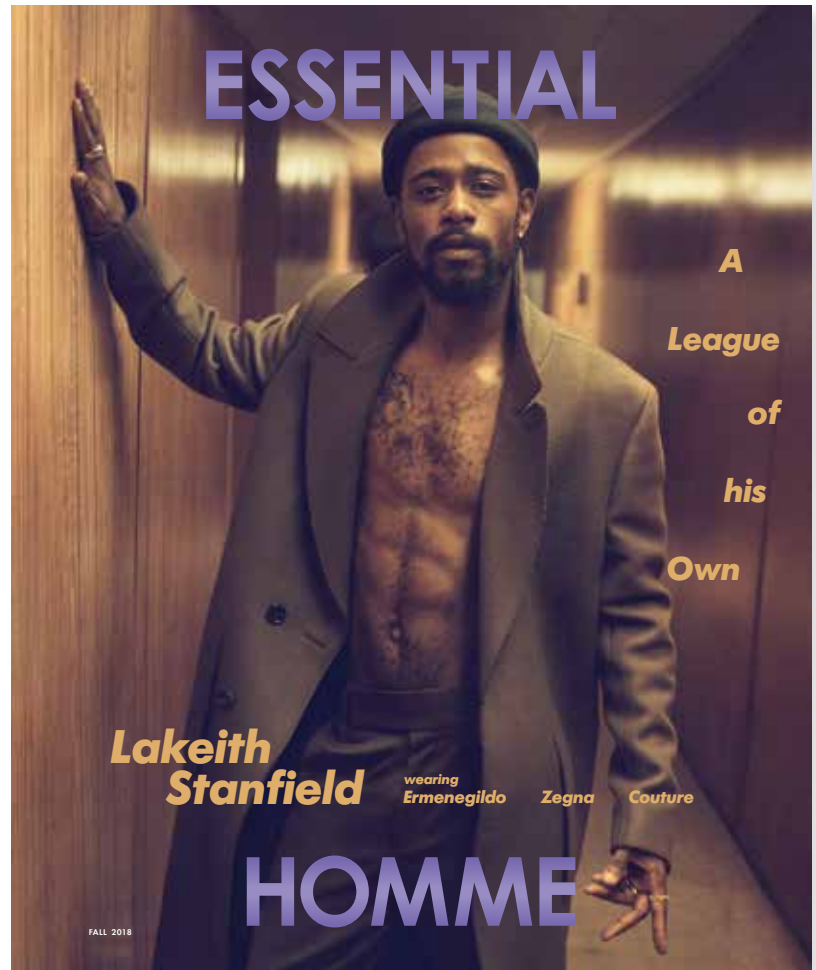




Algis Puidokas

THE STORYTELLER

TELLING STORIES READERS AND
ADVERTISERS WANT TO HEAR.



Interview with Algis Puidokas

Algis Puidokas founded *Essential Homme* magazine in 2010 (when he was 29), and it has become an authority on men's luxury, high-end fashion. The magazine is bold. It's glossy. It's heavy (over 200 pages). It's cutting-edge artistic. And it's attracting major advertising commitments from heavy hitters in the industry: Christian Dior, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Versace, Hugo Boss, you name it. The million-dollar question is, how?

The *Essential Homme* advertising model, like many things the publishing brand does, breaks the usual mold. Advertisers don't just pay for space in the magazine or on its website. They pay Algis and his team to co-create content-slash-advertising that appeals to a carefully cultivated audience while advancing the brands' messages in their minds. Again, the question is, how? We sat down with Algis and asked him.

Algis, were you always in fashion publishing?

Initially, I was on the photography side of fashion. I studied cinematography and television in Lithuania and Russia and then went to Paris to continue my studies. The director of a big modeling agency there, Success Men, liked my work, and that led to a job at *Marie Claire* in their art department. That was around 2005-2006.

During this time, the men's fashion market was expanding in France and abroad, and I decided I wanted to do something very specific, very niche, to target this group. I started a fashion-and-style website and used it as a testing ground for a bigger idea: starting a new print publication. Two years later, I moved to New York City and launched *Essential Homme*.

How you would describe niche publishing?

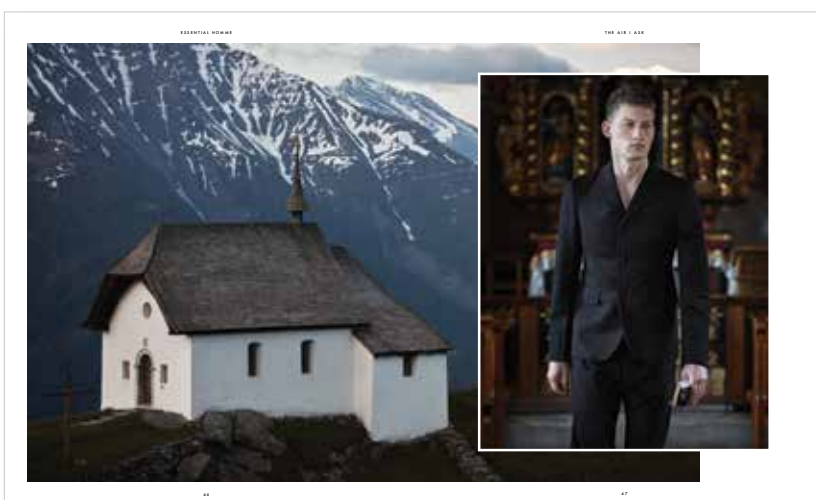
The world is changing and evolving, and all the different societal groups want to be recognized and represented. This is what niche publishing does. Publishers and advertisers realize they need to showcase and speak to this diversity.

The men's market is very large now and has multiple categories within it: the LGBT communities, groups from specific ethnic backgrounds, different types of artists, etc. So for advertisers in niche publishing, like fashion brands who are targeting sub-groups, their marketing approach has become much more defined. They're looking for publications, and other vehicles, that serve these same narrowly defined audiences.

Why do you think niche publishing is thriving? Do you think the groups themselves have driven that?

Yes. In the U.S., people are not afraid to say who they are, and the marketers have taken notice. That's why brands like Gucci have had such success recently. They've transformed their brand to keep up with the changes. Their top executives listen very closely to millennials to track trends — what they want to wear and what they don't. And Gucci is very aware of values like environmental impact, which is important to this audience.

It all goes back to the brand: how they think, how they market, how they create the products that people want. And then there is the media, like us, who help these brands present their products to the targeted audience we have pulled together.



Describe your approach to advertising.

Brands are making so many products now, they want to get it all out there for everyone to see. It's not enough for them anymore to just place an ad page in print and everybody's happy. So our advertisers, big-name fashion brands, kept asking for more: for us to take more photos, to include more of their products in the magazine, to show more products in a variety of ways.

In addition to the usual print and digital ad spaces, we offer our advertisers the option to be in visual photo stories in our magazine. These are 10 to 14 pages (sometimes more) of beautifully staged, artistic photos that represent a lifestyle our readers live or aspire to. It includes models wearing or using the advertiser's products. There isn't a lot of text, only short descriptions of the products, prices, designers, and shoot credits. It fits well into our overall magazine, which is very visually driven. This approach has been very successful and has become an important aspect of our integrated business model.

What do you think you're giving advertisers with these photo stories that they don't get in regular advertising?

In regular advertising, there's a general message created by the advertiser. Imagine now that you need to take that message and, without distorting it, spread it over 10 to 14 pages. We do this by creating a story. We choreograph photos that include advertiser-sponsored products and a lifestyle context that tells readers more about the products than simple words could. We carefully select the models, the props, the setting, and lighting. We always work closely with the advertiser or their public relations department, listening to what they want and never losing sight of their brand message. In today's world, this can be very complicated. Every little thing, every pose, even lighting, can make or break a presentation. We have to meet the needs of our advertisers as well as the sophistication of our audience. It's a balancing act.

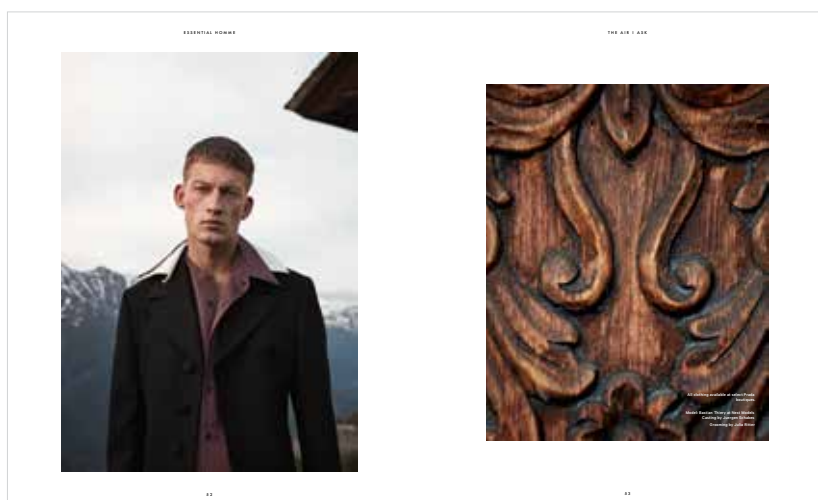
How do you go about creating these stories?

As much as producing visual stories is artistically inspiring, creating the right story is what's important for the brands. This is not a catalog and, especially with the luxury brands, the photo stories are very much about aspiration. It's not just about a jacket or an accessory. It's about the lifestyle that our readers aspire to.

Every photo shoot is its own movie, in a way. We create a setting, a mood for the products. That's what the luxury brands are looking for. For Louis Vuitton, Christian Dior,

and Gucci, who are already well known, it's all about what's next for them. How can we enhance the brand, the presentation, to keep that aspirational element going? That's the driving force behind each vision.

Essential Homme shot in the Alps to create a 14-page visual story for Italian luxury fashion brand Prada featuring its clothes and accessories. Photos by Cyrill Matter. Style by Philipp Junker.





So, it's a collaboration ...

Yes, exactly. And in the past two years, it has become even more so. Advertisers tell us which products are going to be in the stores at a specific time, and they're looking at what time our magazine is coming out so the products we're showcasing match their retail push.

If they tell us a certain jacket is going to be the biggest piece of the season, we have to figure out the best and most exciting way to showcase it in the story. We need to always follow and study what the brand is doing, where they're going, and what image they want to portray.

Can you give us an example?

The car maker Lexus came to advertise with us, wanting to focus on a specific model, the Lexus UX F SPORT 2019, they would be promoting this spring. They wanted the car shown through our *Essential Homme* point of view. And while they required some control over the way we photographed the car itself — like specifying camera angles and lenses to avoid any distortion of the car — we were otherwise able to be creative.

We conceived a story around the car, beginning with a quote from the French action film “*The Transporter*”: “I always say, the way a man treats his car is how he treats himself.” The 18-page story showcases fashion and accessories on a model posed in scenes that evoke a mercenary or special forces vibe, in keeping with the movie theme. We chose the setting, model, lighting, fashion, and accessories that tell a story, in keeping with the brand.

In a story like this, does the product appear on every page?

Not on every page, because we don't want this to look like a product-specific or product-only piece. In this case, we were aiming for a combination of fashion and car. The car was placed as part of a larger luxury lifestyle.

Clothing by **BERLUTI**
Watch by **HERMÈS**



We combined the fashion and accessories that would fit the lifestyle of someone who drives a Lexus — and, importantly, someone who reads our magazine.

Do you combine multiple advertisers in one photo story?

That depends. We work with our creative director/ editor-in-chief, Terry Lu, and he comes up with each visual idea. We know what our fashion brands want, and then we determine which brands will integrate best into the story we have planned. A very sporty brand can't go into a story that's more about luxury. We choose the brands specifically for the concept and then add in other accessories to complete the story.

There are a lot of details to keep track of.

Yes. Because each brand has such a specific branding message, we need to know who we can (and can't) mix with whom in a given shot. That is, I think, the most important thing in the niche magazine world. You need to listen to advertisers as closely as possible, while never losing sight of your reader. If you're not listening and you're not delivering, or you're distorting the branding message, you won't hear from that advertiser again. For small publishers like us, we need to calculate every step, every time.



Jacket by **TALLIA ORANGE**
Pants by **BOES**
Watch by **ERROUET**

An 18-page story for car brand Lexus includes fashion and accessories from various other brands. Photos by Anton Watts. Styled by Terry Lu.



Total look by FERRI

How do you sell this to advertisers?

In the beginning, it was difficult. A lot of brands didn't believe in us. We were a new publication, and they hadn't advertised this way before. They were taking a chance on our approach and on whether we would be around in another year or so. They had to trust us, and that was asking a lot.

The biggest brands started with us slowly, five or six years after we launched the magazine. Even now, every day we have to think in their terms to know what value we can offer them. So, what are the different brands doing? What's important to them? What are their goals? Then we have to translate that to our perspective and capabilities, so we know how to show their products in a way that achieves their goals. We have to understand a brand designer's ideas and then decide how we can take photos and create a visual story for the magazine without altering those concepts. And of course we need to have the audience that an advertiser wants to reach.

You can no longer just come out and do what you want in advertising and anything works. Budgets are so much tighter. If an advertiser is going to spend money with us, they need to know that we're going to get their message right.

How did you gain their trust?

With luck and hard work ... and believing in what we were doing. We had to prove ourselves. I give a lot of credit to our editor-in-chief

and advertising sales team. We had to spend time and effort creating this kind of content before the brands trusted that we could do it well. Once we did that, it became easier to experiment and show even more creativity, something our readers love.

Can you give us another example?

Prada approached us to showcase more of their products — not only their fashion collection but their accessory line as well. We worked closely with their public relations department in New York and Milan and decided to do a photo story that presented one collection, making the designer's message a visual experience. From their fashion shows, we already had an idea of what this designer's thoughts were for the collection. It was inspired by nature and the outdoors, so we shot photos in Europe, in the Alps.

The secret of these photo stories is making them a combination of art and commerce. Terry is very clever with making this work. He chooses the right photographer for the particular story and works with him or her to select all the critical elements. So then, each photo shoot tells its own story, and one is never going to be like another. We're creating something that we've never done or seen before. It's very important to create something new every time. This is what both advertiser and audience are looking for.

You also create video for your advertisers. How does that work?

We film video while we're creating and shooting the visual stories.



Special thanks to Lexus
 Model: Ben Bowers at IMG Models
 Grooming by Liz Morache at Elisa Valentina
 Agency using Brothers Artisan Oil
 Digital Tech: Angelo Siamatti
 Photo Assistant: Michelle Garcia
 Fashion Assistants: Angelika Pokovba and
 Marina Zoukova

Then we produce short videos that give a behind-the-scenes look at the shoots and provide more content that doesn't make it into the magazine. We make these for a few reasons: Our passionate readers love to see how the photo stories come together; advertisers use them as teasers and extra value on social media; and they're another revenue source for us. Advertisers are willing to add this piece to their overall package.

And events?

So far, when we include an event in a package, it's a shopping event at the brand's retail store, and we invite only our subscribers. It's exclusive and marries the brand with a very targeted audience. But we have exciting ideas for doing different kinds of events — especially with Augmented Reality and Virtual Reality elements. There's more to come here.

Why do you think your advertising approach works so well, not just for the advertiser but also for your readers?

There are so many products being launched each season — clothes and accessories, shoes and bags — and people want to see these latest trends. It's much more exciting to see them in the context of a photo story than in a one- or two-page spread that showcases only the main elements of a collection.

Many of our readers work in business and finance, and our research shows that after a work week and plenty of reading, they want to sit

quietly and look at something else, something different from what they've been dealing with all week. It's like an escape into another world, a journey to somewhere else. These photo stories are highly visual and meant to inspire readers. They can imagine themselves in the setting, wearing the clothes or the watch, or driving the car.

And how is it working for *Essential Homme*?

We are attracting new advertisers and re-signing existing advertisers more than ever. And our advertising revenue has increased year-over-year by about 45 percent, which is exciting but requires a lot of hard work.

Have you had any feedback from readers?

Our readers tell us they love this custom content because they get to see more products and because we offer them a form of escapism.

In fashion, the most important thing is to create something new, something that's never been done before. That's what it's all about, and that's what we strive for and have done in *Essential Homme*.

Algis Puidokas is founder and publishing director at magazine brand *Essential Homme*, "the arbiter of style for young + affluent, fashion forward-minded men who share a heightened passion for high quality, high luxury, high fashion." Connect via puidokas@pagesthemagazine.com.