

How Print Magazines Are Powering Audience-First Brand Marketing

In an increasingly digital age, associations and brands are connecting with consumers through an anachronistic technology that is newly relevant: print words on a page.

By Adam Wren

In March, the executives at the email marketing company Mailchimp made a surprising purchase: They bought a magazine. Not an issue from the airport newsstand, but an actual, living and breathing magazine title. The Atlanta-based company acquired the seven-year-old London media company *Courier*, which tells the stories of modern small businesses and entrepreneurs.

A brand buying a print magazine in 2020 is, to be certain, a head-turning transaction. Print, conventional wisdom holds, is dying — if not dead. Digital content marketing is the best, most effective way to reach consumers. But take a deeper look at the nexus of Mailchimp's customer base and *Courier*'s audience — as well as similar moves by other savvy digital brands of late — and the move makes more sense.

Mailchimp got more than a magazine. From its side of the ledger, more than 12 million businesses use Mailchimp. Fifty-three percent of its paid users live outside

of the U.S. *Courier*, meanwhile, has a reach of 100,000 readers in 26 countries. Its April/May issue slings a cover package about how to “Make it in Food!” — from opening an urban winery to learning coffee shop economics to launching a cookware brand.

The overlap in audience interest is hard to miss. “We share so much in common with [*Courier*] — their values, their deep empathy for their audience, and their desire to enable their audience's success,” says Mark DiCristina, vice president of brand and Mailchimp Studios. “We're excited to help fuel their growth and make *Courier* more widely available to creators and entrepreneurs around the world.”

In addition to a like-minded audience, the purchase gives Mailchimp access to precious first-party data, says Joe Pulizzi, former CEO of the Content Marketing Institute. “They just bought an audience, and they have a lot of information now about that audience,” Pulizzi says.

Other brands are taking a different approach, providing their customers with a physical manifestation of their digital brand through a print magazine. At least 10 brands launched print magazines in recent years, according to an analysis by AdAge, from the self-titled *Airbnb* to the legendary golf company Callaway's *Pivot* (with a \$10 cover price) to the outdoor gear co-op REI's *Uncommon Path*.

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“A print outlet provides a vehicle for longer brand storytelling and for creating a relationship with a consumer outside of the transaction,” says Megan O’Grady, senior vice president, account management for HearstMade at Hearst, which publishes the Airbnb and REI titles. “As part of a modern marketing mix, print can enhance a brand’s ability to connect and provide value.”

Even the office supply company Staples launched its own print publication last year: *Staples Worklife*™, published by Imagination beginning in 2019, is distributed to companies that purchase supplies and office furniture from the company.

Why are zeitgeist-y brands extending to print? “You put out a beautifully produced magazine that’s targeted to your audience’s needs, they are going to engage with that and pass it on to their friends and colleagues,” Pulizzi says. “It’s become awfully crowded online. It’s hard to break through the clutter.”

Increasingly, brands see a print magazine as the battering ram required to do so.

A New Revenue Model for Print Magazines

At first blush, a print renaissance in an increasingly digital world seems counterintuitive. In recent years, a number of A-list, consumer-facing publications have gone digital, reduced frequency, or shuttered altogether. Among them: *ESPN The Magazine*, *Glamour*, *Coastal Living*, and *Rolling Stone*. What’s more, for U.S. magazine publishers, revenue has declined precipitously from \$46 billion in 2007 to \$28 billion in 2017, the most recent year on record. “Eventually, they’ll become like sailboats,” Kurt Andersen, the former editor of *New York* and one of the luminaries of the magazine world, told *The New York Times* in 2017. “They don’t need to exist anymore. But people will still love them and make them and buy them.”

But that trend belies another one: More magazines are setting sail, launched from

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the shore now by associations, B2B, and B2C brands. “Anyone who tells you print is dead, or print is dying, they don’t know what they are talking about,” says Samir Husni, the director of the Magazine Innovation Center at the University of Mississippi School of Journalism. “The business model for print has died, and we’ve yet to come up with a new business model.” In that vacuum, Husni says, C-suite leaders are taking a new look at the power of print to connect with audiences. The question they’re asking: “Am I really a 360 brand if I don’t have a print extension?” Husni says. “That print extension is completing the circle.”

Husni’s advice to associations and brands considering a print magazine: Focus on your audience first. “Fall in love with your audience before you fall in love with your platform,” he says. “And once you fall in love with your audience, then you are going to provide those three ships that every member of your audience wants: ownership, membership, and showmanship.” The showmanship aspect — that tactile experience of leaning back in your chair and thumbing through the pages of a beautifully produced print product — is difficult to replicate.

For Staples, a magazine is helping them connect with their audience in deep ways. “Put simply, our business customers are looking for ways to improve their work lives. They told us they want solutions to be more productive and connected at work,” said Marshall Warkentin, Staples’ chief marketing officer. “At Staples, we’re uniquely positioned to bring together solutions to millions of working professionals and to bring a sense of community to work. We’re here to better work lives, whether in an office

or anywhere else — that’s why we’re introducing *Staples Worklife*.”

Is Print Working For Brands?

When Airbnb launched their new magazine in 2017, they started with just four issues and an audience of 350,000 subscribers. But the product took off. In 2019, the mag increased its frequency to six issues and has an audience of 1 million; REI’s last print run was 750,000. In addition to its distribution to Airbnb hosts, the magazine is available at airport newsstands and bookstores in select markets, and each copy is read by an average of four people.

“In the digital world, everything is immediate, transactional, and fleeting,” O’Grady, of Hearst, tells *orange* magazine. “We are guided by the need for instant gratification. Our attention spans are challenged because we are inundated with messages that our brains cannot always process effectively. The power of print is in its permanence and in immersion. Print is a ‘lean-back’ experience, one where the reader can truly savor the content, generally, uninterrupted. For brands, this provides an incredible opportunity to spend quality time with their audience. The longer, tactile format facilitates bigger and deeper messaging and is a natural vehicle for brand storytelling.”

REI has tested the success of its magazine with both co-op members and non-members. The brand hopes to reach all 18 million co-op members soon. The first step in that direction, O’Grady says, is making a digital product available this season.

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some. “We want this to feel separate from advancement and development,” say others.

If there was ever a time to ditch this philosophy to try something new, this might be it. While many are hurting right now, there are others who are itching to help out — but they want to make sure their support is going to an organization they love and trust.

There’s no reason not to make it extremely easy for them to give through your magazine. A blow-in or bind-in envelope with a gift request is a simple addition worth testing. One client I worked with told me they consistently receive between \$20,000 and \$30,000 with each issue that contains a giving envelope. At a school I worked at years ago, the alumni annual fund office was happy to pay for an envelope that went into the magazine. The envelope came with a message telling readers that they could use it to submit class notes, donations, or both. We got plenty of class notes from the effort, and while the annual fund team never shared their numbers with us, they never once complained about the price. They continued the practice for years.

Your magazine will remind people exactly how valuable you are in their lives, and a giving envelope makes it simple for them to give back to support your work.

5. Track the numbers you can track — then improve them.

Many of the editors I speak with do very little measurement to determine whether their magazines are making an impact.

But there’s plenty you can measure and improve over time. In alumni magazines, engagement can be measured in letters to the editor, class notes submissions, and responses to nostalgia prompts.

A few editors I know send out simple, five-question surveys to several hundred readers after every single issue. They’ll often hear from about 100 respondents — perhaps not enough for statistical significance, but enough to gauge the temperature of the readership. Some of the most valuable information they get from readers comes from the open-ended questions they ask at the end, in which respondents frequently suggest excellent story ideas, articulate a surprising insight, or offer a meaningful testimonial that can remind editors and their teams that the work they do really does make a difference.

As many organizations take a harder look at their communications and their costs, there’s no doubt that print magazines will get scrutiny. But with the right adjustments, you might be able to make your magazine your organization’s superpower.

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For his part, Husni likes to tell industry connections a story about birth. “If you’ve ever watched a baby being born, they are born with their fist tight,” he says. “They want to grab everything. They want to own everything from the minute they are born. That sense of ownership doesn’t thrive on virtual ownership. That sense of membership, that sense of belonging — that there are another million or 300,000 people who are part of that community that all have that one thing in common, at the same moment, at the same mailbox, are getting the exact same magazine, the exact same message.”

Now more than ever, in the age of the novel coronavirus, in an era of what Husni calls “isolated connectivity,” that experience is a powerful one. “We are more connected than ever before,” he says. “Yet at the same time we are more isolated than ever before. And then comes social distancing, and we’re really, really isolated: Yet I can connect with anybody. So, the question becomes: How can I do something that shows that my brand is not just a virtual brand? That’s where print plays a big role. That’s why companies are deciding that, maybe with a magazine or a newsletter that I can mail, that people can get their hands on, then maybe they’ll feel that we are a real brand — not just something virtual, not just something in the air. The magazine becomes something like a membership card.”

In other words, brands are using print — the most primal media — to add a new, emotionally charged dimension to their audience relationships.

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