

On the Hunt

Feeding your endless appetite
for compelling content.

By Erin Peterson

With print publications, pages are precious. You likely invest tens of thousands of dollars into every issue of your magazine once you add up staff salaries, printing costs, and mailing costs. So it makes sense to ensure that every story makes an impact.

For more than 20 years, my team and I have been studying what makes readers pick up alumni magazines and read them from cover to cover. The good news? You don't have to guess whether a given story will resonate. Instead, you can use three smart tactics before you or your writers even begin the work at hand to ensure that the final story is one your readers will devour.

Tactic 1

Study — and test — ideas on your social media platforms.

If your company or institution has robust Facebook or Twitter feeds, they're an ideal place to mine for ideas.

Lesson #1:

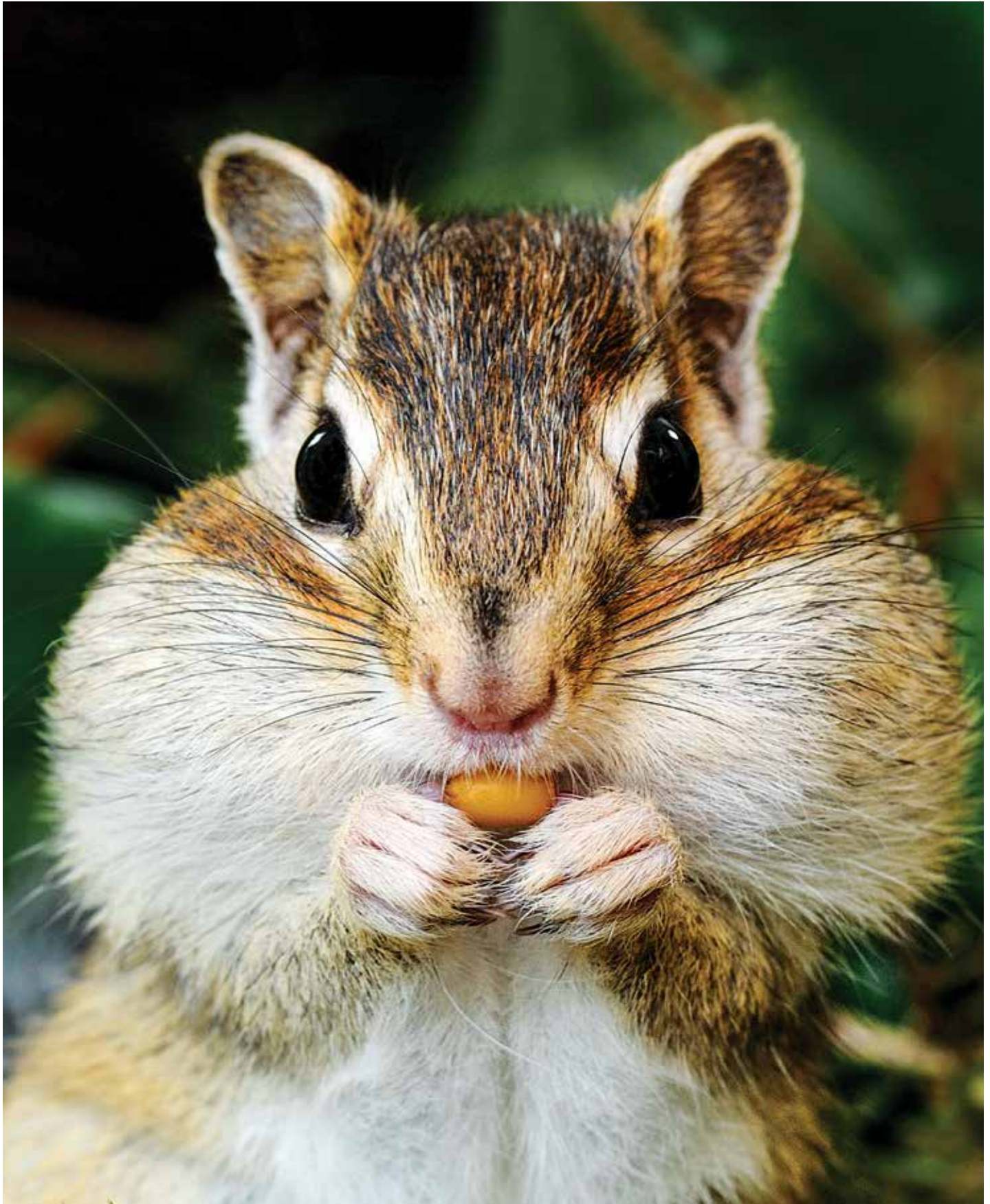
Look for clues in the comments.

Pay close attention to posts that generate conversation in the comments, because it's often a sign that people are ready for a more structured story about the topic in your magazine.

For example, a few years ago, a woman on my own alumni Facebook group — a very

casual and conversational crowd — mentioned that she was about to get married, and she was struggling to decide whether or not to change her last name. That prompted an emotionally charged discussion with more than 100 comments from both men and women. Alumni talked about how their ideas on the topic had evolved as they moved forward in their professions, expanded their families, or hyphenated their names to the point of becoming unwieldy.

It was a fascinating conversation, and there are ways that a magazine story could bring it to a different level. Such a story, for example, could pull together a balanced mix of voices, relevant statistics, and input from faculty





experts. There was no question that the topic was a worthy one.

So my team and I pitched and wrote the story, and it turned out to be just as compelling in print: Reader letters flowed in for months afterward as people shared their own experiences.

Study posts that generate lots of comments and replies. They might not be story-worthy in and of themselves, but they often serve as a great starting point for a topic to cover in your magazine.

Lesson #2: Intentionally trigger discussion.

Posting questions to your audience on Facebook is a great way to learn what your audience is ready (and not ready) to read — as long as you do it effectively.

Recently, I asked a question in my alumni group about jobs: What campus jobs had they held, and what had they learned?

To make sure people shared information that would make it clear whether there was a story worth pursuing, I modeled the kind of answer that would be most interesting to hear. I shared my own experiences working as an intern in the publications office, connecting details from that semester 20 years ago to my work today.

More than 70 people responded with thoughtful answers — clearly suggesting that a story with these themes would be one that readers would gravitate to in the magazine. That initial effort to guide the discussion was essential.

Of course, sometimes posts will land with a thud, and that's valuable information, too. Facebook posts designed to get readers to write about their favorite parties and campus traditions sank like stones, with few comments or likes.

It was surprising but useful information. Better to know this in advance, instead of wasting weeks working on a story that nobody would read. Social media failures are as important as successes because they help you understand when you *shouldn't* waste your precious print pages on a topic.

Tactic 2 Find the right format.

Magazines offer incredible possibilities for compelling storytelling, but you wouldn't know it from the kinds of stories we often tell: 800-word narrative profiles. 2,000-word narrative features. Maybe, if we think of it, a sidebar or two.

It's time to think more expansively about using creative storytelling techniques to engage readers in a real way. Here's how.

Lesson #1: Rethink the way you package the story.

When you come up with a story idea, think about some of the ways you could share information that go beyond straight narrative. Could the story benefit from a timeline, a quiz, a chart, or a Q&A? Could you add a list — or could the entire story *be* a list? Could you create an infographic or an annotation?

I've developed a "cheat sheet" of these options — more than 30 of them — that I keep by my desk and use when I'm working on projects. You can develop your own reference just as easily.

It's not about cramming lots of different formats into your stories. It's about having a toolbox at your disposal, and using the right tools to accomplish the goals of your story.

Lesson #2: Study the best.

As you create your own list of packaging ideas, spend time reading the publications that do it well.

Consider subscribing to titles such *New York* and *Men's Health*, for example. Both feature lots of highly packaged, highly effective stories, and you can use some of their smartest ideas in your own publications.

The larger point is this: It's easy to get stuck in narrative ruts, and neither our magazines nor our readers benefit. Create a packaging cheat sheet (or email me, and I'll send you my list, complete with links to samples) that you can refer to after you've finished your reporting for a story and before you start writing it.

Tactic 3 Ask readers to respond.

Years ago, I surveyed editors in my newsletter to find out how they know whether a story in their magazine is a success. Thirty percent of respondents checked the box that said "I don't need specific results; I know when something's good."

There's no question that a lot of editors have great intuition. But it's also helpful to have tangible, measurable evidence of reader engagement, like letters to the editor. To achieve this goal, you can stack the deck in your favor.

Lesson #1: Create a strong and clear call to action.

Calls to action are traditionally associated with sales and marketing — Buy now! Join today! — but you can use the same principles in your magazine to encourage reader engagement. Essentially, a call to action is just a statement or question that encourages your readers to take a specific step (such as writing a letter to the editor) after they read your story.

For example, when I wrote a story about campus myths for my own alumni magazine, we posted a call to action at the end: "Do you have a campus legend you'd like us to dig into? Send it to [email address]. We'll answer the best questions in a future issue of the magazine."

The result? More than a dozen responses.

Creating a great call to action is nuanced, but there are three keys: Make a single request, include a benefit, and drive action you can measure.

Lesson #2: Ask for personal experiences.

One of the challenges alumni magazines face is making big institutional stories — improving faculty recruitment or launching a career development initiative — relevant to readers who haven't been on campus for decades.

One way to make that connection is by encouraging readers to link those stories to their personal experiences.

Alumni might not have much to say about a story sharing the strategies that drive your

faculty recruitment efforts, but they probably can tell you what their favorite professor meant to them. Doing a piece on service trips? Encourage alumni to write in to share their own experiences volunteering during their college days.

When you can find ways to help readers see their own stories within the larger stories of your institution — and when you encourage them to share these — it can help them feel more closely connected to the school, even if they haven't been back for years.

Your magazine is a serious investment, so it makes sense to create stories that are engineered for success.

These steps — social media tests, better packaging, and strong, relevant calls to action — can help ensure that every story you develop is one your readers will read and love. That's a payoff well worth the extra effort.

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