

FINDING WHAT WORKS

An anonymous tale of ad sales savvy

By a magazine publishing professional

Our publishing model relies heavily on advertising, which has been greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. When we suddenly lost many of the steady advertisers for one of our magazine titles, we knew we had to take action. What we did worked ... and then some.

We don't fit tidily into standard magazine publishing buckets. We are, for starters, a specialty niche publisher. We produce weekly print titles for Orthodox Jewish communities worldwide. Our mission is to keep track of what's happening in the Jewish community and to deliver a blend of news and entertainment that will satisfy our readers' needs and interests.

And even though we distribute worldwide, we operate very much like a regional publisher. Orthodox Jews tend to settle in clusters. Our office is located in a dense concentration of our community in urban New York. As a result, many of our advertisers are local New York businesses. Walk into a supermarket here (there's one on almost every corner), and you'll find us at checkout. We're on most newsstands on the street. As you move out of the city, you'll find us in larger supermarkets and bookstores. In Europe and Israel, we're found in concentrations of English-speaking Jews, like London and Jerusalem.

Here's what really sets us apart. If you're familiar with Judaism, you know Shabbat. It's the weekly day of rest, occurring from sundown



on Friday evening until Saturday evening. In the Orthodox practice, we *completely* disconnect. No work, no technology, no electricity — meaning no computer, no TV, no phones. For us, as a print publisher, this is important. Our readers rely on us for print media they can read over the weekend, on Shabbat.

This background provides important context for our recent decision-making around advertising.

Thinking Out of the Box

In alignment with the major Jewish holidays, we have two big seasons on our publishing calendar: One is in the fall (September to October), and the other is in late winter (March to April). This means large issues with more-than-the-usual number of

advertisers. The shutdown associated with COVID-19, as you well know, started in earnest in mid-March. As soon as our peak season passed with our Passover issue, the advertising in one of our magazines all but disappeared. We found ourselves with a magazine ready to go to print, except that we had hardly any advertising slated for it. This title had been consistently 64 pages with 30-40 percent advertising. All of a sudden, we had almost none.

Let me explain that we have four magazine titles — one focused on news and current events; one geared toward the home and human interest pieces; one about food and recipes; and one for kids. It was our homestyle magazine that took the biggest hit. The reason is that this title, because of its advertising price point and subject focus, carries the most regional advertisers, the most local, mom-and-pop shops. We purposefully keep advertising in this title at a lower rate, comparably, to suit this segment of advertisers. These businesses were closing their doors due to the shutdown, and they pulled their advertising because they didn't know what was coming around the bend and whether they had the budget. Every one of them tightened their purse strings.

Now, we were going to print regardless. We couldn't risk losing our spot at checkouts and newsstands — and we couldn't risk not being available for our weekend readers. After all, we're all learning to do without or to do *differently* during this pandemic. We don't want to risk people learning to do without us. So, what do you do? You take a chance.

We ran a two-week special: 50 percent off our list pricing for full- and half-page advertising. No need for volume or other qualifications. Half off for anyone and everyone.

The response was overwhelming. At these prices, local businesses could afford the spend. A small market that was struggling to get a website up and running could afford to buy an ad to promote its new online ordering and curb-side pickup. A purveyor of goods could afford to advertise its new or revised ecommerce offerings.

Advertising for this title increased by 75 percent from our starting point for the issue.

Week 1: We upped our page count to 80 pages to accommodate the increase in advertising.

Week 2: We moved to 88 pages to accommodate an additional increase.

Of course, our paper and production costs went up, too. Given these incremental costs, our revenue stayed even with pre-COVID days. But, we maintained that revenue and, best of all, attracted new advertisers in the process.

Test and Adjust

We made the decision to modify our offering after the two-week initial promotion. We decreased the discount to 25 percent and brought our page count back down to 64 pages. This was a conscious choice to avoid the extra paper and production costs. The discount is enough to help us achieve our advertising percentage and revenue targets per issue.

It's worth mentioning that our in-store, single-copy sales have gone up tremendously — by 15-20 percent. This is certainly because people are home, with more uncommitted time and a keen interest in both news *and* diversion.

We continue to be flexible and creative to maximize our advertising commitments. For example, we always run a summer special (July to August) to buoy our slow summer season. Usually, it goes like this: If an advertiser commits to four ads, we'll give them a fifth one for free. This year, we're extending this deal to June, adding four weeks and effectively enabling an advertiser to cash in on the free ad twice. We have never given an advertiser an opportunity to earn a second free ad in the same sales cycle, but we believe it's worth trying. It's simply the case that sometimes you just don't know until you try. Certainly, we're all in uncharted territory, and anything that can help each other succeed is something worth trying.

Connect with our anonymous writer via editor@pagesthemagazine.com.

For the Win-Win

There is a symbiosis between publisher and advertiser that is perhaps most obvious at a time like this. Take, for example, one of our regional advertisers, a local shoe store. Their big seasons are early spring and early fall. When COVID-19 shut down this store in March, the owner was left with a large spring/summer inventory that she needed to sell in order to invest in her fall/winter selections. She leveraged a discounted ad in our magazine to promote a 40-percent-off online sale on her inventory. Within just a few days, she had recouped the ad investment and was well on her way toward earning the funds needed for her next season's merchandise. I myself drove over an hour to her store to pick up a pair of shoes for my son. What we can do to help our advertisers stay healthy and in business during these unusual times can effectively do the same for our own businesses.