accomplish the same goals as digital: drive leads and boost sales, McGrath says.

MNI and the San Diego-based Greenhaus ad agency recently collaborated on a program for the Hawaiian luxury resort community Kukui'ula that featured a **six-issue cover wrap campaign** in *Travel + Leisure*.

A carefully chosen set of about 1,500 high income/net worth western U.S. households received the four-page Kukui'ula cover wraps featuring different art and messaging, yet all conveying a compelling, unified brand story. The only call to action was a survey in the wrap of the fifth delivered issue, giving the target group an opportunity to request more information.

The highly targeted cover wraps resulted in 16 percent of those receiving the ads requesting more information about home-sale opportunities at Kukui'ula, with 35 percent of those who responded saying they were more likely to visit the resort going forward.

"When you look at a magazine ad that's beautifully done, it can really stop a reader in their tracks," McGrath says. "Brands want the opportunity to tell their story. TV is extremely expensive, making magazines a much more approachable vehicle to do such a thing."

## **URLs and Beyond**

Even though QR codes have proven to have little staying power with consumers, many brands are still looking for ways to push that print reader into an online response to better track performance.

"The No. 1 way that I've tracked effectiveness of print ads is not anything new or cutting-edge; it's typically the use of a vanity URL for attribution of the traffic to the print piece," says David Matli, principal consultant at Matli Consulting, who also currently serves as the acting fractional CMO at three companies through his practice. "That's the same method used for direct mail, street teams handing out flyers with offers, or anything else that's not digitally trackable."

MNI's McGrath also recommends building augmented reality (AR) links into print magazine ads as an effective way to move that initial offline engagement onto a consumer's mobile smartphone platform. The result is not only additional immersive content for the consumer, but also more metrics for the brand.

Matli says some brands are also including UTM trackers — additional code that can be added to the URL, so marketers know which specific magazine ad drove that consumer response.

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Increasingly, brands are taking a page from digital and using social media and other online channels to cheaply run A/B tests on creative approaches before finalizing their magazine ad creative. Matli says online testing can work for print ads, but cautions marketers need to understand how to interpret the results.

"Don't pick the one that converts the most because that's about the whole offer," he explains. "Instead, pick the one with the highest click-through to guide your creative — and then let your team do the really good version of the ad for print. Also make sure the campaign landing page and print ad are clearly visually related."

Even with testing and the ability to geotarget ads down to the zip code and sub-ZIP Advertising Targeting Zone (ATZ) level, brands may need to borrow even more from their digital arsenals to determine just how effective each print magazine ad has been.

"Attribution still remains a big challenge in print," Smyth says. "One idea I've seen work involves eliminating certain markets, say 5 percent of the total, from a print campaign to compare against the impact and lift generated from all the other markets that carry the campaign."

## Print Magazine Metrics Going Forward

Print magazine advertisers will always face a metrics challenge because one of the things that they can do well for brands — tell a compelling story with a singular visual image — is always going to be harder to measure than digital.

"A lot of what print magazines traditionally have to offer — beautiful, immersive, or inspiring creative that makes an emotional connection with the brand — is not quantifiable in the digital-centric funnel dashboard," Matli says.

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Even in this digital age, a beautifully crafted print magazine ad can still generate buzz among the right audience.

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But Haskell of Hearst suggests for the right categories, print magazine advertising continues to be the foundation for many brand marketing efforts.

"A luxury beauty or fashion product that is presented on the pages of *Harper's Bazaar* September issue makes a big impact because of how important the September issue of *Harper's Bazaar* is to the fashion enthusiast," he says. "Marketers absolutely know the power of that."

Haskell adds that increasingly Hearst is offering brands multiplatform strategy options. "We help our brand clients understand how to use *Harper's Bazaar* in print effectively, in digital effectively, the magazine's Snapchat presence, their Instagram presence, and their Pinterest presence," he says. "So it becomes a question of balancing that media mix."

Smyth adds that print also should shake the notion that a call-to-action is somehow antithetical in aspirational higher-funnel messaging. "Always use unique demographically minded creative that's exclusive to the print channel and carries a response mechanism, such as a redeemable premium, for effective measuring," he says.

Haskell agrees, but says the call to action will only work with some magazines. "We have a lot of magazines that reach a mass audience, such as our food magazines, and there, couponing is really important," he says. "Providing a benefit to the reader is going to

drive your strongest result."

It's unlikely that print magazine advertising will ever be able to recreate the brand lift and awareness of, say, Absolut's iconic creatives of several decades ago. But McGrath of MNI points out that, even in this digital age, a beautifully crafted print magazine ad can still generate buzz among the right audience, citing as an example the August *GQ* in which the inner workings of a Cartier watch were revealed over multiple ad pages.

"Even though it doesn't have the detailed metrics of digital, there's so much brand impact you can have from the halo effect of being next to great content and from the pass-along readership, that brands should be able to see the value of print magazine ads in their total media mix," McGrath says.

For that to work, brands need to take more of a long-term outlook when it comes to print magazine advertising. "One-offs are not going to give you your best result," Haskell says. "What we recommend in magazine advertising is a sustained campaign over a period of time because consistency matters."

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