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Mags-to-riches tale

Niche publications still find support from ads and readers

Presented by



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As Brenda Wood surveys the crowded Canadian magazine landscape, she feels confident her soon-to-be-launched publication aimed at women in business will have sticking power.

"The business individual has the power," says Ms. Wood, chief editor of Heart. "They have the resources to buy the consumables" that advertisers and brands want to sell, she says.

Any venture in the printed word is a dicey proposition these days, with the Internet gobbling up both readers and advertising dollars.

Magazines, at least those in Canada, still draw growing support from advertisers, especially those seeking lucrative niches. In Ms. Wood's case, that would be successful women in the business world.

Overall, the number of magazines launched in Canada fell 15% in 2007. Sixty-three new titles hit the market, according to the latest data from industry trade magazine Masthead. In comparison, 116 titles debuted in 1997.

But the declining number of launches is misleading. There are consistently more launches than there are closures, says Masthead editor Marco Ursi.

While general-interest news and current-affairs publications have seen readership fall as they weed out so-called peripheral subscribers that are expensive to maintain, niche publications with a strong focus are gaining traction.

A spate of business magazines with a regional focus --especially in Western Canada -- and those with a "green" angle, have hit the market over the past year.

In Victoria, a business magazine called Douglas launched last year. The publishers of Alberta Venture have also launched a business magazine for young people, called Unlimited.

And Up Here Publishing recently rolled together its oil and diamond publications into a new magazine called Up Here Business, focused on northern Canada.

There has also been five or six "green-focused" business magazines launched within the past year that focus on how to profit by using environmentally friendly business practices, Mr. Ursi says.

"We're still an untapped market in Canada in terms of the extensions of titles," says Lauren Richards, chief executive officer of media buyer Starcom MediaVest in Toronto. "Almost all our magazines are somewhat mass."

Magazines are still holding their own in the Internet era.

Advertising revenue for the magazine industry rose almost 5% in 2007, according to figures provided by Masthead. That contrasts with a 2% decline for newspapers.

One of the big problems with newspapers is that readership is too broad, Mr. Ursi says.

Today, people can go online and

stitch together the news they are interested in from different sources, such as Google.

Magazines, on the other hand, with their space and glossy fullcolour pages, have the advantage of being able to tell readers the "hows" and "whys," and advertisers are willing to support magazines because readers are loyal and they generally spend a long time looking at them.

Readers tell pollsters they also like the portability of magazines, the ability to read them anywhere.

But perhaps the biggest advantage magazines have is that, unlike television, where a commercial break often means a trip to the fridge, readers actually want to read the advertisements in magazines, Ms. Richards said.

So, while print magazines still make sense on many levels, most new publications will develop an Internet presence as well.

Ruth Kelly, publisher of Unlimited, points to the latest Print Measurement Bureau figures to show that the heaviest magazine users are also the heaviest Internet users, and vice versa.

Of course, it's one thing to identify an underserved niche, but quite another to put out a quality product to fill it. Most small magazines take at least three years to turn a profit, says Ms. Kelly, and rely heavily on advertising revenue versus single-copy or subscription sales. Many don't make it.

And there are some magazine categories that have clearly suffered at the hands of the Internet, most notably those involving pornography and television listings.

But, says Mr. Ursi, "business magazines will always be launched. There will always be new areas to cover in business."

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